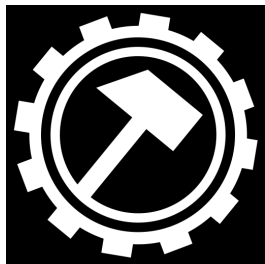


Class Composition

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Class Composition

**Juan
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'factoryist'. According to Accornero (1965), Italy was reduced to the industrial triangle, and the working class to the productive workers of the large factories in the North. In the end, however, the journal's chief failure would lie not so much in its reductionism, although this would create problems enough, but rather in its habit of bringing to too hasty a conclusion the necessarily complex matter of developing political strategies adequate to the autonomous class behaviour which it had been its privilege to identify.

Nobody has discovered anything more about the working class after Marx; it still remains an unknown continent. One knows for certain that it exists, because everyone has heard it speak, and anyone can hear fables about it. But no one can say: I have seen and understood. (Tronti 1971: 18)

Within *Classe Operaia*, as in Panzieri's group, research on working-class behaviour continued to revolve around the studies of Alquati. Later he would deem his work of that time as the product of 'Five Years of Solitude': as projects which, artisanal and exploratory in nature, could only offer hypotheses to be taken up practically at

some future date (Alquati 1975: 11). None the less, having established his conceptual framework in *Quaderni Rossi*, Alquati's central concerns turned to following the complex bonds between the class and its ostensible representatives, and to mapping out the former's patterns of 'invisible' organisation. In his first contribution to the new journal, Alquati focused upon the FIAT wildcat strikes of 1963, which he saw as indicative not of backward, 'anarchoid' behaviour, but of a new, compact, mass vanguard in motion. The most important property of these wildcats lay in their refusal to play by the established rules of industrial relations; instead, they were unpredictable, they excluded the union from the direction of the struggle, and '*they demanded nothing*' (ibid.: 187, 192). At the same time, Alquati believed, it was wrong to see such strikes as anything but transitional phenomena, a temporary measure until a

the objective bases of the 'liquidation' of the peasantry as a class separate from productive workers. Alternatively, it was understood as a moment of the mobility of labour-power; even in the latter case, discussion would be confined to migration within the Veneto region rather than from North to South (Di Leo 1964; Tolin 1965).

Reviewing some American studies a few years later, the workerist Ferruccio Gambino (1968) would insist that the gates of the factory stood firmly closed to the mainstream sociologists of that nation. A cynic might have added that if this was so, *operaismo* itself remained trapped inside. There is, in fact, more than a grain of truth in the contemporary critique of *Classe Operaia's* outlook – advanced by one of its own associates in the pages of *Rinascita* – as

of Alquati, the ‘social fabric’ would be discussed only to the extent that it offered a means to communicate or block struggles. Furthermore, it is puzzling that a journal such as *Classe Operaia*, which is remembered as the birthplace of the ‘mass worker thesis’, should have had so little to say about the enormous impact which migration then wrought upon the whole of working-class culture in the North. If, as Bologna (1981: 17) later recalled, ‘part of workerism was an analysis of the formation of the industrial proletariat of the 1960s, the passage from countryside to factory’, then this was true only in terms of its impact upon the workplace. Next to nothing, for example, would be said about the problems – of housing, transport, social life – which their relocation brought for the new levy of industrial workers. Where the question of migration was taken up in *Classe Operaia*, it was simply in terms of its function as one of

more adequate form of organisation could be found. ‘Carrying the permanent struggle beyond the “wildcat”’, he went on,

demands above all a ‘beyond’ of anticipation, of theory, of organisation, of strategy and *therefore* a ‘beyond’ of the international organisation of revolutionary political struggle ... At FIAT, as in the entire Italian working class, the workers already look to the final battle. (ibid.: 197)

Leaving aside this triumphalist note, the most interesting aspects of ‘Lotta alla FIAT’ are bound up with its explicit rejection of self-management ideology, and its attempt to identify the connecting thread which

ran from open forms of struggle like the wildcat to more subterranean forms of resistance. Polemicising at length with the union left grouped around the Turin CGIL, Alquati dismissed their plans for workers' control as unwitting attempts to bind labour to accumulation. Instead he pointed to recent stoppages in which 'the revolutionary consciousness and will of the workers expressed itself above all in the refusal to address positive demands to the boss'. Such independent action, he concluded, demonstrated that workers had begun to grope their way towards a goal entirely different to that envisaged by Bruno Trentin and his ilk: the organisation of a "political" self-management outside of capitalist production against the "general political power" of capital' (Alquati 1975: 189, 193).

