

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE MASS WORKER*

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We, with our 'Americanism', with our metropolitan ideology, with the two great 'locations' set at the centre of our historical memory, of our theoretical and ideological identity: the class struggles of the American proletariat, and the gigantic and tragic German Communist movement of 1918 to 1932 (Scalzone 1981: 9).

Workerism in the years before the Hot Autumn had secured only a minor foothold within Italian left historiography. The dominant school in the immediate postwar period was that associated with the Communist party, which saw the purpose of history as tracing the development of the institutions of civil society. Gramsci himself had recognised in the Prison Notebooks that 'the history of a party can only be the history of a determinate social group' (quoted in Bermani 1975: 37). Despite this, the majority of his followers waged a fierce polemic in the early fifties against those whose interest in working class and popular culture led them beyond the institutions of the labour movement, there to explore both dissident political experiences and the daily life of workers and peasants (Bermani & Bologna 1977: 21-4). Indeed, even the best of Communist historiography, such as Paolo Spriano's chronicle of the PCI's development—a work whose sense of balance was at that time unique amongst party histories—continued to advance this focus upon the internal dynamic of the organisation's leadership. Here, as Mariuccia Salvati (1980: 8) has justly noted, 'Whatever fell outside the party, fell outside history, and vice versa'. Given the similarly narrow optic of historiography in the universities, the few intellectuals committed to the pursuit of a properly social history were forced literally to be autodidacts, particularly in economic matters (Bologna 1981: 10).

By the beginning of the sixties, however, the introduction to Italy of the work of the foreign Communists Eric Hobsbawm and Jurgen Kuczynski did much to legitimise the notion of a history of working people. In a similar fashion, the incursion of American sociology and modernisation theory prompted a reconsideration of economic history (Pitassio 1976). The first of the new Communist studies was that of Giuliano Procacci (1962, 1970), which examined the class composition of Italian workers at the turn of the century. Far from evoking sympathy within operaismo, however, this and similar studies would be dismissed by the tendency as proof of the PCI's refusal to confront the most pressing contemporary questions, beginning with the state of working class organisation at FIAT (Alquati 1975: 310; Bermani & Bologna 1977: 32). For its part, workerism's earliest historical forays were largely schematic, their chief purpose being to set out 'new "interpretative frameworks"' capable of surpassing existing left historiography (Bologna 1964: 27).

In a series of short review essays published in late 1963 and early 1964, Sergio Bologna was to explore the significance of fascism from the working class point of view. Despite the specific contexts within which they had arisen, the German and Italian interwar experiences both touched upon matters of current relevance. That of Nazism, for example, presented the problem

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of working class passivity in extremis, revealing at the heart of the fascist rise to power the violent subordination of labour-power to production, along with the disposition of all available means to the pursuit of accumulation (Bologna 1963a: 19). In Germany the institutions of the old labour movement had either been destroyed or integrated into new Nazi organisations in 1933, as rearmament protected by autarchy made possible industry's full utilisation of productive capacity. During the war itself, the use of foreigners as slave labour filling the bottom rungs of the production process had destroyed the last remnants of class solidarity, the 'primary condition for the existence of the working class as a political class' (Bologna 1963b: 62). It was precisely under the regimes of Mussolini and Hitler, moreover, wherein the bonds between labour and its erstwhile representatives were violently sundered, that the reduction of working class history to that of party and union bureaucracies appeared 'truly grotesque' (Bologna 1964: 28). Later, as Bologna (1981: 12) would acknowledge, the critical reading of official records by radical historians would help to reconstruct the many instances of resistance to the workplace regime imposed by the Nazis. In the process, their efforts would also make plain what Timothy Mason (1979) once called the fundamental divide between the political resistance of the German left, and working class opposition in the factory and labour market.

As to the Italian case, Bologna was chiefly concerned in the early sixties to challenge the prevalent leftist view of fascism as the product of Italy's social and political backwardness. As the liberal economist Rosario Romeo's recent work had shown contra Gramsci, the absence of agrarian reform had in no way impeded the advance of Italian capitalism. While Gramsci's line of argument had been tenable in his own time, Bologna (1963b: 63) believed that it had since been confuted by the impetuous development of Italy's economic 'miracle', which had encouraged a growing economic and political unity within the hostile camps of capital and labour. Thus, despite his weaknesses, Romeo had to be acknowledged as the only Italian historian currently capable of

undertaking economic research, simply because his work possessed the undoubted merit of having returned historical discussion to the proper terrain, because it refuses the level of so-called superstructures, of perceiving history only through political institutions (Bologna 1964: 28, 1963b: 64).

'Some hypotheses of marxist research on contemporary history', which appeared in the third number of *Quaderni Rossi*, made explicit the alternative vantage point from which workerism chose to survey the question. The essay pushed very hard against Communist historiography, and in particular its understanding of fascism, taking instead as its starting point the recent wave of industrialisation. This, argued its authors Gaspare De Caro and Umberto Coldagelli (n.d.: 104),

objectively poses class relations at the purest and most mature level of their antagonism ... the science of this present indicates the general direction of development itself, and explains the causes of deviations, oppositions and delays to it. In other words, [from this standpoint] history becomes a biography of the collective capitalist in its incessant struggle with the individual capitalist and in its struggle with the working class.

