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Heiresses at Twilight. The End of Politics and the Politics of Difference

1. I sense at the moment a certain tendency to monumentalise the early Tronti and to enshrine him as the iconic master of Italian workerism. This is a befitting gesture, especially given the rediscovery and positive reevaluation of workerism outside of Italy and the impact of a text like *Operai e capitale* on Italian Marxism and on the *Bildungsroman* of all those who encountered the book at the time of its publication. There is, I believe, ample testimony of this in the current volume and, I have to admit, it arouses in me that slight jealousy that younger brothers and sisters have for the experiences of their older siblings. I will not, however, come to the party. This is for biographical reasons, out of faith to my own relation with Mario (which dates from a later time), and because I am convinced that his more recent work is just as important as his earlier writings and doesn't always get the attention it deserves.

I start with biographical concerns just to annoy the *maestro*, who notoriously considers biography an irrelevant and slightly irritating genre. When *Operai e capitale* was first published, in 1966, I wasn't even an adolescent. The book drifted around our house (in fact the copy I still have is the one from my father's library), along with many other texts that Einaudi offered to the progressive and educated element of Italian society. But many important years would pass before I would meet its author in Florence, on the occasion of the launching of the *Laboratorio politico* project.¹ It was the end of the 1970s. The feminist break from the 1968 'community of equals' had played itself out. Workerist journals like *Quaderni rossi*, *Classe operaia* and *Contropiano* had already become legends. Their protagonists had taken separate paths but there was still something common that linked them together. I had come to know them through their writings and, although it would be years until some would become my beloved friends, I already

considered them comrades both near and far. These feelings were confirmed on more than one occasion, and they still come to mind, even in the case of Tronti, when, as in a recent interview, I am compelled to say ‘I don’t agree.’ Or *vice versa* when I am forced to explain to my feminist friends why, notwithstanding the differences between his idea of politics and mine, I still feel so close to him. But I’ll come back to this later, for now let me continue the story. While Tronti’s laboratory was being established—barely aware of the intersections between the complications of feminine difference and the complexities of late capitalist society or the intersections between feminist criticism and the crisis of politics—the feminist laboratory was also restructuring itself, in a way that many people failed to understand. The *gonne a fiori* movement, recognized by everyone for its impact on customs but by no one for its impact on politics, was over. A fruitful season of theoretical discovery was beginning. While many, after having attached us to the 1968 movement, were attaching us to the ebbing back of that movement, we were learning in our own groups—the Virginia Woolf Cultural Center in Rome, the Women’s Bookshop in Milan, the Diotima community in Verona—to confront, as Tronti puts it now, the crisis of politics ‘with substituted categories.’²

It is difficult to reconstruct the happy boldness of those days. We lived the period in the easiness of relations between women (while the left was losing itself in the uneasiness of Craxi’s modernization) and in continual discovery of the new doors opened by the category of sexual difference. These were not, as in the 1970s, only the doors of the present: the conflict of the sexes, the implications of the personal in the public, the role of the unconscious in political rationality. The doors of a longer history were also opening: the story of modern politics and its constitutive aporias. Once the neutrality of the individual was dismantled, the whole conceptual constellation in which the individual was positioned was also dismantled or redesigned: the state and law; liberty, equality, fraternity; order and conflict; power and authority; rules and desire. The modern political project appeared not simply incomplete but rather destined never to be completed, since it is irreparably marked by the founding disavowal of a difference that is constitutive of the human being. I’m unsure exactly what, but something of all this (the critique of equal rights, I think, or perhaps just the open-minded nature of our research) came to the attention of Tronti, who in 1988 gathered some of us for a seminar at the Certosa di Pontignano, where he outlined the critique of democracy that still occupies him now. The ‘Bolognina turning point’ of 1989 was not then on the horizon.³ The XVIII Congress of 1988 had pushed the PCI toward an uncertain cultural revisionism that was still open to diverse outcomes. But it was already clear

that the urgencies of freedom were fading into market liberalism and the emphasis on rights was overshadowing the critique of power. The ‘horizon of communism,’ of which Cesare Luporini would speak two years later at the Bologna Congress, was giving way to the horizon of liberal democracy, which would be taken up in its most acritical form.

But the PCI's turn did not change the object of Tronti's research, which to the contrary was confirmed. Instead, it changed the political, cultural and relational context. A longer account would have to return, sooner or later, to the effect of displacement this had not only on the PCI but on the entire Italian left, forcing complex positions and biographies into the narrow rigidity of a binary, yes or no, presented not as the acceptance or refusal of *that* change but of change *tout court*. It is true that many were always convinced of the need for change, but not for that particular change: they found themselves driven into a conservative faction to which they never belonged. And *vice versa* many who were always quite conservative found themselves suddenly pushing for an ill-defined change. This is not the place to try and make sense of the confusion that reigned at the time and which still affects the political and cultural scene. I want only to recall the background against which those who wished to hold onto their own personal heterodoxy—without resigning themselves to either longing for the past or the mirage of what is to come (or what seems to be coming)—had to define themselves. It is from this standpoint, it seems to me, that Tronti examined the post-1989 transition both in Italy and globally, constantly contesting the narrative promoted as common sense by the mass media and political mainstream. This much is clear from the interviews I conducted with him for *il manifesto* at key moments over the past fifteen years.⁴ Rereading them, I find a thread that reperiodizes the whole post-1989 transition, connecting the ‘Italian anomaly’ to the wider context of the end of 20th-century politics and the workers’ movement. He denounces the post-communist left above all for its subaltern cultural position, coldly dissects Berlusconi and the populist mediatized political forms characterized by him (and largely internalized by the left within the wider degenerative drift of the Western democracies), and opposes the optimism predicated on a linear and progressive model of modernization to an analysis that stresses the discontinuities and the contradictions of globalization.

