Human strike within the field of libidinal economy

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firmed 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.”
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 disproportional repression.

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 af-
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 readymade in 1955 in an interview with James Johnson Sweeny 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.”

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 subjectivation, 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
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.”

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.”


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
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

“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.:
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.”

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.

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