Curiously, in the course of an earlier polemic, he had come to the opposite conclusion about the journal. Then he had complained that the likes of Tronti and Cacciari, 'who today go on and on about working-class centrality', had at that time 'fully recognised the productive nature of socially mediated labour' (Negri 1979a: 11). A similar position has been advanced by Giovanni Bossi (1975: 260), for whom the classical workerist discourse encompassed not only the political leadership of workers in the large factories over the rest of the class, but also 'the socialisation-massification of the figure of the working class beyond immediate production'. Such an understanding of what Bossi has called 'the capitalist use of the articulation of the territory', however, is impossible without a fully developed notion of circulation and reproduction, both of which *Classe Operaia* lacked. At best, as exemplified by the work

At the same time, *Classe Operaia*'s insistence upon the centrality of productive labour in the direct production process would severely restrict Alquati's understanding of class relations outside the world of immediate production. Thus, despite its promising beginning, the rest of his article on Turin as a 'factory-city' explored only the connections between different plants in the cycle of the metal industry. Similar limitations emerged within his piece on the 'green factory' of agriculture, which ended rather than began with the realisation that '*one of the most urgent analyses to be made is that of the social fabric of class recomposition*' (ibid.: 272).

Introducing *Classe Operaia* to a new generation of readers in 1979, Negri (1979b) was to confess with some justice that 'our mass worker smelt badly of the Putilov works'.

Developing its thematic of class composition in this manner, Tronti's group came to reject a notion of class consciousness as the mere aggregate of each worker's *Weltanschauung*. Struggle, rather, was seen as the greatest educator of the working class, binding the various layers of the workforce together, turning the ensemble of individual labour-powers into a social mass, a mass worker. It was through struggle that class autonomy most clearly differentiated itself not only not only from the movements of capital, but also from 'the objective articulation of labour-power' (Alquati 1975: 225). As Negri put it in his essay 'Workers without allies':

[T]he working class is increasingly closed and compact internally, and searches within itself to articulate its ever

greater unity in organisation ...
today the *whole* working class
in struggle is the vanguard.
(Negri 1964b: 18)

Identifying the subterranean paths by which class recomposition moved was, however, to prove a far more difficult task; at times, indeed, the workerists' talk of the compactness of the class merely stood as an admission that its inner workings remained opaque to them. The limits of *Classe Operaia's* approach were particularly evident in its argument that passivity should be understood as an instance of class antagonism, a form of 'organisation without organisation' (Tronti 1971: 262). According to Alquati (1975: 191), the reticence of workers to join in union-sponsored token strikes could be read not only in a traditional manner as a lack

'factory-city' because according to the census more than 60 per cent of its 'labourers' are industrial workers, because the mass of *factory workers* is concentrated in the city, working in factories and living around them. There are no simple, clearcut distinction, then, between the plants where surplus value is created, the residential zones where labour-power reproduces itself, and the centres of administration of the movements of variable capital, of commodities, products and semi-worked primary and auxiliary materials. (Alquati 1975: 230)

in a petty bourgeois milieu and middle class habits of life, dominated by petty bourgeois ideology. (Ruhle 1974: 41-2)

Alquati's view was diametrically opposed to that of the old Council Communist. Taking his cue from the category of *social factory*, he argued that no moment of a worker's life could escape the reach of direct capitalist domination:

