



Critical Thoughts on the Politics of Immanence

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Abstract

This intervention aims to question the opposition between a ‘politics of immanence’ and a ‘politics of transcendence’ through a critical assessment of some contemporary philosophical approaches to politics and a reappraisal of Mario Tronti’s account of the autonomy of the political. I shall argue that the contrast between immanence and transcendence is ultimately politically disabling, as it fails to provide an adequate position from which to situate a political thinking and practice.

Keywords

political philosophy, autonomy of the political, immanence, transcendence, *operaismo*, Tronti

The aim of this brief intervention will be to question the theoretical operation that opposes a politics of immanence to one of transcendence. The easy slippage – so characteristic of contemporary philosophy’s approach to politics – from immanence to molecular to bottom-up (or vice versa), and their evil twins used to condemn modernity itself, fails to grasp the specificity of the delimited fields within which these notions are inscribed or, and more crucially for our purposes, to be of any service to the political.

The attempt to oppose a politics of immanence to one of transcendence is seductive and, perhaps, has some utility in signalling certain forms of allegiance. But I will claim that this is ultimately politically disabling, as it fails to provide an adequate position from which to situate a political thinking and practice. To put this another way, one can have immanence and transcendence, *but in neither case does one have a politics specific to either term*. They are two concepts that remain trapped in their inarticulate, voluble one-sidedness. To remain caught within their double-pincer (or on one side or the other, which is the same thing), leaves us with ethics in the guise of politics; and, while it has the attraction of simplicity that characterises all Manichean dualities, it takes us no further along the path to renewing *political thinking*.

Theorising politics

What I intend to do in the course of this intervention is to outline a series of positions that have been taken on the notion of ‘the political’ and show the inability of the immanence/transcendence conceptual pairing to shed light on those positions or their consequences. That is, my discussion will demonstrate the inability of this dichotomy to adequately trace the contours of what is at stake.

In Peter Thomas’s typically combative article in a recent issue of *Radical Philosophy*, ‘Gramsci and the Political’, he outlines three contemporary positions on the ‘the political’. The first, which he traces back to the work of Carl Schmitt, understands the political as *foundational* of politics – since politics, for Schmitt, is, in Thomas’s words, ‘the conjunctural instantiation of a structure of “the political” that necessarily and always exceeds it’.¹ Thus the political is *autonomous* both from all other realms – such as the social, the aesthetic, the ethical – as well as from politics itself, which only exists as such insofar as it ‘participates’ in the political that founds it. For this current, Thomas suggests that the political is to be understood in the Platonic sense of an *essence that founds politics*. This is where Thomas’s account of Schmitt is at its least convincing, since this purported Platonism sits uneasily with Schmitt’s emphasis on the concrete, existential political *decision* over the exception as the origin of the politico-juridical order. As Carlo Galli writes in his monumental *Genealogia della politica*, for Schmitt ‘order is not a foundation but an abyss, it is precisely the concrete and contingent crisis, radical disorder . . . and hence the practice that opens over that abyss is not a calculation but a “leap”, the adoption of risk’.²

Unfortunately there is not the space here to develop Galli’s account of Schmitt. It should, however, be clear that although there are many things that can be said about the viability of Schmitt’s theorisation of the political, Plato’s transcendent theory of Ideas fails to adequately account for the *opacity* of this concrete, contingent exception that lies at the core of Schmitt’s thinking.

The second approach to the political usefully outlined by Thomas, and which he associates with the names of Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, in contrast to the former emphasis on its autonomy, seeks the *immanent conditions of possibility* for ‘radical political engagement’³ in existing (social) antagonisms to which a ‘true’ politics would provide a resolution. Both of these currents are then contrasted – although this contrast is the least well-developed, being

1. Thomas 2009, p. 27.

2. Galli 1996, pp. 335–6.

3. Thomas 2009, p. 27.

relegated to a note – with Antonio Negri's position, in which politics is said to be immanent-imminent, that is 'requiring more to be revealed than reconstituted'.⁴ An improbable philosophical precursor to this latter position is Heidegger; improbable but useful for indicating one particular consequence of this position – namely that politics is, for Negri, that which must be *uncovered*, brought out from the stratified forms within which it is caught. Although Marxist and Hegelian notions of de-mystification might be more obvious – and are clearly present – it seems to me that the radical dichotomy between 'meditative' and 'calculative thinking', employed by the later Heidegger, is actually more in tune with what Negri means here than the dialectic of truth *in* falsity that characterises the dialectical tradition.⁵ For Negri is specifically interested in a *difference in kind* here.