Like Bologna, the essay presented fascism as 'the political expression of a determinate level of development', a response to 'objectively revolutionary' conditions in which Italy found itself after the First World War (107, 106). Conceiving of fascism as a peculiarly modern reply to this stalemate, De Caro and Coldagelli were also harsh in their assessment of the eventual formula with which the Communist movement had chosen to meet it. To their minds, the Popular Front was a convergence of interests between those committed to defending the Soviet bureaucracy, and sections of Western capital concerned with political and economic reform. Yet, while such a critique evoked those advanced both by contemporary dissident leftists like Fortini

(n.d.: 1974) and the traditional Communist heresies, it was not to be expanded at any length by De Caro and Coldagelli (n.d.: 107-8). Similarly, their analysis of fascism as a political form of capitalist domination, which was to be developed with rigour a decade later by Marco Revelli (1975), was depicted here simplistically as corresponding 'perfectly' to the needs of capital (Coldagelli & De Caro n.d.: 107).

Instead, in another brief essay devoted to the *biennio rosso*, De Caro (1964) turned his gaze to the Turin factory councils of 1920, which 'Some hypotheses' had defined as 'the only initiative responding to the necessity of a revolutionary rupture at this determinate level of capitalist development' (106). Polemicalising with Spriano's study of the period, De Caro located the importance of the councils not in their efforts to defend the interests of labour-power within capital more capably than the unions, but in their reference to a project of political power. Thus, if Gramsci had considered the councils as organs that accepted and took root in the existing organisation of labour, they could not simply be dismissed, as Bordiga had believed, with the charge of reformism. Rather, their true significance—precisely because they anticipated a more advanced form of capitalism based upon co-management—lay in their ability to block the State's efforts to assert a greater role in economic life. That they ultimately failed in this enterprise, De Caro believed, was primarily the fault of the historic left parties, which had been unable to arm workers with an adequate form of political organisation.

TRONTI IN DEUTSCHLAND

The implications of De Caro's arguments were to be spelt out more fully three years later, in what has become the piece of workerist historiography best known to the English-speaking left. 'Class Composition and the Theory of the Party at the Origins of the Workers-Councils Movement', Bologna's contribution to *operaismo's* 1967 conference on the interwar period, is a piece wide-ranging in scope. Its domain stretched from the international cycles of class struggle of 1900-20 to encompass such questions as the nature of fordism, the specificity of the Industrial Workers of the World in prewar America, and debates in the Second International concerning spontaneity and organisation. Its central aim, however, was to make sense of the class composition of the German *Ratebewegung*, the failure of which had sealed the fate both of the Bolsheviks and the postwar world revolution. In Bologna's (1972: 25) view, the distinguishing feature of the councils lay in the political weight within them of skilled workers, particularly those of the machine industry. Deemed indispensable by management, such workers exercised a considerable degree of control over the labour process. Conceived as the self-management of the existing mode of production, their practice of working class autonomy ultimately ran aground due to the lack of any project to confront the obstacles posed by the existing State, seeking at most to democratise and renovate it in a socialist sense. In this respect, the essay was also part of the ongoing workerist polemic against contemporary arguments which grounded revolutionary politics in a productivist ethic:

The concept of workers' self-management could not have had such a wide appeal in the German workers-council movement without the presence of a labor force inextricably linked to the technology of the working process with high professional values and naturally inclined to stress their function as 'producers'. The concept of self-management pictured the worker as an autonomous producer, and the factory's labour-power as self-sufficient ... This relation between occupational structures and determining political-ideological attitudes is well-known. It has to be emphasised both because Germany provides the most substantial illustration, and as a reminder to those who love confused and inconclusive discussions of 'class consciousness', as if the latter were a spiritual or cultural fact (5-6).

Following De Caro, Bologna was careful to avoid a critique which either dwelt upon the ideological shortcomings of self-management, or else dismissed it as something tainted with the odour of the labour aristocracy. That such a conception of socialism was a dead end in the age of the assembly line did not in any way detract from its political efficacy in the Europe of the early twenties. After all, 'the revolutionary import of a movement must be calculated on the basis of the historically determined stage of development in a specific situation' (12). True, this particular figure of the 'worker-inventor' was already in 1919 'objectively doomed to extinction' by fordism (7). Given this, the political importance of the council movement lay above all—as a consequence both of its international significance and the rigidity of German industry—in its ability 'to provoke the crisis and to freeze capitalist development' (26).