It was during one of the more recent interviews with Tronti, done at the time when the statue of Saddam Hussein was falling in Baghdad, that I uttered that ‘I don’t agree’ already mentioned above. I couldn’t agree with the way in which

Tronti understands what he judges as the absolute and ineluctable defeat of the antiwar movement. According to him, there was a war and Bush won it, therefore the pacifists were defeated. It could not be otherwise, he implies, since in war as in politics (that is, politics understood as ‘hot’ or ‘cold’ war between friend and enemy), it is force that decides. My objection springs from an argument that derives from my feminist experience: that you can’t measure the efficacy of a movement using the values against which it was born. You can’t measure the efficacy of the pacifists using the values of the very force they sought to contest, just as you can’t measure the efficacy of feminism using the values of the power that feminism contests. In my turn, I too imply that politics is not only force and power, not always does it take the form of war, or function according to the binary of friend and enemy: there is something else under the sky of politics and this otherness must be recognized and accounted for. It is always on this same point that my closeness to Tronti reverses into the maximum distance: that is, on the idea of politics, in the final analysis. Naturally, I don’t pretend to be able to change his mind. But I will take advantage of this occasion to try and explain why the obstinate adherence to this idea of politics functions, in his latest work, as a kind of final resistance that blocks the analysis at precisely the point where it might be freed. *La politica al tramonto* is the text that at once allows and demands this approach.⁵

2. Timely in its publication at the end of 1998, *La politica del tramonto* is more a farewell toast to the 20th-century than a welcoming of the 21st. It is a text about ends and losses: the end of the century of grand politics, the loss of points of belonging, the vanishing of that which the word communism held (or was believed to have held) in common. Before being a work of political philosophy, then, the book is a practice of mourning, as evidenced by the writing that ‘comes from within,’ the circular procedure of argument, the alternate tonality of musical ‘movements’ that accompany the index, and the final suspension and ellipsis: a parenthetical question mark attached to the final sentence that speaks of ‘wandering, wondering, mistaking’ in the ‘strange light that the twilight of politics throws upon the history of the recent past.’ This is what happens to thought when we are mourning, in the suspended time that opens up when one thing has finished and another has not yet begun: it wanders and wonders, turning back on itself, trying to follow an *andante* tempo but falling back to the *adagio*, displaced and disoriented from loss. But when one is able to take stock of oneself in this altered but fruitful condition, the displacement and disorientation can become an opening. It is this crucial theme, the working through of grief for the end of communism, that Jacques Derrida, as early as 1993 in *Specters of Marx*, identified as the most

urgent task for political and geopolitical thought after 1989. Derrida linked the end of communism and the end of modern political forms with the spectral weight of the spirit of revolution upon the global geopolitical unconscious and melancholic tone of our epoch. And it should be noted that he also associated the mournful shadow cast over politics (and its removal from political discourse) with the ‘masculine installation of sexual difference’ within the mechanisms of power and their transmission from father to son, with all the cruel and sacrificial conflicts that follow from this.⁶

There is a strange consonance between the non-communist author of *Specters of Marx* and the communist author of *La politica al tramonto*, even though they take a quite different approach to their theme. I will not revisit here the main thrust of Tronti’s analysis, which identifies communism as the heir of modern politics and consequently correlates the end of communism (backdated from 1989 to 1968, from the Berlin Wall to Prague’s Wenceslas Square) with the end of modern politics. Instead, in a Derridean manner, I will approach Tronti’s argument from its borders: if modern politics is finished, what is its inheritance? Are we its heirs and, if so, who is this ‘we’? If, as Derrida writes, inheritance is always a matter of decision, of close scrutiny, or a choice between what we take and what we leave, how do we then ‘decide’ about the inheritance of modern politics? And, in this matter so full of the specters of the inheritance of modern politics, what is the role of the *feminine installation* of sexual difference in the critique of power and its transmission?

It is at this level, I believe, that the question of the connection between Tronti’s late work and the feminist thought of sexual difference must be posed. This connection is not a matter of fashion, chumminess, or politically correct homage. Tronti knows that the thought of sexual difference is not about ‘women’s issues,’ gender rights, or quotas of representation, but about politics: about the who, what and how of politics, about its roots and its destiny. It thus raises radical issues which demand general lines of inquiry. Tronti’s recent trajectory suggests three of these to me: a genealogical one, an ontological one, and an epistemological one.

3. With the first evidence comes the first problem. The question of sexual difference emerges as a political question, along with feminism, at the time of the crisis of politics: around about the time—let us say provisionally—of 1968. In the periodization proposed by Tronti, this date functions as the watershed between the ‘grand’ and the ‘small’ 20th-century, or between the grandness and the decline of 20th-century politics. Is it the case that in this relation, which is conceptual as well

as temporal, the feminist revolution and the crisis of politics sit together? Is the former a symptom or a cause of the latter, or both? And does it announce an exit from the crisis as much as a post-crisis politics? Tronti (does not) respond(s) to these questions by hypothesizing a sort of missing heritage that women could in theory, but never in practice, take from 20th-century politics: as if women were the last heiresses of a fallen empire that leaves nothing behind—the missing heiresses of a lack or trustees of a bankruptcy. We know how this works. When the masculine installation of difference in the mechanism that transmits power from father to son breaks, the response of power is not to divert this mechanism to the daughter but to declare bankruptcy. But let's leave aside the metaphor, and proceed using Tronti's terms. When the 'feminist revolution' erupts around about the time of 1968, Tronti writes, it exhibits the two characteristics necessary for a political subject in the classical sense: ancient roots and a spirit of discord.