Summarising Thomas's account, then, we could say that there are three contrasting positions: a Žižekian/Badiouian *construction* of a 'true' politics from the conditions of antagonism; a *revealed* politics, in Negri, which calls rather upon a process of *composition*; and an *originary* one in Schmitt that is *decided upon* on the basis of a conditioning nothingness. We can leave Thomas's paper aside now – though it should be widely read for its fascinating account of Gramsci as the thinker who demands that politics be put to work at the heart of philosophy, rather than allowing what is, for Thomas, the ultimately bourgeois notion of 'the political' to overdetermine concrete political practices.

Immanence and transcendence as political categories

It seems clear to me that to assign to these respective positions the labels 'immanence' or 'transcendence' sheds no light on either the operation of the political or on their respective political consequences.

Let us take, for example, Schmitt's decision over the exception that originates the political order. To what might the decision be said to be transcendent or immanent? To order and disorder? What difference would this make to such a decision, given that the decision operates within contingency, within the opacity of the concrete which it alone can order? But regardless, since the decision lies at the origin of the distinction of order and disorder, it cannot be understood by reference to the terms decided upon – and hence whether it is immanent or transcendent to them reveals little. Although Galli argues that

4. Thomas 2009, p. 35, n. 3.

5. On Heidegger's use of this opposition in relation to Italian political thought of the 1970s, see Mandarini 2009, especially pp. 43–4.

the notion of order becomes ‘transcendental’ – rather than ‘transcendent’ – in the sense that order is the ‘transcendental of every form of politics . . . in that its absence demands its “realisation” . . . as a duty’;⁶ that transcendental notion of order cannot be presupposed, since it is an *entirely concrete* transcendental, only functioning as the effect of a *specific concrete decision in the face of the contingency that threatens it*. That is not to say that transcendence for Schmitt plays no role; it plays a role to the extent that political order is not overdetermined by a divine plan, and hence, in genealogical terms, it is crucial.⁷ But transcendence – or immanence, for that matter – has no *specific political function*. It is, rather, the contingent, unconditioned, concrete nature of the decision that marks the innovation of the Schmittian position: whether the secularisation of theological categories of which Schmitt speaks is tantamount to resolving the transcendent in the immanent, or whether the sovereign decision indicates the spectral persistence of transcendence within immanence, has a *genealogical* importance but no *political consequences*. That is, the terms become redundant within political modernity, foreclosing their use for the determination of specific political orientations or concepts. What of the ‘true’ politics that constructs or translates the social antagonism into an organised force for social transformation? To what might its truth be transcendent? To the state’s partition of the situation? Or is it the state’s partitioning of the social body that transcends the unfolding of the true political sequence? Truth’s *irreducibility* to the situation, its *exteriority* to it, is all that is required for it to play the role asked of it.

There are surely other distinctions – and commonalities – that help shed light on the politics that emerge from the respective positions. So, for example, all three positions place some version of the notion of antagonism at the heart of their accounts – although, while Žižek, Badiou and Negri draw upon pre-existing antagonisms that need to be organised, Schmitt demands that they be decided upon. Is not the existential irrationality of the latter what makes this position tendentially fascistic – rather than any purported sympathy for the transcendent?⁸ Consider then that Badiou and Schmitt emphasise the act or decision as the core political moment. Is it not this which draws out the resonance of all these thinkers with a non-statist conception of politics, and which goes some way towards explaining the contemporary revival of Schmitt by the anti-state Left – rather than the interestingly diverse theological

6. Galli 1996, pp. 354–5.

7. Indeed, the whole of Schmitt’s *Political Theology* is a meditation on this question.

8. The crucial place for the critique of Schmitt in these terms is to be found in Löwith 1995; see also Tronti 2006 and Mandarini 2008.