Amongst other things, Bologna's essay was a useful illustration of classical workerism's habit of stressing the contents of radical struggles whilst reducing the question of their organisational form to a purely secondary matter. If such a stance indicated a legitimate wariness of those who made a fetish of workers' councils, it also did nothing to challenge the argument—common to proponents and detractors of the council-form alike—which equated the working class practice of direct democracy with productivism. When one turns to examine the events of 1918-23, however, it becomes clear that this formulation is far from adequate. As Bologna (1968: 128-9) was to point out in another essay of the period, historiography has not been kind to the German revolution, preferring—whether through myopia or bad conscience—to leave it in the shadow of Weimar and the Russian October. Indeed, so widespread had this collective dismissal become that even so astute an observer and former participant as Paul Mattick (1968: 348) could look back upon it half a century later and see nothing but the 'dreary story' of 1918. Without doubt, the general thrust of the councils was simply towards their own extinction in favour of a National Assembly, while their most extreme limit lay in ambiguous attempts to combine councils and parliament. Yet, even if skilled workers such as Bologna had described had been the 'most typical' representatives of the movement, the experiences of the latter could hardly be said to exhaust those of the German working class as a whole in the five years which followed Wilhelm II's abdication.

When later he was to review the work's failings, Bologna (1974) would note the 'hasty and schematic' manner in which it sought to separate the epoch of the mass worker from that of its predecessor. Following the predominant historiography's preoccupation with the events of 1919, however, the most glaring oversight of 'Class Composition and the Theory of the Party' lay in its neglect of a whole series of struggles that ran counter to—and, in their political significance, went beyond—those of the *Ratebewegung*. Indeed, the absence of any discussion of the postwar struggles of the Ruhr miners was all the more strange given the essay's designation of this sector as the 'most advanced' in the class composition of prewar Germany (Bologna 1972: 9, 11).

The emergence after 1968 of a new generation of radical historians has done much to improve our understanding of the revolution in the Ruhr, and of the miners' existence generally (Brüggemeier 1981; Geary 1980). Even so, the major study by von Oertzen, from which Bologna was to draw so much of the ammunition for his 1967 argument about skilled workers, already contained a detailed discussion of the radical nature of working class organisation in the Ruhr after the war. The only reasonable conclusion to draw from this, therefore, is that Bologna had been in such haste to make his basic point concerning the craftworkers of the *Raten* that he failed to register another class fraction. Ironically, this was one within which the determinant weight of unskilled migrants indicated obvious parallels with the Italian mass worker of the sixties (Baluschi 1981). Finally, if Bologna was correct in concluding that the real failure of the German Revolution lay in its inability to join class autonomy to a project of armed power, it was also the case that in 1920 the Ruhr had seen a unique attempt to address this question. There thousands of miners had first abandoned the old trade unions for new organisations modelled upon the

industrial unionism of the IWW, then gone on to form Red Armies—replete with heavy artillery—to engage the Reichswehr and the Freikorps (Jones 1987: 176-83).

Criticising the workerists in the introduction to his massive study of *Proletariato di fabbrica e capitalismo industriale*, Stefano Merli (1972: 11) argued that ‘at least in the historiographical field’, the tendency had offered

a manichean history, with a working class without internal articulations, monolithic in its revolutionary fixity, and a ‘bureaucracy’ which, having never exercised hegemony, having never become the ruling group, was forced to satisfy itself with the manipulation [*strumentalizzazione*] of the masses.

It was a harsh judgement, yet not far from the truth. While *operaismo* had provided some new perspectives for the interpretation of labour history, its work still remained marked by that simplistic and one-dimensional view of proletarian behaviour prevalent in the philosophical reflections of Tronti. This was particularly evident in the other workerist contributions to the ‘Workers and state’ conference, which had been even more prone than Bologna to represent the working class as a homogenous entity. Indeed, it was very revealing that none of the contributions to this survey of the interwar period were to devote much attention to the experiences of either fascism or stalinism, both of which had imposed massive defeats upon the working classes of Europe. Instead, the problem of decomposition, of the destruction of the class as political subject, had remained conspicuously absent from their discourse. Significantly, the strongest historical piece in the book—Ferruccio Gambino’s (1976) careful reconstruction of the history of Ford workers’ struggles in Britain—was written three years after the 1967 conference, and benefited both from its author’s acuity and the changed circumstances which followed the Hot Autumn.

Interestingly, the most sustained piece of classical workerist historiography was not to be produced in Italy at all. Written largely by Karl-Heinz Roth, who had been prominent during the late sixties within the German student movement, and first published in 1974, *The ‘Other’ Workers’ Movement* offered an interpretation of German working class history from that nation’s unification a century before. Presenting the vicissitudes of a working class movement ignored by party and union alike, the book provoked a considerable controversy within the German left upon its appearance, which would be further fuelled by Roth’s own subsequent arrest in obscure circumstances the following year (Primo Maggio 1976).