There is the need for liberation from millenarian repression. These are the two characteristics that qualify and reveal a political phenomenon as being able to measure up to the noumenon of history. The first is that it breaks out in direct contrast, in a relation that is agonistic or 'polemical' in the literal sense of the term, meaning that the one divides into two with no possibility of synthesis, opening up an either/or that unleashes a *Freund-Feind* struggle. The second is the long duration of the problem, its epochal nature and relative eternity.⁷

The stuff of a political subject was thus there. But—Tronti goes on—'the problem was missing its epoch.' Sexual difference could be 'a category of modern politics.' But, in practice, 'it could not do without conflict, it could not do without force, it could only stand on the legs of realism and utopia, it could not but construct a desired false consciousness, it could not but convert the strategic complex of liberation into a tactic of emancipation.' It emerges only when modern politics ends. The contradiction man/woman would have had 'its natural place autonomously alongside the great epochal contradictions of the early 20th-century: workers and capital, fascism and democracy, capitalism and socialism.' Instead, it exploded 'in the small 20th-century, when all the other great contradictions were, either theoretically or practically, extinct.' The conclusion is that feminism is an instance of culture but not politics. 'It gave us thought, displaced relationships, changed laws, upset common sense, destroyed good sense.' But because it occurred not in the era of politics but of the end of politics, 'it remains a culture, a theoretical point of view on the world and man.' It is not the heir of 20th-century politics, but only 'of the civilizing, modernizing and secularizing processes of the 1960s.'⁸

Clearly we have a paradox before us. But while Tronti attributes it to the thing itself, I attribute it to its interpretation. I will try to suggest another hypothesis, a different way of analyzing the relation between feminism and the crisis of 20th-century politics, beginning with a reconsideration of the ‘watershed’ of 1968.

4. Notwithstanding the familiar refrain of the left, which considers feminism a kind of derivative of 1968, born from it like Eve from Adam’s rib, a glance at the facts reveals that feminism began before 1968, both in the US and Italy. It grew, as Carla Lonzi writes, not *with* but *despite* 1968 (and, in Italy, 1977). And it does not follow the reflux of the 1968 movement at the end of the 1970s.⁹ Rather, it cuts the 1968 movement internally, with the separation of women from men, an act which is not just a declaration of identity or a gesture of liberation but an exodus from the lexicon and form of a certain politics toward another lexicon and other forms. It is an unveiling and declaration of alterity, which departs from the deluded certainty of repetition that emerges so strongly in politics at times of revolution. The repetition of the ‘masculine as the dominant value’ under premise of egalitarianism, the repetition of phallogentrism under the premise of universalism, the repetition of power under the premise of antiauthoritarianism, the repetition of alienation under the premise of liberty.¹⁰ If, as Tronti claims, 1968 can be considered the point of exhaustion of modern politics, it does not mean that everything that disappeared of modern politics at that point was good. Feminine difference reveals what has been left out, bringing to the fore a crucial element of the picture: the complicity that modern politics entertains with the symbolic order of patriarchy. Just as in Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, the anamorphosis changes the entirety of the picture, so the feminine glance discovers the skull—yet another story of specters, to gloss Derrida—and opens another perspective on modern politics, for the future and the past.

I will speak later of the future. For now, I want to propose two brief revisitations of the past. Going back through the 20th-century and the entire period of modern politics, the exceptionality of the contingency that links feminism to 1968 allows us to partially—but only partially, as we shall—locate a certain returning regularity in the picture. There are two exemplary moments here: the 1930s and the French revolution. Before it exploded around the time of 1968, Virginia Woolf had already announced the 20th-century feminism of difference in *Three Guineas*. In the wartime London of 1938, there had already been a huge wave of feminine emancipation, an exodus from an exhausted political lexicon, a conflict

with the feminism that aims only at parity with men, a struggle with socialist and pacifist brothers and their way of attaching women to themselves ‘equally,’ and a response to the connection between the crisis of patriarchal authority with the hardening of virile masks of power, first among them that of the *Führer*. It was the era of the great contradictions that Tronti would like to have seen aligned with the man-woman contradiction. But this alignment did not occur. Rather sexual difference acted as an uncomfortable third term that complicated the picture, an unpredictable element that could not be reduced to the grand dichotomies of classical political conflict. The second moment is Paris 1791, at the time of the revolution: Olympe de Gouges rewrites the seventeen articles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in her Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Citizen. This is neither an act of feminine translation nor inclusive enlargement but a reformulation of the universal on the basis of sexual difference. Two years of the revolution had been enough to understand that the third keyword of 1789, fraternity, compromised the supposedly universal character of the other two, since the relation between brothers remains exclusive and excluding. Also in times of revolution, masculine difference returns to install itself in the heart of power and its transmission.

Let’s put it this way—the politics of difference, which, according to Tronti, is like politics *tout court*, takes advantage of the state of exception: in normal times women used to stay at home, now they are diligent workers and good citizens. In times of war and revolution, women explode onto the public scene and attempt to reinvent the rules of the game, but something always returns unchanged to exclude them or, to put it better, women resist capture by this process. But what is the state of exception for the politics of difference? It is the point where the suture between the socio-political order and the symbolic order breaks, where the edifice of modern politics and its patriarchal foundations can no longer sustain themselves and, for a moment, everything opens up to different possibilities and unpredictable outcomes, before the suture of normality returns to restrict them. In times of change, writes Luisa Muraro, ‘the games are, so to speak, officially open’: in political disorder the game between women and men becomes freer and women participate as protagonists of change.¹¹ But the institution of the new order is systematically accompanied by that which is currently understood as exclusion. A more attentive feminism, however understands this as the subtraction of women from the mechanism of power that reorganizes the relations between men and the entire public sphere. Maria de Medeira has miraculously captured this process on the screen

in her movie *Capitani d'aprile*, narrating the events of the 1975 Carnation Revolution in Portugal through the eyes of a young girl. As Muraro writes:

