

Human strike within the field of libidinal economy

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The possibility of keeping together autonomy and an affective life is a tale that hasn't been written yet.

Lea Melandri, *Una visceralità indicibile*, 2007

In 1974 François Lyotard published the surprising book entitled *Libidinal Economy* where he attacked Marxist and Freudian simplifications and he opened a new perspective on the connection between desires and struggle. What starts to crumble down at that time under the offensive of the two essential weapon-books by Deleuze and Guattari *Anti-Oedipus* and *A thousand plateaus* is the fetishization of consciousness as the organ that will lead the revolution. As the myth of the avant-garde begins to decline, a psychosomatic reorganization arises and its consequences on the relationship between people are brutal and inevitable. Like in an inverted Menenius Agrippa's speech the head, with all its metaphorical connotations, lost its privilege and the low body could find a new voice full of desire and fear. A new materialism was coming to life inside people's bodies. At this point the failure of the responsible and pyramidal militant structures becomes blatant: thirst for power, need for leaders and the insufficiency of language to resolve conflicts inside the groups reveal the impossibility of living and fighting in such formations. In '73 the Gramsci Group wrote in the *Proposition* for a different way to make politics: "it's no longer possible to talk to each other from avant-garde to avant-garde with a sectary language of "experts" politicians... and then not being able to concretely talk about our experiences. The consciousness and the explanation of things must become clear through the experience of one's own condition, one's own problems and needs and not only through theories that describe mechanisms" (p.508, *L'orda d'oro*). The language that served the purposes of traditional politics seemed to have lost all its use value in the mouths of these young people; the members of the militant groups felt like they were "spoken," traversed by a speech that didn't transform them and couldn't translate their new uncertain situation. A protagonist of the events describes as it follows his position of leader: "the leader is somebody who is convinced that he has always been revolutionary and communist, and he doesn't ask himself what the concrete transformation of himself and the others is... The leader is the one that when the assemblies don't go the way they should either because a silence takes place either because some political positions are expressed which are different from the ones of his own group, he feels that he must intervene in order to fill the verbal space or to affirm his political line against the others." In this simple and clinical diagnosis we see the groups as spaces where subjective transformation attempts to be funneled into revolutionary efficiency; as a result of this process the positions of the singularities that composed the groups became progressively more and more rigid and the revolutionary space, in order to remain such, imposed the most conservative patterns of behavior within itself.

The term "human strike" was forged to name a revolt against what is reactionary even – and above all – inside the revolt. It defines a type of strike that involves the whole life and not only its professional side, that acknowledges exploitation in all the domains and not only at work. Even the notion of work comes out modified if seen from the ethical prism of human strike: activities that seem to be innocent services and loving obligations to keep the family or the couple together reveal themselves as vulgar exploitation. The human strike is a movement that could potentially contaminate anyone and that attacks the foundations of life in common; its subject isn't the proletarian or the factory worker but the whatever singularity that everyone is. This movement isn't there to reveal the exceptionality or the superiority of a group on another but to unmask the whateverness of everybody as the open secret that social classes hide.

One definition of human strike can be found in *Tiqqun 2*: it's a strike "with no claims, that deterritorializes the agora and reveals the nonpolitical as the place of the implicit redistribution of responsibilities and unremunerated work."

Italian feminisms offer a paradigm of this kind of action because they have claimed the abolition of the borders that made politics the territory of men. If the sexual borders of politics weren't clearly marked in the seventies in Europe, they still persisted in an obscure region of the life in common, like premonitory nightmares that never stop coming true. In 1938 Virginia Woolf wrote in *Three Guineas*, "Inevitably we look upon societies as conspiracies that sink the private brother, whom many of us have reason to respect, and inflate in his stead a monstrous male, loud of voice, hard of fist, childishly intent upon scoring the floor of the earth with chalk marks, within whose mystic boundaries human beings are penned, rigidly, separately, artificially; where, daubed red and gold, decorated like a savage with feathers he goes through mystic rites and enjoys the dubious pleasures of power and dominion while we, 'his' women, are locked in the private house without share in the many societies of which his society is composed." Against the chalk marks, already obsolete in 1938 but that still keep appearing under our steps even in the twenty-first century, Lia Cigarini and Luisa Muraro specified in 1992 in a text called *Politics and political practice*: "We don't want to separate politics from culture, love and work and we can't find any criterion for doing so. A politics of this kind, a separated one, we wouldn't like it and we wouldn't know what to do with it."

At the core of this necessity of a politics that transforms life and that can be transformed by life, there wasn't a claim against injustice but the desire of finding the right voice for one's own body, in order to fight the deep feeling of being spoken by somebody else, that can be called the political ventriloquism.

A quotation by Serena, published in the brochure *Sottosopra* n°3 in 1976, describes a modest miracle that took place at the women convention in Pinarella, "Something strange happened to me after the first day and a half: underneath the heads that were talking, listening and laughing, there were bodies; if I was speaking (and how serenely, and with no will of self-affirmation I was speaking in front of 200 women!) in my speak, in a way or another there was my body that was finding a strange way to become words." What an example of miraculous transubstantiation of the human strike.