Unlike Bologna, who had seen the autonomy of the unskilled emerge only after the destruction of the skilled workers’ centrality to production, Roth (1976: 36) placed great emphasis upon the formation—even before the First World War—of a new working class. This class was ‘crude, homogenous even as it was divided in the workplace by a refined hierarchy, but always ready to struggle’. Present in textiles, the ports and above all the mines (where Polish migrants played a fundamental role), this sector of the working class was separated from the craft workers who dominated the official labour movement by a profound gulf’ of behaviours and values (35). With the militarisation of labour during the war, dramatic transformations had taken place within the industrial workforce, weakening the influence of skilled workers in favour of the unskilled and unorganised. After the failure of the armed insurrections of 1920-23, both strata of the class again succumbed to the discipline of capital, which now sought to introduce productive techniques inspired by Ford so as to prevent the repetition of such outbursts. Given that for much of the Weimar regime both the Social Democrats and Communists looked primarily to skilled workers as their privileged reference point, the ‘other’ working class movement came again to be abandoned to its own devices (49-56). Driven underground but never fully extinguished by the Nazis, as the pivotal chapter by Elisabeth Behrens sought to document, its struggles would resurface sporadically after 1945. With West Germany’s use of immigrant labour—first from the DDR, then increasingly from the Mediterranean—the gulf between the two components of the

class had become starker than ever before. Written in the immediate aftermath of a strike wave that had swept through much of German industry during 1973, Roth's conclusion was quietly optimistic. Despite the currently spasmodic outbursts of confrontation, the 'multinational worker of mass production' would be pushed by growing repression in the factory to organise a new guerrilla war able to strike out from the workplace against 'the entire social machinery' (241).

While Roth was to polemicise at length with the specific reading of German events presented by Bologna in 1967, it was clear that his own method of enquiry was little different. For example, in depicting the decision in 1920 of the most intransigent wing of the German Communist party to form a new political body—the KAPD—linked to militant workplace organisations, Roth would present the coherence of a small if significant minority of activists as the property of the unskilled as a whole (63). Further, this latter stratum was portrayed as a compact force, whose documented diversity of gender, age and nationality appeared to pose no great barriers to its internal unification. Nor, apart from a passing reference to the famous chemical workers of Leuna, did Roth seek to examine the condition of workers outside the factory, or what bearing this might have upon their behaviour (54-5).

In a brief review which dismissed *The 'Other' Workers' Movement* as 'confused to an unacceptable degree', Paul Mattick (1978: 88) also made plain his lack of interest in the problem of class composition. Instead, he offered his longstanding 'conjunctural' analysis of working class subjectivity as a product of capitalist crisis (Meriggi 1978c: 11). A more pertinent savaging occurred at the hands of the historian Erhard Lucas (1978: 96), whose work on the failed German revolution had been much cited in Roth's study. What particularly offended Lucas about the book, beyond what he deemed its superficial use of sources, was that it used the category of mass worker not as a hypothesis to be tested, but rather as a 'machete' with which to hack a way through conventional historiography. Yet even as he documented a number of the errors and gaps in the work, Lucas would himself fail to confront Roth's central proposition concerning the relation between class behaviour and the technical structure of labour-power (Behrens et al. 1978: 109-110). More balanced was the assessment of Massimo Cacciari (1978: 42, 41), who argued in the pages of *Rinascita* that Roth's 'strongly reductive' approach and 'continual ideologisation' of the 'other' workers' movement did not obscure the book's strengths, in particular its account of the evolution of military-style repression in German factories. The most perceptive critique of Roth's study, however, was to come from Tillman Rexroth (1978: 33). As he pointed out both its method, which depended more upon a counter-reading of existing research than original excavation of its own, and its exclusive focus upon 'the male world of the factory, a male world even when women work within it', were characteristic of classical workerist historiography. In this sense, he concluded, *The 'Other' Workers' Movement* remained 'a book that describes alternative working class history in a non-alternative way'.

TOWARDS A MILITANT HISTORY

A greater receptivity to the complexities of working class politics was to come in the early seventies with the establishment of the history journal *Primo Maggio*. Grouped around Sergio Bologna (1973: 162), its editors were committed to the development of a new, militant history 'subordinate to struggle'. While their common past in *Potere Operaio* and *Lotta Continua* bestowed a distinctly workerist bent to their enquiry, the vanguardism and political intrigues of those organisations had left the editors acutely aware of the disjuncture between working class autonomy and past attempts to organise it from without. According to *Primo Maggio*, 'autonomy is not only a permanent contradiction of the relations of production, but also a permanent contradiction in the construction of the party'. For this reason, it refused from the beginning to succumb to that 'unreal pretence of political organisation' which had so marred the judgement of

Classe Operaia (Bologna 1976: 29, 39). This, together with the collaboration of a number of young historians formed in Gianni Bosio's exploration of popular culture—an experience which had left them both committed to the use of oral sources, and sensitive to the complexities of working class life—lent to this 'rational' workerist undertaking a sobriety at odds with Negri's triumphalism. While one early reflective piece by Bologna (1974: 5) denied that there was any 'necessary relationship between class composition and organisation, in the terms of a subordination of the political program to class composition', the opposite argument would soon emerge as one of *Primo Maggio*'s most important contributions to workerist sensibilities.

Sympathetic to much of the radical history written in the United States since the late sixties, those involved in *Primo Maggio* were nonetheless sharply critical of historians whose work displayed the simplistic features earlier criticised by Merli. Writing in 1975, Peppino Ortoleva examined Jeremy Brecher's study *Strike!* (1980), which had drawn exclusively upon conventional sources such as written documents to reconstruct the relation between the institutions of the labour movement and the highpoints of working class struggle. Brecher, he argued, betrayed an 'Enlightenment view of the historian's role' as one whose task was to restore in class memory a past scrubbed clean by capital. Against this, Ortoleva wrote approvingly of the efforts of Alice and Staughton Lynd (1981), who had started instead

from a quite different presupposition, which is constantly verified in the course of [their] investigation: the hegemony of capitalist culture, and its version of American history, does not translate into a *tabula rasa* of the 'collective memory' of the American working class. A store of working class traditions remains, but it is the patrimony not of the American proletariat as a whole, but rather—disarticulated and sectionalised—of individual groups of workers, of rank-and-file union experiences etc. (Ortoleva 1975: 52).