Feminist historiography has documented the repetition of this phenomenon in many different contexts. In every instance, the moments of recognizable feminine presence are revolutionary phases of human history, while the tendency to exclusion-reclusion sneaks back in the successive, and generally longer, phase of 'normal history.' In the early Christian societies, in the late medieval cities, in the modern French state, in revolutionary Russia, in independent Algeria, in anti-imperialist Iran, in enormously different contexts, feminine protagonism was accepted at the early stages and then at a certain point, when the revolutionary phase ceded to the search for stable forms, it became, so to speak, unsustainable, particularly for men.¹²

Muraro connects the mechanism of the exclusion of women to another symbolic mechanism, which in masculine history works to substitute pleasure with power, or rather with the taking of pleasure from power. Here again we see the masculine installation of sexual difference in the transmission of power from father to sons: a Freudian theme before it was ever Derridean or feminist one. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud explained how the constitution of the social and political order is linked to the Oedipal constellation; that is, to the sacrificial sequence that allows the fraternal clan to substitute itself in the paternal order by killing the father and paying for the power it thus acquires with the interdiction against pleasure and the regulation of access to women. Just how much the history of modern sovereignty—of the 'totemic mask' of the sovereign—has to do with the sacrificial quintessence of this primordial myth is something that should—but is not—understood by political thought.¹³ But what happens to this original suture between modern politics and the Oedipal constellation in the era that Tronti calls the twilight of politics and which many others call the twilight of Oedipus? What role did the feminist revolution of the 20th-century play in opening up this double fracture in the political order and the symbolic order? And what consequences does this double fracture have for politics-to-come?

5. I would like to revisit in this framework the controversy opened by *La politica al tramonto* in its identification of 1968 as the watershed between the grand and the small 20th-century, or between the greatness and decline of modern politics. The relevance of this controversy becomes evident if we read Tronti's text alongside another that was also published at the turn of the century and written by authors by no means unfamiliar to him: Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*.¹⁴ Whereas, for Tronti, 1968 closes the era of politics, for Hardt and Negri, it is a

beginning that opens a new era of subversion. And, while Tronti fails to see the novelty that is born from the ruins of the old, Hardt and Negri fail to see the repetition that returns under the sign of the new. I think it is impossible to avoid this shortsightedness without introducing to the picture the complications of the feminist revolution, its asymmetrical connection to 1968, and its effects upon the suture between the political and symbolic orders.

Tronti himself deals with the problem in the right way when he writes about 1968 that ‘the crisis of politics paradoxically has its origins in the will to throw authoritarian power into crisis.’ But the analysis here needs to be more subtle and, doubling back along the trajectory of sexual difference, to avail itself of the distinction—which Tronti later gladly notes—between power and authority elaborated by the Diotima philosophical community drawing on Hannah Arendt.¹⁵ Tronti argues, to my mind with some reason, that 1968 was an anti-authoritarian political movement that had the paradoxical effect of removing authority from politics. Even so, there was a double movement: sons against fathers, but also sisters against brothers. On the first front, that between sons and fathers, the revolution of 1968 brings to its highest point the tendency of modern politics that began with the ‘grand narrative’ of the social contract. As Carole Pateman has magisterially shown, this is nothing other than the narrative of the transition from traditional (paternal) patriarchy to fraternal patriarchy, from the natural power of fathers to the conventional and contractual power of sons, which installs itself in the double and interconnected form of male freedom and domination over women.¹⁶ The novelty emerges on the second front: that of sisters against brothers. In 1968, this explodes with unprecedented extension and intensity. It reveals the entanglements of the ‘sexual contract’ between free men and subjugated women which sustains the social contract, divides the public sphere with the inaugural gesture of separatism, and gives political form to a sisterhood that is asymmetrical to fraternal society, because it is not based on matricide in the way the latter is based on parricide and relies not on paternal sacrifice but on maternal relation. The feminine attack on the patriarchal-fraternal order liberates politics from its sacrificial and mournful roots: the relational form supplants the ritual of death that regulates the transmission of heredity and the separation of powers.

It could be said that the first movement, insofar as it is revolutionary, re-enters the order of repetition, while it is only the second that is truly unforeseeable and makes a difference. In the state of exception, the fraternal anti-authoritarian revolution renews the Oedipal sacrifice and, in so doing, preserves and reproduces

the patriarchal symbolic order. The sisters, however, break it. The first movement, under its subversive crust, reorders; whereas the second disorders. Antoinette Fouque, one of the protagonists of the French scene, identified this dynamic immediately. Fouque writes that May 1968 was 'the first assemblage of sons as such: after the era of liberty and equality came that of fraternity.' 'The father has exited the scene,' and what counts now is 'the double, the twin, the reflection, the brother; or what they call the comrade,' which in the era of fraternity acquires the coloring of omnipotent narcissism.¹⁷ The narcissistic personality of the 1968 and post-1968 man, accurately described by Christopher Lasch in 1980, should not be under-evaluated as a widespread sociological phenomenon.¹⁸ It is not by chance that the theme returns in one of Slavoj Žižek's most important interventions: another end-of-the-century book, *The Ticklish Subject*. Discussing the historicity of Oedipus in the wake of Freud and Lacan, Žižek also locates in the contemporary anthropological panorama a break in the symbolic order of bourgeois society and identifies this with the eclipse of paternal authority. 'The symbolic authority of the father, 'the Name of the Father,' the figure that unites the two functions of totem and taboo, of the ego-ideal and the super-ego, fades away. In its place there emerges 'the primordial father,' deprived of symbolic authority, no longer the ego-ideal but the ideal ego. This 'primordial father' is the imagined rival of his Peter Pan sons, who are eternal adolescents in competition with him, like Narcissuses obsessively dedicated to the care of themselves. They remain unaffected by interiorized prohibitions and are continually driven by injunction to enjoyment, which is functional to the capitalism of immaterial consumption and the postmodern religion of chance.¹⁹