resonances of their positions? Schmitt and Negri see the decision as the moment or mechanism that forms a political collectivity, whereas Žižek and Badiou see the decision as one that affirms a specific political truth (or sequence) that one avows and from which organisational consequences follow. This marks the anti-sociological position common to all their conceptions of politics. Where they stand on transcendence helps not a jot. On the other hand, one may argue that Negri's emphasis on revelation, in contrast to Badiou's notion of 'true' political sequences, demonstrates the former's continuing debt to a modified-Marxist account of de-mystification, just as it reveals Badiou's Blanquist tendencies. The contrast of immanence and transcendence as a conceptual pairing used to distinguish political positions persists, but these terms have no substantive political pertinence.

The autonomy of the political in Italy

The lack of political purchase of these two categories can be brought out further by a turn to the concept of the 'autonomy of the political' as developed by Negri's erstwhile collaborator, Mario Tronti. The reason for choosing this specific topic is that the divergence between Negri and Tronti has, in the course of the intervening decades, come to epitomise the conflict between a supposed politics of immanence and one of transcendence. It should be noted that the distinction between a politics of immanence and one of transcendence is in no way present in the original debate. Rather, the development of the notion of an autonomy of the political was a response to a completely different series of specifically political problems, irreducible to the categories under which it has since been relegated. With these concerns, we begin to see what a properly revolutionary notion of the political might look like.

In his thinking of the 1970s, Tronti directly confronted the concept of the political not only as the *point of intervention* and of *active transformation* of a reality in which the driving-force of the economic – as he saw it – had ceased to offer an adequate conceptualisation of social change. More importantly, he recognised that the field of the political had been left in the hands of capital for too long. At a time when the new footing on which capitalist development had been placed in the middle of the twentieth century (as exemplified by Roosevelt's New Deal and the so-called Fordist-Keynesian compromise) was running out of steam, it was necessary for the Party to take up the reins of social transformation. In other words, the *political* was to be the *new terrain of victory or defeat* in conditions where the social struggle had been *isolated* and was increasingly *overdetermined* by the capitalist restructuring that was

breaking the centrality of the factory as a site of political struggle. Class-struggle was the terrain of the *economic struggle*, the space of *spontaneity* in which the fate of politics was to serve the immediate struggle, but the shifting terrain called upon the struggle to attain its *properly political* dimension. This is expressed most forcefully in Tronti's demand for the development of a 'concept of political rationality that is completely autonomous from everything, independent even of class-interests'.⁹

It was through a reappraisal of German Social Democracy, as well as of the political significance of Lenin, that Tronti began to develop a radically innovative conception of politics. The brilliance of German Social Democracy was, he argued, that it was able to keep tactically united the two aspects of its politics: 'a quotidian Menshevik tactic and an ideology of pure principle'¹⁰ – which is to say, workers' struggles within given conditions but in view of their amelioration, and the revolutionary refusal of those conditions themselves.

In contrast, the genius of Lenin was to refuse to reduce the party to the role of passive subject of even the highest level of worker-spontaneity – i.e. a spontaneity that was not in contrast to an internal moment of organisation and direction. Tronti summarises Lenin's innovation as follows:

To actively mediate in complete fashion the complex real whole of the concrete situation, where workers' struggle never operates alone in pushing in a single direction, but is always interwoven with the political response of capital, with the latest results of bourgeois science, and with the levels of organisation achieved by the workers' movement.¹¹

To flirt with Heidegger's terminology, we might say that the metaphysical problematic of immediacy, of presence, and its concomitant rational deduction of organisational forms, would result in politics being fatally contained. Or, as Tronti states in the brief introduction appended to the publication of his lecture and seminar discussion, 'L'autonomia del politico': 'we cannot go back to the philosophy of the economy' – what Antonio Peduzzi calls the '*first philosophy*' of vulgar Marxism.¹² And so, to counteract the metaphysical closure, it was necessary to *leap* to another plane. What was at stake, then, in his reassertion of the role of the Party, was not a mere genuflection before the Great Lenin (an affirmation of some form of hyper-orthodoxy), but rather a call to recognise the need for a new terrain of struggle.