As the workerists of *Primo Maggio* soon began to discover, class composition—contrary to Bologna's curt dismissal of 1967—was indeed a cultural product. Drawing upon his work with Bosio, Cesare Bermani (1975: 48) insisted upon the 'non-homogenous nature of culture within a class society'. Both inside and outside the workplace could be found the culture of those who were 'exploited but not submitted', within which memory served to filter, order and transmit experience. Used critically, oral testimony could throw light upon the internal workings of class subjectivity; for this to happen, however, the historian must also be a political militant, who as such had won

the complete trust of the interviewee. History of and for the workers' and peasants' movement can only be a history written by a militant for militants.

It was no longer possible, then, to see political composition as merely the result of an immediate and exclusive relation with the labour process. The best work of classical workerism had been made possible by the recognition of material divisions existing alongside that formal unity provided by the shared condition of wage labour: in Alquati's case back in the sixties, the identification of a generation gap at FIAT. For Bologna (1977: 62), writing during the social 'earthquake' of 1977, political composition had come to mean

not only the technical composition, the structure of labour-power, but also the sum and interweaving of the forms of culture and of behaviours of both the mass worker and all the strata subsumed to capital. The mass worker's peasant past, its links (or break) with the familial clan, its past as migrant worker in contact with the most advanced technologies and with the society of the most advanced command over labour-power, its past as political or union militant or its past as a member of a patriarchal Catholic clan: these attributes are all translated into the acquisitions of struggle, into political wisdom, the sum of subcultures which catalyse on contact with the massification of labour and with its inverse process of fragmentation and territorial dispersion. Machinery, the organisation of labour, transmute

and bring to light these cultural pasts; mass subjectivity appropriates them and translates them into struggle, refusal of labour, organisation. Political class composition is above all the result, the end point of a historical process. But it is also, and in a dialectical manner, the starting point of a historical movement in which the labour subsumed to capital interprets the productive, social and political organisation of exploitation and overturns it into the organisation of its own autonomy.

Thus, if in *Primo Maggio's* understanding the factory continued to be 'the most important site of socialisation and strength', its notion of the workplace was considerably richer and more complex than that advanced by the workerism of the sixties. Indeed, in introducing the journal's readers to one contemporary American account of factory life, Ortoleva (1976: 42) was to criticise its author for failing to see that 'the division and stratification of workers outside the factory also acts within it'.

Primo Maggio was also increasingly critical—if not always to the satisfaction of some of its younger associates (Scarlinzi 1984: 67)—of that leninism which Potere Operaio had expoused for most of its existence. In the years when Negri (1976: 201-23) went out of his way to defend Lenin's polemic against 'infantile leftism', *Primo Maggio* would make clear for the first time the debt which *operaismo* owed to earlier proponents of class autonomy. Reflecting upon the vicissitudes of the Comintern, whose initial aim of creating 'a multinational instrument of command over the rhythms of world revolution' he still considered praiseworthy, Bologna (1975: 94) emphasised that at the beginning of their quest the Bolsheviks had turned to the various forces of left extremism, from the ultra-left of Germany and Holland to the revolutionary unionists of Britain and the United States, as the privileged interlocutors of their project. Only when these currents spurned the Russian model of organisation did Lenin begin his offensive against them, which would be won at the cost of ignoring the specificities of class composition in Europe and North America. If the bulk of the Western working class for its part refused to abandon the traditional labour movement for the militant factory organisations advocated by syndicalists, industrial unionists and left communists, it also refused to follow the Communists upon putschist manoeuvres such as the March Action of 1921. As a result, the growing stress that the Zinoviev-led Comintern placed upon the party function led it to privilege relations with other parties and their social bases through the so-called United Front. This choice was made at the expense of relations with workers themselves, a problem that became confined to the fight for hegemony within the unions. This tactic had failed in turn, according to Bologna, because the Comintern had no sense of the wage struggle as anything but a defensive measure to maintain the most minimal level of subsistence in the epoch of capitalism's decline (92-3, 94).

Of all the competing factions of the early Communist movement, then, the clearest conception of both the need for independent organisation within the workplace, and the long term prospects of social change could be found amongst those advocates of class autonomy dubbed 'infantile leftists' by Lenin. As Bologna indicated, however, the left extremists of the IWW and the KAPD were themselves often sharply divided in their perspectives, and ultimately ineffectual in pursuit of their goals (92). To avoid *Primo Maggio* simply becoming 'an anthology of "marginalised" working class movements', as Bologna wrote to Primo Moroni (quoted in Bermani & Cartosio 1984: 7), the recovery of such experiences had to be set firmly against the current dialectic between working class, labour movement and State. Examining the past through the eyes of the present was no longer enough: the journal must also engage in the direct discussion of contemporary political problems.