In this way, Žižek explores the everyday effects of that process of the decline of paternal authority and the consequent crisis of masculine identity that Max Horkheimer analyzed in his *Studies on Authority and the Family*. But neither Horkheimer in the 1930s nor Žižek today manage to understand what was happening on the feminine side while Oedipus was vacillating within the masculine *Bildungsroman*. Let's return to Antoinette Fouque: in the era of narcissistic fraternity or the 'universe of sons and images' which takes the phallus as 'the general equivalent of the integrity of Narcissus,' what place is reserved for women? Fouque responds: either the part of Echo or the exhibition of the body in the market of images (a phallic gesture in its own way). These two poles have certainly not remained vacant: there is an abundance of women available to fill them. The point is that many, around the time of 1968, took a different path: difference, separation, exodus from the community of equals, sisterhood and feminine genealogy rather

than parricidal fraternity, the emptying of power and construction of authority while the masculine anti-authoritarian struggle was confounding power and authority. No more Echo, no more mirrors for Narcissus. It was the feminine separation, just as much if not more than the decline of paternal authority, that prevented the movement of 1968 and after from resolving and recomposing itself into a new political order based on the reproduction of the old symbolic order. The movement of brothers against the father was the insurrectional element reducible to the new order, but the movement of sisters against brothers was unforeseeable and irreducible. In this way, it was women who made 1968 radical, more than it was 1968 that made women radical.

It is thus true that 1968 closed an epoch: it closed the epoch of the modern social contract, of the separation of powers among brothers after the killing of the father and beheading of the sovereign. After 1968 there is no longer the stability of the democratic contract (it is no accident that the neo-contractualists have had to reinvent it, without success: to reaffirm its neutrality a contractual subject must cover itself in the veil of ignorance with regard to its concrete determinations, beginning with its sexual one). There are unstable and narcissistic fraternities that seek to divide up among themselves a power without authority, and there are women who refuse to echo and construct authority without power. From Olympe de Gouges's contestations of the fiction of universal fraternity to the feminist separation from the 1968 community of equals, the historical arc of harmony between the modern political order and the patriarchal-fraternal order both extends and expires. The symbolic order is scrambled, out of joint like the time of Hamlet; there is great disorder under heaven. The Oedipal-masculine genealogy of politics has come to the end of the line; the hereditary mechanism of power guaranteed by the masculine installation of sexual difference is interrupted by the installation of feminine difference in the critique of power. It is necessary to take stock of patrimony again and reconceive inheritance. Modern politics declines but it does not finish, even if it is no longer possible to think it in the lexicon or act it out in the forms of the Oedipal fairytale.

6. So much for the path of genealogy, which can also be traced in ontological terms, along the line of the irruption of sexual difference within the formation of the modern subject. This is by no means a task that is concluded or conceptually resolved, as demonstrated by the debate that has rocked the international feminist community for three decades and intersects the contemporary philosophical debate on subjectivity, on the relation between identity and difference and between

difference and differences, and on the passage from modernity to postmodernity. It is neither possible nor interesting for me to recapitulate that debate completely here.²⁰ But I do want to interrogate it, starting from the reading Tronti proposes of the 'event' of sexual difference: as we have seen, 'the one divides into two with no possibility of synthesis, opening up an either/or that unleashes a *Freund-Feind* struggle.' With this, crucially in my opinion, Tronti grasps the rupture of the original gesture, political and theoretical, of the birth of feminine difference: the separation from men and the affirmation of a self that knows itself to be partial and claims its own partiality and point of view. From this point on, the individual is no longer one and neutral (and thus, it really ceases to exist and cedes its place to singularity). Discourse is no longer univocal and universal, the public sphere splits: difference is irreducible, there is no synthesis, the dialectic does not function. Tronti's sensibility with regard to this rupture of the sexual difference-event is not accidental: it is not by chance that Toni Negri, in his recent and provocative text *La differenza italiana*, collocates Tronti and Luisa Muraro, *operaismo* and the thought of difference, in the isomorphism of the affirmation of workers' difference and that of feminine difference, and of the political gesture of the workers' separation from the masters in the factory and the feminine separation from men everywhere.²¹

But the rupture of the event does not stop here: difference does not limit itself to division in two, but it immediately becomes a differential matrix and multiplies differences. This is immediately clear from the history (more so than the philosophy) of the women's movement: as soon as one affirms the difference from men, there emerge differences between women. As soon as the collective noun and subject 'women' is deployed, it is contested by the plurality of female groups that differentiate themselves from that noun, by female voices that begin to say 'I' in different ways. Such is the practice of movement, which, in fact, will never have an organized form or unitary representation. In philosophy, where there is a complex series of references and alliances (Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida), there seems to be a revolt (largely derived from Anglosaxon women's studies and poorly adapted to the Italian context) of 'gender theories' against the supposed essentialism of the theory of sexual difference. This involves the substitution of the conflict man-woman with the (often much less conflictual) proliferation of transgender, nomadic and rhizomatic subjectivities. Such a path is not without its traps, since the logic of multiplicity often recapitulates the logic of the one (with some confusion between sociology and ontology). The problem posed by the event of sexual difference remains to be thought in both its conceptual implications and general

politics: the break of essentialist ontology of identity and the rewriting of an anti-essentialist ontology of difference.

It is not a matter of dissolving the one in the many, but of taking theory seriously by learning how to convert into practice the differential form the subject acquires when the voice of sexual difference shows there is no longer, and never was (except at the price of an insupportable fiction), a neutral and universal oneness. This differential form is internally fractured, excessive, non-coincident with any essence or identity, and dislocated from itself. It precipitates the fall of the figure of the individual and the entire scaffolding of modern politics—not only with respect to order (and with consequences for the forms of representation) and the state but also with respect to disorder and subversion. The conflict man-woman *does not* assume the form of a struggle between friend and enemy but that of a relation of difference. It does not organize itself in a field of forces directed against an other but acts locally and transversally. It does not aim to seize power but rather to empty it. As such, it obliges us to rethink the form of antagonism outside the binary friend-enemy and to measure transformation with values different to those of force and power. The one that divides in two does not remain content with the forms of modern politics or follow the unfolding of the great dichotomous contradictions of 20th-century politics. Rather, it leaves these behind or, more accurately, announces that politics itself must leave these behind.