9. Tronti, 1971, p. 277.

10. Tronti 1971, p. 279.

11. Tronti 1971, p. 281.

12. Tronti 1977, p. 6 and Peduzzi 2006, p. 14.

To continue with this interweaving of Marxist categories with those of the critique of metaphysics, what Tronti was pointing to was the need to refuse the notion of the metaphysics of the base, that is, the metaphysical deceit or conceit that presents a univocal, spontaneous determination of the present state or the state of the present, by the metaphysical. Instead, what Tronti saw emerging in the 1970s was a lag, a being out of synch', between the economic and the political; a lag that was *functional* to capital, that is, which enabled the state to absorb and temper socio-economic conflicts.¹³ It was precisely because the form they took on the political plane in this period was *retarded* – that is, out-of-synch with those struggles – that the system was able to absorb them. The effectiveness of this operation by capital was evident – and it explained the persistence of capitalism, as becomes clear when confronted with Tronti's account of Marx's reading of the manner in which capitalism was to be brought to an end:

If we bring it about that the two-class system, from a purely economic struggle is raised to the level of confrontation, i.e. becomes a political fact, then the system has reached the conclusion of its cycle; and in this way one is able to move beyond it. In other words, it was precisely the... political unfolding of the class-contradiction, the process of moving from the relations of production to power... that was to lead the capitalist system to its death.¹⁴

The lag, then, that emerges between the planes (and it is not always the political that lags behind – as Tronti indicates when discussing the New Deal),¹⁵ the discontinuity produced, is precisely functional to the continuity of the system as a whole.¹⁶ The effect of it is that, however advanced the class-struggle is, to the extent that it sees the shift to the plane of politics as a deduction following from the correct organisation of socio-economic contradictions, its struggle remains *discontinuous* with the political – that is, it remains *isolated*, caught up within the objective, unable to attain political subjectivity.¹⁷ It is not the failure of immanence to attain the correctly vertical, transcendent, standpoint of intervention (for example, taking state-power); neither is it a case for the transcendent level of the state to be dissolved in immanence (for instance, via an exodus that leaves the transcendent to rotate idly in the void). It is simply that to treat the *non-homologous as homologous*, in this case, means *condemning*

13. Tronti 1977, pp. 10–13.

14. Tronti 1977, pp. 12–13.

15. Tronti 1977, p. 13.

16. Tronti 1977, p. 12.

17. This what Tronti calls a 'difetto soggettivo', that is, a deficiency of subjectivity, Tronti 1977, p. 14.

them to inefficacy by blocking the different articulations they are required to take on the different planes of their intervention. In such cases, the non-coincidence becomes dangerously structural in that, paradoxically, it is precisely this non-coincidence that prevents any hope in the automaticity or spontaneity of crisis.¹⁸

This assessment of the structuring relations opens the route to ‘the political’ being understood as that theoretical practice that sets out from the *proper recognition of this non-coincidence* and of *politics* as the *practice of negotiation, manipulation, and intervention* opened up by that recognition. Moreover, it is clear that the space of the political itself is produced through shifting relations between politics and the socio-economic.¹⁹ What becomes crucial, however, is the careful work of assessment of the levels of autonomy reached by the various strata of social organisation and their shifting articulations; as well as the evaluation of the points of fragility of the class-enemy and of the dispersal and disposition of forces that is opened up by this shift of terrain; an opening not only for the *autonomy of the political* but – something usually forgotten in the bitter disputes between the different strands of *operaismo* – also for the *autonomy of class-struggles* on the terrain of production, of social struggles on those of the social, and so on.