MARX IN DETROIT

One of the most distinctive aspects of workerist historiography in the seventies was to be

its reconsideration of revolutionary unionism. The cavalier dismissal of syndicalism during the preceding decade was now commonly replaced by an appreciation of that 'patient daily' mass work (Sereni 1974: 27) practiced by the less demagogic of Italy's own revolutionary syndicalists during the early years of the twentieth century (Antonioli & Bezza 1973). So too that of the Catalonian movement before the Second World War, which offered many parallels, in the opinion of Roberto Bordiga (1976), to the modern Italian situation. In both the textile and building industries, which were then central to Barcelona's economy, unskilled migrants had possessed a determinate weight, just as they did in the industrial triangle of the sixties. Scattered across a multiplicity of small enterprises, such workers found a reference point in the syndicalists' territorial forms of organisation, much as their Italian counterparts had made use of the *case del popolo* in the years before Mussolini's rise to power. Constantly challenging the legitimacy of class relations in the labour process, the anarcho-syndicalist-led Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) was to be illegal for much of its existence. One of its most important lessons had been the fight to hire unemployed workers through a reduction in working hours, a goal which had been pursued not for the sake of a work ethic, but rather to preserve unity in the sphere where labour could do most damage to capital. Yet the most interesting aspect of the Spanish experience, according to Bordiga, lay in the libertarian movement's efforts at insurrection. Whatever its self-image, he argued, the relations between the CNT and the Spanish anarchist groups of the FAI represented 'one of the few examples of a genuine "party of autonomy"' alien to both councillist ideology and leninism (Bordiga 1976: 83, 82). On the other hand, he continued, if a political body separate from the mass movement was needed to impose a 'break' upon the pattern of class struggle, it was also clear that

the 'premature insurrections' betrayed a fundamental extremism which impeded the anarchists' passage from a function of provocation and rupture of the movement to the tasks of the political recomposition of the Spanish proletariat.

Above all, the Iberian libertarian movement had lacked a 'modern theory of power', and was thus unable to surpass the crisis of insurrectionalist politics which followed the failed uprisings of 1934 (86).

Despite this curiosity about both the Italian and Spanish experiences, it was to be to the Industrial Workers of the World that workerist historians returned again and again. Such interest was part of a broader fascination with the American working class already evident in the mid-sixties, and which had been stimulated further by the growing social unrest which characterised the United States as the decade progressed. A riddle to many European leftists, for whom its often bloody struggles and indifference to socialist politics spelt only a provincial backwardness, it was precisely this combination which made the American working class so appealing to *operaismo*. To some degree, this line of thought had been inspired by workerism's earlier contact with associates of C.L.R. James, such as George Rawick and James Boggs. At the 1967 conference on 'Workers and state', Rawick (1972a: 53; 1972b: 137) had argued that the gains won during the New Deal period—'when the American workers, in a direct clash, conquered the highest standard of living ever known by a working class'—were second in revolutionary significance only to the Russian proletariat's seizure of power in 1917 (67). This view was echoed by Tronti (1972: 27): 'the American class-struggles are more serious than European ones', he wrote, 'in that they obtain more results with less ideology'. Where he went further than Rawick, however, was in asserting that this factor lent a clarity to class struggle in the United States which was absent in its European counterpart:

The history of the European working class is literally submerged in the ideas of Marxist intellectuals. But the history of the American working class is still naked, without anyone having thought it out. The less critique of ideology needed, the easier it is to further

scientific discoveries. The smaller the contribution of leftist culture, the more the class pregnancy of a given social reality comes forward (56).

Yet naked or not, little was known of American labour historiography in the Italy of the early seventies. Indeed, for those who did not read English only a few texts, critical or otherwise, were then available. One of *Primo Maggio*'s most important functions at the time, therefore, was to help in introducing the United States experience to the left of its own country. In the journal's third issue, for example, Ortoleva (1974: 37) offered a survey of a variety of interpretations of American class relations, from Rawick and Daniel Guerin to the work of G.D.H. Cole. Stressing the 'commonly neglected dialectic between class struggle and the transformation of the State', Ortoleva's gaze, like that of many of his contemporaries in the American new left, focussed upon the 'Progressive Era' at the turn of the century. This was a time when federal State involvement in industrial matters had first taken a systematic form. At the centre of this period, too, stood a unique experiment on the labour front: the revolutionary union movement popularly known as the Wobblies.