1890 date of birth of the human strike

In her extensive research around the strike in the nineteenth century, Michelle Perrot talks about the birth of a sort of "sentimental strike" in the year 1890. May 4th of that year, in the newspaper from Lille entitled *Le Cri du Travailleur* (*The Worker's Scream*) we can read that "the strikers didn't give any reason for their interruption of the work... just that they want to do the same thing than the others." In this type of movement, young people and women start to play a very important role, Perrot says. In a small village called Vienne militant women encouraged their female comrades, "Let's not bear this miserable condition any longer. Let's upraise, let's claim our rights, let's fight for a more honourable place. Let's dare to say to our masters: we are just like you, made out of flesh and bones, we should live happy and free through our work." In another small village, Besseges, in the same year a young woman of 32, wife of a miner and mother of five, Amandine Vernet, reveals her vocation of natural born leader, "she never made

herself noticeable before May 14th when she started to read a written speech in a meeting of 5,000 people in the Robiac woods. The day after she had started to speak, and the following days, made more self-confident by her success, she pronounced violent and moving speeches. She had the talent of making part of her audience cry.”¹

In this type of strike, what Perrot calls the emotional strike, the movement is no longer limited to a specific target: what is at stake is a transformation of the subjectivity. This transformation – and that is the interesting point – is at the same time the cause and the consequence of the strike. The subjective, the social and the political changes are tightly entangled so that necessarily this type of uprising concerns subjects whose social identity is poorly codified, the people that Rancière calls the “placeless” or the “part-less.” They are movements where people unite under the slogan “we need to change ourselves” (Foucault), which means that the change of the conditions isn’t the ultimate aim but a means to change one’s subjectivity and one’s relationships.

According to some interpretations, there have been some components of this kind in the movement of ’68. Young people and women rose up then and claimed new rights that weren’t only political in an acquired sense, but that changed the very meaning of the word “political.” The inclusion of sexuality as an officially political territory is actually symptomatic of this transformation. Sexuality isn’t in fact the right term to be used, because it already designates an artificially separated field of reality. We should rather talk about the rehabilitation of the concept of desire, and analyze how new desires enter the political sphere in these specific moments, during the emotional strikes that we call “human strikes.”

The feminisms that do not pursue the integration in a world conceived and shaped by male protagonists are part of these strikes. We can read on this crucial point in a collective book from 1987 entitled *Non credere di avere dei diritti* (*Don’t believe you have any right*), “The difference of being a woman hasn’t found its free existence by establishing itself on the given contradictions, present within the social body, but on searching the contradiction that each singular woman was experiencing in herself and that didn’t have any social form before receiving it from the feminine politics. We have invented ourselves, so to speak, the social contradictions that made our freedom necessary.” Where invented doesn’t mean made up but found and translated the facts that reveal their dormant political dimension.

The plan of consistency of human strike

“They call it love. We call it unpaid labour. They call it frigidity. We call it absenteeism. Every time that we become pregnant against our own will, it’s an accident at work. Homosexuality and heterosexuality are both work conditions. Homosexuality is just the control of the workers on the production, not the end of the exploitation. No more smiles? No more money. Nothing will be more efficient to destroy the virtue of a smile. Neurosis, suicide, desexualization: professional illnesses of housewives.”

Silvia Federici, *The right to hatred*, 1974

¹M. Perrot, *Les ouvriers en grève*, France 1871–1890, Mouton, Paris, La Haye, 1974, p.99–100.

“1. The house where we make the most part of our work (the domestic work), is atomized in thousands of places, but it’s present everywhere, in town, in the countryside, on the mountains, etc.

2. We are controlled and we depend on thousands of little bosses and controllers: they are our husbands, fathers, brothers etc., but we only have one master: the State.

3. Our comrades of work and struggle, that are our neighbors, aren’t physically in touch with us during the work as it happens in the factory: but we can meet in places that we know, where we all go when we can steal some free time during the day. And each one of us isn’t separated from the other by qualifications and professional categories. We all make the same work.

(...) If we went on a strike we would not leave unfinished products or raw materials untransformed etc.: by interrupting our work we wouldn’t paralyze the production but the daily reproduction of the working class. This would hit the heart of the Capitalist system, because it would become an actual strike even for those that normally go on strike without us; but since the moment we stop to guarantee the survival of those which we are affectively tightened to, we will also have a difficulty in continuing the resistance.”

Coordination from Emilia Romagna for the salary to the domestic work, Bologna, 1976

“The worker has the possibility of joining a union, going on strike, the mothers are isolated, locked in their houses, tightened to their children by charitable bonds. Our wildcat strikes manifest themselves as a physical and mental breakdown.”

