The American Worker and the Forze Nuove

Turin and Detroit at the Twilight of Fordism

Nicola Pizzolato

September 25, 2013

In a 1982 paper presented at MIT, Italian urbanist Paolo Ceccarelli characterized Detroit and Turin as "*città fragili*" – fragile cities. His assessment contrasted starkly with the way the two "motor cities" had been represented for most of the twentieth century, but it resonated with his contemporary audience. While they were once seen, at the pinnacle of their industrial development, as the benchmark for the modern city, Ceccarelli argued that Detroit and Turin, were actually examples of how such cities should *not* be built. In both places, Fordism had sparked rapid and tumultous demographic change, first through mass immigration, then through emigration. This upheaval had not been matched by adequate urban planning and governance. The initial inordinate growth had generated societies divided along fault lines of race, ethnicity, and class. Industrial expansion had brought a number of social ills, but decentralization, a harbinger of deindustrialization, made things worse, leaving in its wake a desolated urban landscape of abandoned plant complexes and dilapidated neighborhoods (in Detroit), or pauperized and marginal peripheries and slums (in Turin).[1]

In depicting the history of Detroit and Turin as a cautionary tale of modernization gone awry, Ceccarelli neglected to note that Fordism had brought not only an urban cataclysm, but also the opportunity for a far-reaching working-class recomposition within the industrial plants, the rise and fall of social movements, and the creation of a corpus of social theory and militant practice related to both. All these topics would benefit from the kind of comparative perspective that Ceccarelli applied to urban planning. After all, it had been *Meridionali,* southern Italians, in Turin, and African-Americans in Detroit (two groups heavily represented in the automobile factories of these cities in the 1960s), who had exposed how 'fragile' the motor cities were.

A number of transnational threads connected the two cities during the twentieth century, in particular in the 1950s and 1960s, two decades crucial for the destiny of these cities and for the paradigm of production and social organization on which they thrived, Fordism. During the 1950s and early 1960s, political militants outside the traditional left developed a critique of the practice and ideology of trade unions and Soviet-inspired communist parties, and generated a new, empirical way of documenting and researching the working-class that populated Turin and Detroit. Initially independent from each other, these militants would eventually situate their work

[1] Paolo Ceccarelli, "Due città fragili: Detroit e Torino. Ovvero, come non si dovrebbe costruire la città moderna" in *Il*

within transnational connections. In the American Motor City, dissident Marxists C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya exposed Soviet communism as "state capitalism" – a system which, like its market-driven counterpart, rested on the exploitation of workers – and at the same time issued a scathing attack on American labor unions. By the early 1950s they had gathered in Detroit a small but vocal group of activists and intellectuals, under the name of Correspondence; this described both a publication and its supporting activist group, focused on political intervention in the factories. Correspondence's vision of class struggle with the automobile factories of Detroit was grounded in the idea of workers' self-organization outside the existing labor movement. The 1947 pamphlet *The American Worker* by Paul Romano (a pseudonym for Phil Singer, a General Motors autoworker) and Ria Stone (an alias for Grace Lee, one of the leading members of Correspondence) was one of the group's most influential early publications. Even though the pamphlet was penned by these two authors, it was born out of the collective discussion of the group. Written just after American trade unions had curtailed a period of intense strike activity, *The American Worker* denounced the adverse effect of union bureaucracy on the everyday life of workers, and on the prospect of working-class struggle. It decried the union's failure to address the issues that mattered most to workers, such as the speed-up. Romano also touched upon two principles that would become fundamental to the new transnational approach: the existence of a latent and spontaneous workers' resistance to the regimented life of the factory, irrespective of any actual union organization; and their instinctive ability to organize their work in a more humane, but equally effective way: "Many workers become angry because of the fact that suggestions which they put in are ignored. These suggestions would add to efficiency and also increase production as well as save money. There is a general tendency in all strata of the working class to work in as efficient a manner as possible." However, the pamphlet argued, the exploitation workers were subjected to forced them to oppose the managers' efforts, resorting in their pent-up frustration to justified acts of sabotage and vandalism.[2] *The American Worker*'s novelty consisted in presenting, in a worker's own words, a realistic representation of factory work and its repercussions on the psyche and political outlook of the worker. The industrial worker's autobiographical account became a minor genre during the 1950s and 1960s, as Correspondence and other groups tried to inquire into the condition of workers on the basis of their actual experience in the factory – rather than on the basis of a dogmatic truth bequeathed by Marxist theory. The *American Worker* was serialized by the homonymous publication of the French group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and found an echo in another influential biography, *Journal d'un ouvrier* by Daniel Mothé, a worker at Renault's automobile plants. Cooperation between members of Correspondence and *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in Paris spanned throughout the 1950s, resulting in the book *Facing Reality* (1958), co-authored by C.L.R. James, Grace Lee Boggs, and Pierre Chaulieu (the cover name for Cornelius Castoriadis, one of the leading members of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*).[3] This book built on the common perspective shared by the groups in Detroit and Paris and characterized trade unions as the "bodyguards of capital,'." Their repressive action manifested itself into two elements: the steward system and the grievance procedure. Both had originally been devised to protect the union and the worker from the whims of management, but now they acted as a straitjacket, restricting workers' capacity to organize production on the shop floor. The steward