Already in 'Class Composition and the Theory of the Party', Bologna (1972: 9) had praised the IWW as 'a class organization anticipating present forms of struggle'. The chance to explore a political tendency whose origins and development were 'completely independent from the traditions of both the Second and the Third Internationals' was forced to wait, however, until the failure of Potere Operaio's born-again leninism. From the very first issue of *Primo Maggio* (Buonfino 1973; Cartosio 1973), it was clear just how much importance its editors placed upon the experience of the One Big Union. Then again, the workerist interest in the IWW is not difficult to explain. The most immediate point of attraction lay in the priority that the Wobblies had given to the organisation of the unskilled components of the American working class. From its foundation in 1905, the IWW had committed itself to organising the increasingly 'uniform mass of wage slaves' called to tend the factories of the Machine Age (IWW 1905: 7). Such workers were new to the American labour movement, then dominated by the craft unions of the American Federation of Labor, and often new to the continent itself. 'Before World War One', notes David Brody (1980: 15) 'close to 60 per cent of the industrial labor force was foreign born', condemned to those jobs with the poorest pay and conditions. In the North in particular, where industrial development was then concentrated, divisions between the skilled and unskilled largely followed those which separated unionised, native-born male workers from the predominantly European immigrants. Concerned to protect their power over the labour process from the encroachments of management, and imbued with a sense of superiority over the 'Hunkies', the majority of American skilled workers perceived the new levy of machine operators as a threat. Barred even from voting due to gender or nationality, immigrant workers for their part found themselves outside the formal political sphere no less than the world of organised labour. In a similar fashion, many of the Western rural labourers were likewise excluded from civil society through their mobility and lack of a recognisable craft. For both groups, the IWW offered a form of organisation which cut across trade lines, and an approach to industrial disputation which relied upon the direct action at work of 'the workers themselves, without the treacherous aid of labor misleaders or scheming politicians' (Justus Ebert, quoted in Kornbluh 1972: 35).

The second aspect of the IWW's attraction for *operaismo* lay with its attitude to the problems that faced workers from day to day. Certainly, many Wobblies saw strikes and action on the job as 'mere incidents in the class war ... tests of strength, periodic drills in the course of which the workers train themselves for concerted action' (Andre Tridon, quoted in Kornbluh 1972: 36). All the same, few dismissed the fight to improve wages, hours and conditions as inconsequential in themselves. For the IWW, the struggle between capital and labour at the point of production was by definition a political struggle, uniting the socially marginalised even as it attacked the rate of surplus value. As 'Big Bill' Haywood put it in 1911,

industrial unionism is the broadest possible interpretation of the working-class political power, because by organizing the workers industrially you at once enfranchise the women in the shops, you at once give the black men who are disenfranchised politically a voice in the operation of the industries; and the same would extend to every worker (Haywood 1911: 50).

There was also an earthiness about the IWW's approach to working class aims which struck a chord with workerism's own thematic of needs. Contempt for 'pie in the sky', whether of the religious or political variety, led to a number of splits between the Wobblies and more conventionally-minded leftists, and fuelled a running ideological battle with the 'Starvation Army' and other evangelists (Hill n.d.: 133; Hill 1913: 129). Behind the IWW's frequently repeated maxim that the new society must grow within the old there lay, not only a rather mechanistic conception of change, but also a sense that the materialism which drove contemporary America held a grain of rationality lost to those motivated by socialist or Christian asceticism. It was not a sign of corruption by the capitalist Mammon to fight 'bread and butter' struggles for more money and less work. The real problem, Haywood claimed, lay with a system which placed the machine—a potential source of collective freedom from toil—at the disposal of a minority committed to nothing more than their private gain (Bock 1976: 121). The Star of Bethlehem, another Wobbly propagandist once insisted, led 'only to Heaven, which nobody knows about. These are the three I.W.W. stars of education, organization, and emancipation. They lead to porkchops which everybody wants' (quoted in Kornbluh 1972: 71).

The most important workerist discussion of the Wobblies during the seventies was again the work of a German historian. Published in Feltrinelli's 'Marxist Materials' column, it was flanked by contributions from two editors of the North American journal *Zerowork*, both similarly concerned with *The Formation of the Mass Worker in the United States 1898-1922* (Carpignano 1976; Ramirez 1976). The centrepiece of the volume, Gisela Bock's contribution focussed upon the problem of the adequacy of the project and practice of the IWW—America's own 'other' workers' movement—to its working class in the first quarter of the century. Despite its title, however, the essay cannot be dismissed simply as a transposition of Roth's work onto the United States of the Progressive Era. To begin with, the narrower timeframe of Bock's essay freed the text from some of the more sweeping generalisations that had characterised her compatriot's efforts, leaving the reader with a sense of the complex nature of the divisions running through the American workforce. Certainly for Bock (1976: 65-70), like Roth, the major fracture within the class was that between those organised in craft unions and the rest. Not only did the former wield considerable power by dint of their knowledge of production, they were also often successful in exercising control over the means of entry to their professions. If the craft workers' oft-voiced fear that immigration threatened their jobs was sincere in its conviction, the reality of the time seems to tell another story. Rather, a dual labour market then acted in America to exclude the majority of wage labourers from sharing in the relative privilege won by their skilled brethren (68). Yet while the position of the individual craft worker was often secure, the continued predominance of their stratum as a whole was less certain, as industrial expansion increasingly took the form of mechanised production demanding only common labour. In the decade before America's entry into the First World War, the simplification and interchangeability of factory labour took impressive strides. In such circumstances it was often tempting to assume, as the IWW itself frequently did, a commonality of collective interest amongst workers which their situation 'objectively' promoted. Such a peccadillo, however, was firmly resisted by Bock (107). As she was well aware, ethnic and sexual divisions interlaced and further complicated distinctions of wage and industry within the unskilled and semi-skilled layers of the workforce:

far from immediately homogenising the class, the devaluation of skills and the expropriation of knowledge and skill over the labour process often reinforced the mechanisms of competition amongst the workers themselves. Then there were the welfare and profit-sharing programs in the manufacturing industry which, together with the new hierarchies created by scientific management, often succeeded in melding the interests of the firm with those of the American and skilled section of the workers. This was capital's reply to the political risk of a tendential homogenisation of the class and of struggles.