Adrienne Rich, *Born of a Woman*, 1980

The situation of not being able to draw the line between life and work that beforehand only concerned housewives is now becoming generalized. A strike isn’t possible to envisage for most of us, but the reasons we keep living the way we do and can’t rebel against anyone but ourselves are to be searched in our libidinal metabolism and in the libidinal economy we participate to.

Each struggle has become a struggle against a part of ourselves because we are always partly complicit with the things that oppress us. The biopower, under which we live, is the power that owns our bodies but allows us the right to speak. According to what Giorgio Agamben writes in *The Coming Community*

the colonization of physiology by industry started in the ’20s and it reached its peak when photography allowed a massive circulation of pornography. The anonymous bodies portrayed were absolutely whatever and because of this very reason generically desirable. Images of real human beings had become for the first time in history objects of desire on a massive scale, and therefore objects.

Stuart Ewen explains very well how advertising starts to target heavily women and young people in the fifties, right after the war; women and children were the absolute majority of the

bodies portrayed in a promiscuous proximity with goods of consumption. The intimacy between things and human beings creates all sort of symbolic disorders since the very beginning. Since then the consumption shapes the actual life form of human beings – not only what is called life style. In the case of women the confusion and enforced cohabitation with objects within the sphere of desire – male and female desire – is clear for everybody. Advertisements talk to the affects, and tell tales of a human life reconciled with things, where the inexpressiveness and the hostility of object is constantly obliterated by the joy and the beauty that they are supposed to bring to their owners.

Work is never really present and life has no gravity in advertising: objects have no weight, the link between the cause and the effect of gestures is governed by pure fantasy. The dreams engendered by capitalism are the most disquieting of its products, their specific visual language is also the source of the misunderstanding between the inhabitants of the poorly developed countries and the Westerners. These dreams are conceived as devices of subjectivization, scenes from the life of the toxic community of human beings and things. Where the commodity is absent, bodies are tragically different.

If brought to its last consequences this implicit philosophy leads to the complete redundancy of art – and in this sense the message that we all know so well and that we all receive every day in the streets of the cities or from the television screen must be taken seriously. The artwork is no longer the humanized object – this change started to take place in the nineteenth century with the industrialization of life in general. Duchamp himself explains the birth of the ready-made in 1955 in an interview with James Johnson Sweeney by declaring that he came to conceive the readymade as a consequence of the dehumanization of the artwork. The task of making the objects expressive, responsive to human feelings, that for thousands of years has been taken in charge by artists, is now performed by capitalism essentially through television. Because what is at stake in the capitalistic vision of the world is a continuous production of a libidinal economy in which behaviors, expressions and gestures contribute to the creation of this new human body.

The irreversible anthropological transformation in Italy (and elsewhere)

“I think that this generation (...) of the people that were 15 or 20 years old once they have made this [revolutionary] choice between 1971 and 1972, which in the following years becomes a generalized process in the factories and the schools, in the parishes, in the neighbourhoods, they have gone through an anthropological transformation, I can't find a better definition, an irreversible cultural modification of themselves that you can't come back from and that's why these subjects later, after '79, when everything is over, become crazy, commit suicide, become drug addicts because of the impossibility and the intolerability of being included and tamed by the system.”²

That's how Nanni Balestrini describes a form of tragic human strike that took place during the eighties, when the movement of '77 fell under the weight of a disproportioned repression.

²N. Balestrini, *L'Editore in La Grande Rivolta*, Bompiani, Milano, 1999, p.318–319.

The bleed of revolutionary lives from the country makes Italy a nation of disappeared. Without needing a genocide nor a real dictatorship, the strategy of tension and a modest amount of State terrorism achieved this result within a few years.

One should consider that what doesn't happen isn't a disgrace or the legitimate source of resentment against the anonymous and submitted population, but as a consequence of what has happened before.

The space of politics where Berlusconi rose without encountering any resistance was a territory where any opposition had been deported since the repression started to function directly on the life forms, since people couldn't desire in the same way anymore because the libidinal economy they were part of went bankrupt.

One question that still isn't considered with the adequate attention in the militant context is the one of the struggle-force. The struggle-force, like the love-force, must be protected and regenerated. It's a resource that doesn't renovate itself automatically and needs collective conditions for its creation.

Human strike can be read as an extreme attempt to reappropriate the means of production of the struggle-force, the love-force, the life-force. These means are ends in themselves; they already bring with them a new potentiality that makes the subjects stronger. The political space where this operation is possible isn't of course the same one that was colonized by the televised biopower. It's the one that we can foresee in Lia's words from 1976:

“The return of the repressed threatens all my projects of work, research, politics. Does it threaten them or is it the truly political thing in myself, to which I should give relief and room? (...) The silence failed this part of myself that desired to make politics, but it affirmed something new. There has been a change, I have started to speak out, but during these days I have felt that the affirmative part of myself was occupying all the space again. I convinced myself of the fact that the mute woman is the most fertile objection to our politics. The nonpolitical digs tunnels that we mustn't fill with earth.”

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