Mulino, 1 (1983).

[2] *Ibid*, 15.

[3] Marcel van der Linden, "Socialism ou Barbarie: A French Revolutionary Group (1949-1965)," *Left History*, 5:1 (1997).

secured workers' compliance with the union contract, rather than representing workers in management. The grievance procedure defused conflict with management through an "'elaborate"' process that removed conflict from workers' hands and transferred it to the labor bureaucracy. Later, observers on the liberal Left would uphold the idea that the grievance procedure was an ineffective way to solve workers' complaints, but the main critique made by James and the other went further: grievance procedures gave management the power to schedule and control the production flow and the organization of work. This criticism was not totally wholly fair, since the union's encroachment on the shop floor did *after all* check to some degree the arbitrary power of management, but it also touched a nerve: the UAW had in fact succumbed to the auto manufacturers' wish to control and organize the point of production as they saw fit, even though individual workers were now less vulnerable to retaliatory lay offs and wage cuts. *Facing Reality* argued that this system suppressed workers' desire for self-organization, which, while not a conscious program, but simply something "inherent in all their actions and in the discussions they hold among themselves."'[4]

In early 1950s Italy, this analysis appealed to those leftwing activists who questioned whether the dogmatic Marxist narrative propounded by the Italian Communist Party really applied to the actual conditions of the Italian working class. By the middle of the decade, the ideas of the Johnson-Forest Tendency began to filter through to dissident Marxist circles through the translation of Romano's and Mothé's work by Danilo Montaldi. Montaldi was an essayist and sociologist who had left the PCI after the war, remaining critical of the Old Left throughout his life. In his preface to the translation of *The American Worker*, Montaldi celebrated the text as a sign that, contrary to prevailing assumptions, the American working-class remained class conscious and had not fallen for the ideological blandishments of capitalism. Montaldi described Correspondence as the American "revolutionary vanguard", a group that understood that "the worker is first of all someone who lives at the point of production of the capitalist factory before being the member of a party, a revolutionary militant, or the subject of coming socialist power. It is the productive process that shapes his rejection of exploitation and his capacity to build a superior type of society, [...] and his class solidarity." The development of this fundamental idea, wrote Montaldi, was Correspondence's crucial contribution to the contemporary revolutionary movement.[5]

One of Montaldi's collaborators, Romano Alquati, was greatly inspired by both *The American Worker* and Mothè's *Journal*. They both travelled to Paris to meet the members of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and Alquati organized roundtable presentations of the *Journal* in Turin.[6] Alquati was in the process of developing his own brand of workers' inquiry, close in many ways to that of Correspondence, in which the experience of workers constituted the basis for theory, rather than vice versa.

In 1961, Alquati pioneered this new kind of workers' research at FIAT.[7] Two themes ran through Alquati's report, later published in *Quaderni Rossi*: first, the pre-eminence of a new working class at FIAT, disillusioned with the company, but also indifferent to left-wing unions and parties. Alquati controversially argued that even a large company such as FIAT failed to "inte-

[4]CLR James, Grace Lee, and Pierre Chaulieu, *Facing Reality* (1958; Detroit: Bewick Editions, 1974), 21, 27.

[5]Preface to *L'operaio americano* in Danilo Montaldi, *Bisogna sognare. Scritti 1952-1975* (Milano: Colibrì, 1994), 501.

[6]Romano Alquati, interview in Guido Borio, Francesca Pozzi, Gigi Roggero, *Futuro Anteriore. Dai 'Quaderni Rossi' ai movimento globali: ricchezze e limiti dell'operaiosmo italiano* (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2002), attached CD-ROM.