Also if considered from the point of view of subject formation, sexual difference is central to our times. It removes the problem of the subject from the schematizations and simplifications that constellate about the debate on the passage from the modern to the postmodern. More precisely, we can say that sexual difference incarnates and motivates (but also complicates) this passage, since it comes from ‘the mute and tacit inside of modernity’ but does not identify itself with the dissolutive drift of postmodernity.²² The subject of difference that emerges—not by accident—with the decline of the identitarian subject, accelerates the deconstruction and crisis of the latter without nihilistic or auto-annihilating results. As Tronti himself acutely observes, there is today ‘a masculine movement of deconstruction and, however uncertain, a feminine movement of construction.’²³ But if this is so, there are more things under the sky of the passage of modernity to postmodernity than contemporary philosophy can know. And there is an excess that Tronti himself, in his defense of the power of the modern against postmodern fragmentation, doesn’t manage to grasp: the subject that emerges from the disavowed part of the modern paradigm does indeed point to an overcoming, but

‘opens from its inside not toward any ‘afterwards’ but rather toward more of itself.’²⁴ It thus points—and here we are again at the question of inheritance—to the relaunching of the patrimony of modern politics and not to its dissolution. But with this image of the tacit and mute inside of modernity, we arrive at the third and final path that I wanted to follow: the epistemological.

7. Another factor, the most frequently overlooked one, of the irruption of sexual difference into modern politics should not be forgotten: i.e., the unforeseen and disturbing way in which it suddenly reveals the repressed side of politics and, in so doing, throws doubt on the luminousness of politics as we know it. Difference under neutralization, the mute feminine word under phallogocentrism, patriarchal oppression under democratic liberty and communist equality, the private under the public and the personal under the political, the unconscious under rationality, sexuality under the neuter, repetition and impediments under the utopian project: at the beginning feminism was an effort to unbury this immense repressed material. The scandal was to proclaim that this repressed material was also political material, or that it should and must become so. And this scandal goes on since, three and a half decades after the beginning of feminism, everyone is ready to add a ‘gender’ chapter to politics as it currently exists; but no-one (or almost no-one) recognizes that this politics is only the surface of a stratigraphy that can no longer be occluded and throws into question the sphere, statute and form of rationality. Remarkably too, the scandal persists at a historical time when the surface of politics does nothing but vomit, like an erupting volcano, all that was repressed by the construction of modern politics. Women excluded from the public sphere, ethnicities canceled by the nation-state, religions expunged by lay citizenship, the ‘geopolitical melancholy’ (Derrida once again) hidden under liberal triumphalism obsessed with the spectre of communism: these are signals that show how the rationality and lexicon of modern politics are no longer able to mark the change or make sense of it, like a crust that breaks under the pressure of unnamed drives. All of this suggests that the current disaffection for politics should perhaps be interpreted as disaffection with its worn narrative, with the linguistic and conceptual cage in which it is imprisoned.

But the unconscious has two sides: repetition and opening, neurosis and desire, nightmare and dream. And while repression imprisons, the unpredictable liberates. ‘The fascination of politics is that it can never rationalize everything’ so Tronti writes in the essay ‘*Politica e destino*.’ In the spoken version, I am sure, he added something else, which was perhaps too scandalous to be included in the

written version—rationality is broken by the weight of an unconscious that does not allow itself to be removed.’ There remains, however, the mark of an excess that is irreducible to ‘the given and the objective,’ which ‘is not only outside, in history, but also inside, in the motivation, articulation and decision to act politically.’ It is an action that is not entirely in our hands but that also decides about us and acts on us. Where this excess or ‘irruption of the unpredictable’ occurs, there is an event or contingency. In a manner similar to Arendt, Tronti claims, there is politics where there is ‘the birth of the unexpected and thus of the unrecognized.’ In this sense, politics is a feminine substantive, ‘because politics is a mother, it creates in the sense that it generates.’²⁵ Unconscious, birth, contingency, excess: the lexicon of feminine liberty turns in a circle around the terms of the groundlessness of politics, and opens the central question of the late Tronti: that of freedom’s existence in tension, and not continuity, with democracy.²⁶

8. The late Tronti, which begins with the ‘Tesi su Benjamin’ in *La politica al tramonto* and continues to this day, is the most striking but least received. It is like an indigestible fruit for the common sense of the left at the beginning of the millennium, which has made itself an heir of democracy without any ‘decision’ about what to take on board and what to discard. By contrast, Tronti both decides and discards: ‘The century of democracy, which in war wins against dictators, does not give freedom in peace. At the end of the 20th-century, that historical conflict between dictatorship and freedom, that defeated both totalitarianism and authoritarianism, opens the way to a political conflict between democracy and freedom.’²⁷ Far from realizing the autonomy and independence of the bourgeois individual, *homo democraticus* inhabits the present like ‘one of the herd,’ an isolated and massified atom, apathetic and dependent, a proud defender of his own ‘particular’ freedom but susceptible to pervasive forms of control, from the mass mediatized manipulation of common sense to the colonization of desire in the supermarket and the emptying of political participation in the forms of plebiscite democracy. And all of this occurs in the shadow of guaranteed constitutional rights, which, in expanding the spectre of juridical freedom, do not obstruct but rather assist, in certain ways, the hemorrhaging of freedom that turns democracies into regimes of voluntary servitude.