In the final article in the 1971 edition of *Operai e capitale*, Tronti writes:

He who delays loses. And take care: it is not a case of hurrying to prepare the response to the bosses’ move...; one must first foresee their move, in some cases suggest it, in every case anticipate it with the forms of one’s own organisation so as to render it not only politically unproductive for capitalist ends but productive of workers’ aims.²⁰

This definition of revolutionary political action reaffirms the political as against any attempt to isolate the political within the state – or, for that matter, to reduce revolutionary political struggle to direct confrontation within the immediate process of production. The political response can vary: it can sometimes involve holding the planes apart and articulating struggles upon a specific terrain on which one’s own forces have greater possibility of winning; at others, it is the confusion of terrains that becomes essential so as to combine

18. Tronti 1977, p. 14.

19. As Tronti writes, ‘it is a case of reconstructing a process... of distinction and separation that instead of coming to an end, deepens its historical rationale... It is a process that, on the one hand, capital grants, and on the other hand, undergoes’ (Tronti 1977, p. 16). To that extent, I think that – perhaps surprisingly – Tronti’s position is not so different from the one that Thomas tries to extract from Gramsci.

20. Tronti 1971, p. 307.

forces or to play-off a divided class-enemy. It may be the case that one can only speak of a *revolutionary situation* – that is, a total social transformation – when autonomy, non-coincidence is eroded, since, in revolution, struggle expands beyond a specific plane to affect all areas of the social order. But it is clear that one cannot always hope to advance through a mere refusal of non-coincidence. The *decision on specific practices* can only follow from a *careful assessment* of these various elements.

Thinking politics beyond immanence and transcendence

What use, then, do the concepts of immanence and transcendence have as political categories? Immanence and transcendence become entirely redundant when assessing the political – even if we allow, which I would not – that *class-struggle dictating political struggle* captures what we understand by a politics of immanence, whereas by a politics of transcendence we understand Tronti's idea of the *autonomy of the political struggle from that of the class*. That is to say, there is a rigidity (and one-sidedness) to the notion of immanence and transcendence that fails to grasp that politics is always fluid, contingent, and must be responsive in its forms and interventions to the concrete conditions of its operation.

To that operation which deploys these categories for the purposes of thinking politics, we might respond with Marx's words from his 'Moralising Criticism and Critical Morality'. He writes there that:

... where it succeeds in seeing *differences*, it does not see *unity*, and that where it sees *unity*, it does not see *differences*. If it propounds *differentiated determinants*, they at once become fossilised in its hands, and it can see only the most reprehensible sophistry when these wooden concepts are knocked together so that they take fire.²¹

So, while it is perfectly possible – indeed justified – to speak of the immanent emergence of transcendence, I am not sure it gives us any more than is said by the materialist genealogy of the ideal. Ultimately, however, I am not sure what either of these gives us in terms of the political.

How, then, are we to think of revolutionary politics beyond immanence and transcendence? I think we can extract a set of conditions from what has been said that might help towards such a rethinking.

21. Marx 1976, p. 320.

- 1) Political organisation cannot slavishly follow struggles within the immediate process of production – let alone as generalised socially, and vice versa.

Such struggles take their character from the changes in capitalist restructuring and are, therefore, inevitably behind the curve – they are *politically retarded*.

- 2) Workers' struggles have always been formidable information conduits for capital. It is not always clear they have been for the Left – who tend to use them (at best) as a material force to be organised.²² To that extent, 'bourgeois science' is often ahead of thinking on the Left.²³
- 3) The weakening (if not disappearance) of struggle from the advanced sectors of the economy heightens ignorance regarding the status of the system for both capital and labour.²⁴

To adapt a well-known saying of Kant's, we can summarise these conditions in the following formula: *Without struggle politics is empty. Without politics struggle is blind*. But more crucially, beyond immanence and transcendence, the *specificity* of the political is linked to the emergence of a tendency towards a separation of planes upon which it is then asked to operate. It is to this *present condition*, not to a disguised ethics of immanence or transcendence, that politics must respond.

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22. As Tronti writes in 1971: "Workers" struggles are an irreplaceable instrument of capitalist self-consciousness; without them, capital cannot see, cannot recognise its adversary, and so fails to know itself" (Tronti 1971, pp. 284–5).

23. For this reason, the disengagement from the workers' inquiry method of co-research [*conricerca*] by later *operaismo* is deeply troubling, as it fails to advance an adequate revolutionary epistemology.

24. It would be interesting to test this hypothesis to find out to what extent the current crisis can be linked to the lack of information being passed on to capital regarding the material conditions of the exploited in the wake of the dismembering of organised worker-resistance.

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