[7]"Relazione sulle 'forze nuove. Convegno del PSI sulla FIAT, gennaio 1961" and "Documenti sulla lotta di classe alla FIAT" in Romano Alquati, *Sulla Fiat e altri scritti*, (Milano, 1975), 314-341.

grate" workers into capitalism and to neutralise their rebelliousness: whatever faith these youth had *before* entering the factory in the desirability of industrial work, this was quickly shed *after* only a few months' work at the point of production. Relatively high wages (for some) and the consumerism they enabled did not lessen the effects of alienation. Any resurgence of class struggle within the firm would be based upon these *forze nuove*, as Alquati called them, which included southern Italian migrants. Even though the "new forces" lacked class consciousness in a traditional sense, they spontaneously understood the need for "self-determination," that is, self-organization within the factory.[8]

Second, Alquati emphasized the inability of the traditional left to identify and make use of these new trends. The report accused the union and PCI leadership of focusing on loftier political goals, such as legal reform, which did not directly affect factory conditions. The politics of the traditional Left did not measure up to the politics of the new working class. Or, conversely, the new workers did not perceive their action to be "political" because they associated politics with partisan politics in Rome. The solution lay in a new "organizational praxis" through which the new workers would be led to analyze their situation.[9] The wave of workers' struggles in the Turinese factories in 1962, leading to the so called "riot of Piazza Statuto" and the events from 1969 onwards, vindicated Alquati's insight that the working class organized itself in ways that transcended the trade union leadership.[10]

By the early 1960s, in both Turin and Detroit, political militants and radical social theorists analyzed a drastically recomposed working-class, whose significance escaped the dominant organizations of the labor movement. This recomposition accounts for the striking similarities, as well as important differences, in the way industrial relations broke down in the automobile factories, and social protest flared up in Detroit and Turin after 1968. In both cases, a massive wave of migration had fundamentally changed the demographics of the two cities. Tensions over competition for housing and resources between newcomers and natives were compounded by ethnic (and in Detroit, racial) prejudices. Racial discrimination took a heavier toll on African-Americans, since they were victims of a racially segmented labor and housing market, police brutality, and none-too-subtle forms of social segregation. In Turin, Italian southern migrants likewise encountered housing discrimination and were concentrated in run-down sections of the city center, or in building projects in degraded suburbs poorly connected to the rest of the metropolitan area. Even though their problems were not exacerbated by "race," southern migrants were at the mercy of a dual labor market, typical of Fordism, that allotted high-paid steady jobs to natives, and precarious low-wage occupations to newcomers. Because Turin and Detroit were industrial cities, the experience and the standing of southern migrants and blacks within the factories played a considerable role in their overall positions in the community, in terms of income, political influence, and symbolic status. The parallel trajectories of the two cities were determined by the structural configuration and urban concentration of the Fordist industry *par excellence*: the automobile industry.

Working-class unrest in Turin and Detroit shared an important feature: the activism of social groups occupying a marginal position in the political economy of the city. In both cases, the distinct cultural background of the "new workers" shaped the tactics, political language, and

[8] Alquati, "Relazione sulle "Forze nuove," 35.

[9] "Documenti sulla lotta di classe alla FIAT," 63.

[10] See Dario Lanzardo, *La rivolta di Piazza Statuto* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1980); Sante Notarnicola, *L'evasione impossibile* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1978), 79-82.

goals of the movement. They subverted the traditional class narrative of insubordination against capital by elevating cultural, regional, or racial "difference" to political importance. Americans had long associated European immigration with radicalism, but this argument was not usually applied to internal migration, the kind that brought tens of thousands of southern blacks to Detroit in the 1940s, 1950s, and also, to a lesser extent, in the 1960s.[11] Similarly, in Italy, after the war few would have imagined that southerners were destined to become a major force of political change. On the contrary, industrialists and unionists, conservatives and Communists, all expected southern migrants to sap working-class consciousness.

My book *Challenging Global Capitalism* puts forward the argument that in the case of both Detroit and Turin, the experience of marginalization was a key stimulus to action, even when protesters interpreted their resistance in terms of interest categories such as race, class, or ethnicity.[12] This characteristic had been captured by the dissent activists that operated in both cities during the 1950s and 1960s, but caught the traditional labor movement by surprise.