Is this degeneration or the destiny of democracy? ‘In the past fifty years, according to those who see the problem from the point of view of radical democracy or the critique of democracy, democracy has either been corrupted or completed. I believe that it has been completed.’ As with socialism, there is no

break between the model and the thing, between the idea and the historical experiment. Democracy is real (or actually existing) democracy. It is not something other than the historical realization of the idea. The outcome is not a degeneration of the model but is inscribed in its original constitution, which it shows to have a disturbing root: 'The unification of the world under the single sign of indirect domination, the crash of alternative subjectivities, the death of the people and substitution of the masses in the titles of the sovereign's function, the spurious forms (commanded from above) of direct democracy, the primacy of communication and subalternity of politics, and the fact that all of this produces a thought that is seen as the one and only, ultimate and indisputable, form of political system, without anything other or beyond it being publicly desirable, suggests the (reversed) title of 'democratic totalitarianism.'²⁸ What is this if not the logical and historical unfolding of democracy's identitarian root, of the identity of *demos* and *kratos* that substantiates the formula of popular sovereignty, realized in the course of time as the '*kratos* of the *demos*, the power of the mass over anyone,' the 'process of homogenization or massification of thoughts, sentiments, tastes, and behaviours,' a sort of 'auto-dictatorship' close to voluntary servitude'? But if this is knot that strangles the democratic project, there is perhaps no way to untie it: 'it seems to me that the moment has come to cut it.'²⁹

In his latest exercise of the critique of democracy, which I am following here, Tronti's debt to the thought of sexual difference becomes more explicit and precise: this critique, he writes, 'has a father, *operaismo*, and a mother, the autonomy of the political. And it is a female child, since the thought and practice of difference anticipated this critique with the questioning of the universalism of the *demos*, which is the other face of the neutral character of the individual, and with that *non credere di avere diritti* (don't believe you have rights) that is no longer directed to the individual but to the people.'³⁰ In this way, the general valence, both theoretical and practical, of the event of sexual difference is acknowledged and carried to its consequences. It is not only a matter of the denunciation and criticism of the false neutrality of the individual and the *demos*, but also of the exposure of and attack on the heart of the identitarian root of democracy. (Sexual) difference is not an element that can be expansively included in democracy. It is rather the explosive and unhinging element. If the democratic order constructs itself on an identitarian base and consolidates and globalizes itself through the assimilationist and homogenizing valence of equality, difference is the element that disorders this double base by unhinging it. If, in the democratic order, the identitarian root and assimilationist and homogenizing valence of equality suffocate human and political

freedom, decomposing them in the liberty of the (neutral) citizen assured by rights (that are ‘precious to live together with others but poor for existing in a way that begins with oneself’), difference is the refounding element of freedom or, to put it another way, the category with which to rethink the subject.³¹ The semantics of freedom and the grammar of difference touch each other in the central and crucial political project of the present, which is called ‘for the critique of democracy.’

I have discussed elsewhere the cut that Tronti’s criticism of democracy makes with respect both to the right that has been hegemonic in the West from the 1980s on (and which has hooked the democratic triumph to a liberal, privatized and antipolitical conception of freedom) and the post-89 left (which has hooked it to an immunitarian and depoliticizing concept that absolutises the democratic religion without daring to question).³² This is a tainted convergence that today is under the eyes of all: in the democracy exported to Iraq by the United States, the Paris *banlieues*, and the extenuated Italian transition. There is no need to underline, in the face of this democratic monotheism, the subversive aspect of Tronti’s program. Upon which (and here I want to conclude), sexual difference acts like litmus paper but also brings up some question marks.

9. It remains to say something about the ‘completion’ of democracy that Tronti, from his point of view, justly assumes as a bar against the ideologies of a still-to-come completion of the democratic project, or of its reformability, or of the possibility of purifying the ‘corruptions’ of the ‘correct’ model that are rather (as we have seen) its logic of becoming true. It is, however, a strange completion that contains an element of chronic incompleteness—that of the still incomplete inclusion of women in democratic citizenship and in the seats of representation and power. This theme notoriously divides the international panorama of feminism: between those who read this incompleteness as a deficit and a ‘not-yet’ and those (the feminists of difference) who read it as an excess and a ‘no more.’ In the first case, democracy will be complete only when it has included women (and parity is the measure of this progression). In the second case, democracy is complete insofar as the semi-inclusion (or semi-exclusion) of women fractures it always and forever (and difference is the sign of this original and destined *crisis*, which the feminist revolution has turned into *criticism*). This conflict that agitates the feminine democratic scene throughout the 20th-century and today is not simply a secondary matter; what is at stake is the faith in the democratic religion, which is sustained by the priestesses of parity as much as it is contested by the disbelievers of difference. The democratic states of the late 20th-century responded to the explosion of

difference in the 1970s with the strategy of ‘obsessive parity.’³³ And the democratic Empire of today uses the same strategy in the war of conquest of the infidel women, who are hiding everywhere—in the Western metropolises as much as in Afghan villages and Iraqi cities. The clash of civilizations, or the war for the planetary hegemony of the democratic religion, will not be won until the resistance of feminine difference and the feminine incredulity toward democratic homogenization (whether this incredulity is naked or clothed, postmodern or premodern, nomadic and queer or domesticated and segregated) is crushed.

But it will not be crushed, as demonstrated by the irreducibility to the democratic lexicon of some emblematic conflicts that revolve around sexual difference, such as the struggle over the French law on the veil. Or by the ordinary irreducibility of the feminine to the parameters of power, of representation and value, which unsettles democratic games of partition and parliaments as well as capitalist devices for control of the workforce. Or again by the irreducibility to the contractual form of the birthing power of the mother, which shows the limits of the masculine political generativity celebrated by the narrative of the contract. The democratic century that, as Tronti says, defeated the workers’ movement, also placed a feminine thorn in its side. But this means, differently from what Tronti claims, that it is not completely true that the double face of democracy, both a practice of domination and project of liberation, can be boiled down to one face only, namely the first. The completion of democracy still produces fractures and conflict: maybe not in the form of the antagonism friend-enemy, but certainly in the form of exodus, resistance, emptying, heresy, and parody. The democracy of the depoliticization of the masses still produces the political if, as Carla Lonzi used to claim, the feminine separation from the lexicon and dying forms of modern politics *is already political*, and if this separation has already given birth to new words and new forms.