Turin is considered the 'factory-city'. And it's even true that there isn't one aspect of the 'social life' of the city that is not a moment of the 'factory', understood in the Leninist sense as 'social relation of production'. But it is also the

of class identity, but also as a refusal to sanction empty gestures which did nothing to challenge capital's command over their labour-power. Against this, Sandro Studer has suggested that the path to understanding such behaviour lies in examining

the daily relationship between workers and productive forces, which is always an ambiguous relationship, where both the acceptance and refusal of capitalist labour coexist, where workers' passive objectification and subjective (collective) resistance coexist within the subsumption of labour-power to the productive process. (Studer 1977: 59)

For his part, Alquati was not to pursue the matter beyond the limits already set by his work in *Quaderni Rossi*. All the same, his work would be amongst the first to address, however implicitly, an apparent contradiction within classical workerism. This lay in its insistence upon the permanent nature of labour-power's antagonism to capitalist relations of production, while at the same time talking of a 'technological path to repression' (Negri 1967: 11), by which capital could successfully destroy the political quality of given concentrations of working-class power.

Unlike many Marxists, the editors of *Classe Operaia* never believed that the 'making' of the working class within a particular social formation was an event confined to a single period. Rather, it was the result of an

is the extreme differentiation between the levels of capitalist exploitation in the various zones, sectors, firms. (Alquati 1975: 222, 223)

An appreciation of the Italian working class, therefore, could not be exhausted by its description as a 'compact social mass': rather, such homogeneity stood as a goal for which to fight. And more than any other editor of *Classe Operaia*, Alquati was sensitive to the existence of a working-class experience outside the workplace. Forty years before, Otto Ruhle had insisted:

Only in the factory is the worker of today a real proletarian ... Outside the factory he [sic] is a petty-bourgeois, involved

elementary units of working-class resistance which, based upon both the organisation of labour and social networks, have been explored at length by certain radical American writers (Weir 1981).

In other respects too, Alquati would continue to supply *Classe Operaia's* most sober assessments of working-class behaviour. Emphasising the need to locate Italian developments within an understanding of accumulation and proletarianisation as worldwide phenomena - 'ii socialist' countries included' - he was of the opinion that if the unification of the class was now 'decisive' it was also 'partial'. In Italy, he continued,

a stumbling block to
approaching the structure of
labour-power at the social level

ongoing interplay between the articulations of labour-power produced by capitalist development, and labour's struggles to overcome them. But which element was the more potent: the continuity of struggle, or capital's ability to decompose its antagonist? Was the proletarian subject really destroyed by the reorganisation of production which periodically followed industrial conflict, or was it like some single-celled creature, which could be infinitely divided whilst still retaining its genetic code intact? Was it enough to say, with Negri and Tronti, that capital's restructuring simply displaced class conflict to a higher and more socialised level? Finally, what role if any did the problem of memory play in the reproduction of class antagonism?

These questions would become paramount

at the end of the following decade. In the mid-1960s, however, most workerists seemed happy to posit a determinate relation between the workforce's material articulation within the organic composition of capital- the 'technical composition' of the class – and its struggle to overturn such subordination in pursuit of a new political unity. Whilst still associated with *Quaderni Rossi*, Alquati had already stepped beyond such reductionism, intertwining his assertion of labour's inherent hostility to capital with a sense of the peculiar problems thrown up by the vast cultural gulf which separated the million new workers of the 'miracle' from their older workmates. By the time of *Classe Operaia*, Alquati had deepened his understanding of shopfloor culture further, placing an increasing emphasis upon the coherence that the transmission and filtering of memory between successive generations

of workers lent to the immediate experience of production. In this regard, his best work of the period was to be a study of those ex-party 'factory Communists' who provided an internal vanguard for the industrial working class of Turin. It was these factory activists, he argued, formed in the struggles of the miracle and now politically homeless, who would ultimately decide the fate of Tronti's project of the working-class 'use' of the PCI (Alquati 1975: 274-302). By stressing the dialectic between such militants and the workplace culture which nurtured them, Alquati thus began to move away both from conventional Leninist notions of vanguard organisation, and *Classe Operaia's* own simplistic characterisation of the working class as a single, homogeneous mass. In this manner, his thematic of 'invisible' forms of class organisation came to acquire a certain substance, gesturing towards those