The analysis of this period of intense social mobilization, which takes into account parallel developments in different local settings – an analysis, that is, which pursues similarities and connections beyond national borders – highlights three significant themes that enhance our understanding of this phenomenon. The first is the direct consequence of the marginalization processes described above. In Detroit and Turin, "marginal" workers; that is African-Americans and *Meridionali*, who, for a number of reasons, had benefited least from the existing system of industrial relations, and whose path to social integration had been steep and strewn with obstacles, were prominent in the workers' unrest. In a sense, this is hardly unexpected for the historian, yet it did take many representatives of the Left by surprise. These workers were bringing into the struggle motives, tactics, and political identities that clashed with the traditional approach of organized labor – their emergence as a class subject changed the working class forever.

The second theme that resonates on both sides of the Atlantic was the challenge that workers' militancy posed to existing industrial relations, in particular to the link between wages and productivity – a central pillar of Fordism. This had been the result of hard bargaining and collective action, in the American case, and the outcome of FIAT's attempt to defuse mass unionization by means of heavy-handed paternalism, in the Italian case. Workers disrupted this nexus by turning the shop floor into the key site of industrial conflict. In the automobile plants of the late 1960s, workers not only took time off work by striking, but blocked production in a variety of ways without renouncing their wages. Because Fordist industry relied on a highly integrated process, these actions disrupted not only the department directly implicated, but also all the other departments and plants connected to it. The demands that accompanied these tactics were equally disruptive of the old order, as they rarely focused solely on wage increases, but also tended to involve changes in the organization of work, or the balance of authority at the point of production, and safety issues raised by the production process. In both Detroit and Turin, when the workforce mobilized, decision-making shifted away from union and corporate boardrooms onto the shop floor.

[11] For the immigrants-radicals association see John Higham, *Strangers in the Land* (New Brunswick, N. J., Rutgers University Press, 1955); see also C. Guerin-Gonzales and C. Strikwerda eds., *The Politics of Immigrant Workers. Labor Activism and Migration in the World Economy Since 1830* (New York, London: Holmes & Meier, 1993).

[12] Nicola Pizzolato, *Challenging Global Capitalism: Labor Migration, Radical Struggle and Urban Change in Detroit and Turin* (New York: Palgrave, 2013).

Finally, the third theme implicit in both cases studied here, and no doubt in many others, is the link between workers' struggles and a wider process of social mobilization which had "anti-systemic" objectives (a term used by Arrighi, Wallerstein, and Hopkins in the context of 1968).[13] Workers hardly needed to be convinced by students of the desirability of resisting the exhausting demands of the assembly line, but the coalition with New Left activists magnified the effect of the revolt on the shop floor. This period saw the establishment of various forms of collaboration between students and industrial workers. Sometimes it was spontaneous or unstructured, but more often it occurred within the radical groups that agitated against capitalism, discrimination, and oppression, both inside and outside the factory. Mention might here be made of groups such as the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, *Lotta Continua,* and *Potere Operaio.* Workers and students (at any rate those on the Left), shared a youth culture that extolled anti-authoritarianism, forms of participatory democracy – such as general assemblies where anyone could take the stage and speak – and disruptive tactics such as unannounced sit-ins or occupations. These actions often riled labor activists from the Old Left.

Radicals on both sides of the Atlantic found solace in the idea that a transformation of the relations of production elsewhere could abet change in their own region. They engaged in dialogue – sometimes in writing, at other times in person – in order to share tactics of rebellion, to elicit support for their particular groups, or to refine their analysis of the workings of capitalism. They saw in the autonomously organized working class the engine of radical social transformation. Simultaneous upheaval in Detroit and Turin, and elsewhere, seemed to suggest that at the turn of the 1970s the world was on the point of being fundamentally transformed by social movements. Fordism was at the twilight of its existence, crumbling under the pressure of self-organized protest and withdrawal from work. It was a fundamental insight of the social theory developed in this period that the protest developed in the factories by this new working class ushered in an utterly new era of capitalism in the West which could no longer be called Fordist.

[13] Giovanni Arrighi, Terence Hopkins, Immanuel Wallerstein, *Antisystemic Movements*, (London: Verso, 1989).

Nicola Pizzolato
The American Worker and the Forze Nuove
Turin and Detroit at the Twilight of Fordism
September 25, 2013

https://www.viewpointmag.com/2013/09/25/
the-american-worker-and-the-forze-nuove-turin-and-detroit-at-the-twilight-of-fordism/

theanarchistlibrary.org