At the end of modern politics, the heiresses of its fall or executors of its failure, are paradoxically the best suited, from the platform of the difference, to relaunch it. You can passively inherit a patrimony and then dissipate it, or you can inherit and decide what to discard and what to keep and valorize. After discarding the masked neutrality of the subject, the homogenizing power of equality and the totalizing drive of identity, the Oedipal brotherhood that excludes, the masculine sacrificial ritual that celebrates power and the mournful and guilty shadow that it throws on the public sphere, maybe, like Peer Gynt’s onion, nothing of modern politics will be saved. But maybe we will rediscover its kernel of freedom. What is

at stake is not a struggle friend-enemy but a radical leap in civility. The criterion of measurement is not the conquest of power, but rather the reshaping of the subject. Difference interrupts the eternal return of the-always-the-same. This light that the *politica al tramonto* throws on recent history is not only strange; if you look at it from the right angle, it also displays the promising clarity of dawn.

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¹*Laboratorio politico* was a journal of political theory and practice directed by Mario Tronti. It was published for three years, from January 1981 to December 1983.

²Mario Tronti, 'Politica e destino,' op. cit. (forthcoming, no page numbers).

³ On November 12, 1989 the Secretary of PCI Achille Occhetto announced at the Bolognina branch of the party in Bologna the change of the name of PCI and the constitution of a new, post-communist party. This decision was ratified few months later at the Congress of Bologna, February 1990.

⁴ See *il manifesto* 12/21 1989, 5/30 1991, 7/29 1993, 3/27 1994, 7/11 1995, 3/2 1997, 7/8 1999, 8/24 2000, 5/17 2001, 3/28 2002, 4/11 2003, 4/1 2004, 4/29 2005.

⁵ Mario Tronti, *La politica al tramonto*, Einaudi 1998.

⁶ Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Quale domani?*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2004. Here Derrida reconsiders his *Spettri di Marx*, Cortina, Milano 1993. On the communists' mourning for the end of communism see also the interview with Wendy Brown by C. Colegate, J. Dalton, T. Rayner, C. Thill 'Learning to Love Again' in the special issue entitled Democratic Futures, *Contretemps* 6, 2006 (www.usyd.edu.au/contretemps).

⁷ Mario Tronti, *La politica al tramonto*, p.41. [The terms *Freund* and *Feind* are drawn from Carl Schmitt, on whom Tronti has written a great deal. For more on these concepts, see Schmitt's short book *The Concept Of The Political*, published in 1996 by the University of Chicago Press.]

⁸ Mario Tronti, *La politica al tramonto*, pp. 41 ff.

⁹ See Maria Luisa Boccia, 'Il patriarca, la donna, il giovane. La stagione dei movimenti nella crisi italiana,' in Fiamma Lussana e Giacomo Marramao (a cura di), *Italia repubblicana nella crisi degli anni Settanta*, Rubettino 2003, vol II; Ida Dominijanni, 'Le donne oltre la crisi della politica,' in A aVv, *Millenovecentosettantasette*, manifestolibri 1997.

¹⁰ Lia Cigarini, 'Masculine as the dominant value,' in *il manifesto* (monthly review), 1970, n.4.

¹¹ Luisa Muraro, *Oltre l'uguaglianza*, Liguori 1995, p. 119.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 113.

¹³ Giacomo Marramao, *Dopo il Leviatano*, Giappichelli 1995, pp. 317 ff.

¹⁴ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2000.

¹⁵ See Diotima, *Oltre l'uguaglianza* op cit.

¹⁶ Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Polity Press, 1988.

¹⁷ Antoinette Fouque, *I sessi sono due*, Il Saggiatore 1997, p. 49.

¹⁸ Christopher Lash, *The culture of Narcissism*, Norton 1980.

¹⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, Verso Books 1999, it. transl. Cortina, 2000, pp. 391 ff.

²⁰ See among others Adriana Cavarero and Franco Restaino, *Le filosofie femministe*, Paravia 1999; Rosi Braidotti, *Feminist Philosophies*, in Mary Eagleton, (ed.), *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory*, Blackwell 2003.

²¹ Antonio Negri, *La differenza italiana*, nottetempo 2005.

²² Luisa Muraro, *Oltre l'uguaglianza* op cit., p. 141.

²³ Mario Tronti, 'Politica e destino' op cit.

²⁴ Luisa Muraro, *Oltre l'uguaglianza* op cit., p. 141.

²⁵ Mario Tronti, 'Politica e destino' op cit.

²⁶ See my 'L'eccezione della libertà femminile,' in Ida Dominijanni (ed), *Motivi della libertà*, Franco Angeli 2001.

²⁷ Mario Tronti, *La politica al tramonto* cit., p. 197-198

²⁸ Mario Tronti, 'Per la critica della democrazia,' in Ida Dominijanni (ed), *Motivi della libertà* op cit., p.25.

²⁹ Mario Tronti, 'Per la critica della democrazia politica,' in Marcello Tarà (ed.), *Guerra e democrazia*, manifestolibri 2005, p. 16.

³⁰ Ibid. *Non credere di avere dei diritti* is the title of a famous book of the Libreria delle donne di Milano (Rosenberg e Sellier, 1987).

³¹ Mario Tronti, *La politica al tramonto* op cit., p. 199

³² In my Introduction to *Motivi della libertà* op cit.

³³ Luisa Muraro, *Oltre l'uguaglianza* op cit., p. 130.