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Mario Tronti: Revolutionary Adventurer in the Interregnum

Gerardo Muñoz

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A survivor of the great political upheavals of the twentieth century and the COVID-19 pandemic, Mario Tronti (1931-2023) passed away Monday August 7th at the age of 92. As a towering intellectual figure in the Italian political landscape of the second half of the twentieth century, Tronti will remain a key witness to the destiny of contemporary Western politics.

It's hard to think of another European intellectual who has gone from the communist party culture and the horizon of revolutionary politics (he was cofounder of the influential journal *Classe Operaia*) to parliamentary participation (as senator of the Italian left *Partito Democratico*) and, finally, to a thorough engagement with the theological-political vocabulary of Western Christianity, going as far as professing an univocal admiration for the Benedict XVI pontificate, a theological attitude that some on the Left have referred to as "Marxisti ratzingeriani." Tronti's thought and political activity could be very well placed under the sign of the adventurer, that is, someone committed

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to taking risks, against all the outstretched hands of common sense. More precisely, Tronti gravitated between the ethos of two distinct figures: the risk-taking adventurer, and the professional politician. But deep down, he was convinced that only the former could enable a passionate politician to truly fulfill his task.

From his early writings on the working class and the autonomy of the political in *Workers and Capital* (1966) to his confrontation with the twilight of politics in *La politica al tramonto* (1998), to his later texts on political theology (Schmitt, Benjamin, Taubes, Quinzio) and the contemplative praxis that constitutes monasticism, Tronti's political and esoteric vortex could be compressed into a single dialectical axiom, an obsession: how can the passion for political form be sustained against all the apparatuses of neutralization? By apparatuses we mean: economics, the movement of philosophy of history, the aspiration to the utopia of production and the social democratic absorption that comes with the constitutionalization advanced by the late modern "rights revolution"? It must be stated that Tronti's early insistence on a "strategy of refusal" permeated his thinking until the very end. For him, the *maquis* of the revolution was neither a cultural pedagogue nor an historical abstraction — always swiftly defeated by the cunning of capital's real subsumption — but lay rather in the possibility of provoking a transformative schism in this world. This is why, as Tronti never ceased to insist — with clear Warburgian echoes that went mostly unnoticed — that the working class must be the embodiment of a rude and corporeal pagan race, and must refuse to capitulate or dissolve itself into the mechanistic capitalist civilization that had ensured that all "successful" revolutions in the twentieth century paid a high price, namely, the crushing of the potentiality of this pagan partisan class, in favor of the abstraction of capital. Yet another lesson to be learned.

A self-proclaimed “conservative revolutionary” (inverting the terms of Armin Mohler’s famous typology), Tronti accepted Joseph De Maistre’s idea in his *Considérations sur la France* (1796) that the modern concept of revolution holds the human species metaphysically captive in the name of a monopoly of the civilization of production and the production of future time. Tronti’s revolutionary imagination departs from the central dogma of modern revolutionary practice, since for him revolution can be understood only from an eccentric vantage point as an destituent swerve that allows a mediated *political form* to emerge. A revolution based on the primacy of political economy and deluded by the conquest of an integrated totality of all political agents would, alas, only serve the hegemony of a moral humanity obsessively haunted by absolute enemies who must be destroyed. Confronted by the increasing depoliticization of contemporary Western democracies, whose tyranny of values ensure that the ordering principle of governance and the unity of social cohesion are achieved solely by the arbitrary deployment of police powers, it would be difficult to disagree with Tronti’s hypothesis today.

This is why, as early as 2008, Tronti advocates a revolutionary process that generates a “compact counterrevolution,” in which the recognition of enmity is clearly defined by formal distinctions, thus able to overcome the uneven moralization nourishing the circular dialectics of hegemony and administrative governance. In this, although a follower of Karl Marx, Mario Tronti saw himself even more as an heir to Carl Schmitt’s concept of the political, understood as the surplus of conflict proper to any concrete social reality. In other words, in Tronti’s work, heretical Marxism finally realizes that the surplus of politics takes precedence over the economic surplus discovered by classical political economy and the labor theory of value. Tronti’s existential resistance to the anguish (and historical defeat) of modern revolutions comes out in his stubborn

insistence on the partial, as well as *partisan*, polemical energy of the political.

In this sense, Tronti's long intellectual practice possesses a kernel of realism. But we must be careful to specify that realism for Tronti is not about the crafting of cultural hegemony or seizing of power to preserve, however precariously, a minimum of institutional regulation; realism is about concretely sustaining a *partisan form* — which will, in turn, generate a clear distinction at the level of enmity. His insistence on the irreducibility of political form calls into question the irreversible organization of the social mediations of power allocated for the purposes of administering the reproduction and redistribution of capital. Tronti's overtly emphatic passion for politics has found a strange malaise in the wake of the internal transformation of the Western institutional order into an administrative state charged with optimizing and pacifying social conflicts, while displacing the political into a permanent twilight zone.

For Tronti the twilight of Western politics heralds a time of interregnum. In this suspended time of anguish, the problem of "life" becomes central, while the subject of politics disappears, and the revolutionary subject dissipates. Of course, a world without political transformation is a non-world of nihilism and apocalyptic overtones, whose central drama will be the conflagration of planetary geopolitical *imperii*. As Tronti told me in a conversation from 2019, the depth of the West's ongoing crisis is the crisis of an authority for which there is no available *Katechon* — the power that restrains the worldly kingdom, first evoked by Saint Paul, and later deployed by Schmitt in his defense of the *ius publicum europaeum*. In its effort to overcome the crisis of the state, this situation could generate new metapolitical conditions. Is a new coming politics imaginable against this backdrop? This is precisely the question that arises at the twilight of secularization — today revealed through open and unjustified civil war.

Commit to nihilism, or retreat? During the first months of COVID-19 epidemic, in collaboration with Italian thinker Marcello Tarì, Tronti favored the option of retreat: a praxis of monastic *xeniteia* to save his soul from the crushing acceleration of an excruciating, alienated world. In the late Tronti, revolutionary passion becomes a revocation of modern politics, yet without renouncing the necessary social schism that forms the prerequisite for existential serenity. When weighed against modernity's historical collapse, it's clear that the possibility of transformation is to be sought in the long durée of *gnosis*. In the contemplative gaze of an old revolutionary like Tronti, the promise of worldliness survives precisely because *revolution* has become an unspeakable and yet unforgettable affair:

Worldly life and the kingdom, solitude and community, institution and destitution, strength and grace, spirit and law, contemplation and combat, each of these pairs of words brings us back to the mystery of the world, of history, and what we might call "the dimension of the beyond."

Tronti became — and asserted himself as — a *revolutionary in exile*, an untimely exile from both the revolution and the epoch. With this testament, one of the twentieth century's most lucid political witnesses bids a long farewell to the grand illusions and blazing struggles of the modern political edifice.