Secondly, Bock's treatment of the relation between organisation and class was more sophisticated than that of Roth's book. At no point in her account, for example, did the Wobblies appear as the logical-historical emanation of class autonomy that Roth made of the revolutionary *Unionen* and Red Armies of 1920. If anything, the protagonists of the struggles of 1909-14 were presented as the saviours of the IWW itself, restoring to it a sense of direction and purpose which the repression and factional brawls of its early years had all but destroyed (108). Paul Buhle (1973) and Serena Tait (1973), she argued, were right to emphasise the clarity with which some American exponents of industrial unionism perceived the vanguard anti-capitalist role of unskilled machine operators. Nonetheless, Bock (1976: 107) also made plain the often mechanical manner in which the Wobblies expressed the relation between class organisation and industrial structure, with the first commonly seen as an unambiguous response and adaptation to the second. Nor, unlike Roth, did Bock's discussion of the collapse of the organisational forms of the 'other' workers' movement hinge solely upon the ferocity of State persecution; after all, the Red Scare which followed the war had also driven the nascent Communist movement underground, without however destroying it. As Bock was to indicate, an important part of the answer for the IWW's decline lay in its inability to grapple with the changes to working class experience ushered in with the twenties, especially the influx of women and African-American workers onto the labour market. Instead, the sympathy within certain Wobbly circles for technicians and Taylorist principles betrayed a growing detachment from the IWW's initial rejection of the capitalist organisation of labour (Bock 1976: 179-87).

The true novelty of Bock's work when compared to earlier workerist efforts, noted Tillman Rexroth (1978: 36-7), was its extension of the notion of class composition beyond the bounds of the factory. Drawing upon the ideas of Lotta Femminista, Bock had placed emphasis upon the contribution of the unpaid domestic labour of women to the reproduction of labour-power. While the links established in the essay between struggles and the vagaries of the business cycle were somewhat sketchy, she had broken with the prevalent mechanistic reading of the nexus between technical and political composition. In the process, she had discovered the identity of the mass worker to be above all one of a certain relation to labour and the wage, rather than the immediate reflection of a given sociological structure. Thus, unlike Roth,

if G. Bock avoids the theory of recomposition in the sense of a mere series of manoeuvres to divide and rule ... she also avoids the danger of teleologising the theory of recomposition in the sense of the so-called mass worker thesis. Already the fact that the book begins with the period in which the passage from skilled to mass labour had already essentially occurred—that passage whose European variant continues even today to inflame passions—indicates that G. Bock does not intend by 'recomposition' the secular constitution of the mass worker. Rather she is interested in the more subtle differentiations within the model of class composition, without which all the contours of that theory collapse; she speaks of a 'permanent' or better 'periodic' restratification of the class, and not of a unitary development verifying itself by degrees up to the arrival of massified labour (Rexroth 1978: 32).

Reviewing Bock's essay in the Winter 1977-78 issue of *Primo Maggio*, Bruno Cartosio (1978: 56) indicated the pertinence of the study in the fact that in the Wobblies' time, as in the Italy of the seventies, there existed 'a phase of very strong political recomposition of the class

which did not produce the party'. In this respect, Negri (1978: 62) had been quite right to consider the success of a Comintern-style party as 'impossible' in the United States. Praising Bock's piece as 'perhaps the best' of the works on the IWW to appear so far in the Italian language, Cartosio also drew attention to what he saw as its occasional ideological distortions. One of the more striking of these was its use of Tronti's 'suggestive but void' notion of passivity as a form of 'organisation without organisation' to explain the relative quietude of the American industrial front during the twenties. Struggles did continue in that decade, despite the effective curtailment of immigration after 1924; these, however, had been confined for the most part to technologically primitive industries such as mining and textiles. Here too, he argued, lessons could be derived for the present, given the tight relation which such efforts to resist restructuring illustrated between political behaviours and the organic composition of capital. Still, works such as Bock's were only the beginning of the workerist appraisal of labour history, an undertaking to which Cartosio (1978: 56) looked forward with some confidence.

Barely three years later, such quiet optimism would be shaken by the reverses—both political and theoretical—that *operaismo* had come to suffer. Now, *Primo Maggio* would see its role in quite a different light, as

the conservation of a thread, however tenuous, of proletarian memory in times in which the destruction of social identity seems to have assumed devastating dimensions, and the re-elaboration of categories of theoretical reflection, however partial and provisional, in a world in which, as never before, the left appears deprived of a cultural and ideal identity (Revelli 1981: 9-10).

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