




'We want everything': a commentary to Pun Ngai's 'The new Chinese working class in struggle'

Andrea E. Pia¹ 

Published online: 09 October 2019
© The Author(s) 2019

Vogliamo Tutto (*We Want Everything*), the working-class novel symbol of the Italian autonomist Marxism of the 70s, is finally available in Chinese.¹ Penned by Nanni Balestrini (2016 [1971]), an experimental poet linked to the leftist literary movement *Neoavanguardia*, the novel describes a wave of wildcat strikes and protests in the Turin car factory of FIAT. The book is based on interviews Balestrini conducted between 1968 and 1970 with a worker from Southern Italy, Alfonso Natella, who, like the majority of the hundred thousand migrant workers who made industrialisation possible in post-war northern Italy, had been directly involved in a long season of violent labour unrest commonly known in Italy as the *Autunno Caldo* (Hot Autumn). At one point in the book, we see Natella's alter ego taking part to a factory sit-in. What did the FIAT workers want to achieve by direct action and the prolonged withdrawal of their labour?

It's not fair, living this shitty life, the workers said in meetings, in groups at the gates. All the stuff, all the wealth that we make is ours. Enough. We can't stand it anymore, we can't just be stuff too, goods to be sold. *Vogliamo tutto* — We want everything. All the wealth, all the power, and no work. What does work mean to us. They'd had it up to here, they wanted to fight not because of work, not because the boss is bad, but because the boss and work exist. In a word, the desire for power started to grow. It started for everyone, for workers with three or four children, unmarried workers, workers who had kids to put through school, workers who didn't have their own apartment. All our unbounded needs came out in concrete aims during the meetings. So, the struggle wasn't just a struggle in the factory. Because Fiat has one hundred and fifty thousand workers. It was a huge struggle not just because it involved this great mass of workers.

The passage above encapsulates brilliantly the radical political sensibilities of the Italian migrant workers of that era. It is exactly by building on these sensibilities—the intuition that the Fordist factory had a double nature, a place of exploitation that could be turned into

¹Free for download at https://www.gongchao.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/YIDALI-LIUQISHINIANDAI-DE-JIEJIDOUZHENG-YU-LILUNTANSUO_2018_3_Women_quandou_yao.pdf

✉ Andrea E. Pia
a.e.pia@lse.ac.uk

¹ Anthropology, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK

workers' positional advantage in their power struggle against capital and for greater autonomy—that in the following years Italian 'workerist intellectuals' (*operaisti*) such as Mario Tronti, Alberto Asor Rosa, Toni Negri and Romano Alquati will produce some of the most insightful readings of labour mobilisation in the twentieth century. Writing in the midst of western counterculture, the state-conniving politics of labour unions and capitalism's first energy crisis, Italian workerism developed a comprehensive theory of labour's changing relations to capital in post-war Europe starting from the recognition that the canonical Euro-communist interpretation of Marx and Gramsci had muffled the radical voices of the continent's younger workers in struggle. According to *operaismo*, the received belief in the ineluctability of a workers' revolution had quenched any methodological or critical interest in the subversive demands, and their accompanying forms of collective action, with which a new generation of Italian workers dared confronting a factory-intensive disciplinary regime, the epitome of the newfound alliance between the most advanced fringes of European capital and the bourgeois state.

In the wake of this Keynesian-Fordist synthesis, Italian *operaismo* reclaimed a space for the empirical investigation of the changing nature of salaried labour under run-away technological improvements and the strategic co-option of organised labour that escaped the leftist orthodox exegesis of that period. Some of the key tenets of *operaismo* included: thinking of 'living labour' as the *active* subject of production and capital as only *reactive* to workers' struggles, studying technological advancements as regulating the degree of capital command on labour politics, and looking at class as (expropriable) social intelligence naturally disarranged—but always rearrangeable—along its internal demographic and cultural lines of differences. During those tumultuous years, the analytical toolbox of *operaismo* went a long way towards understanding and transforming the objectives and tactics of the Italian migrant workers' activism of the 70s. Here were young workers (and some not so young), many of them conversant with Marxism and radical labour theory, who sought to challenge not just the way work is rewarded in a capitalist society, but the very assumption that we should live in order to work.

Four decades on and a new generation of Marxist scholars is now chasing labour activism and capital to their new spatial frontiers. What does the new Chinese working class want? How likely is it to get it? What can Chinese *nongmingong*'s struggles teach us today about the global state of labour's relative position *viz* capital? In her powerfully worded essay, Pun Ngai argues that China is currently witnessing the constitution of a new political subject—one in a growing position of power—capable of laying out political demands and reigniting the mobilisation of labour globally. Marshalling several decades of research, including her own, on Chinese labour, Pun describes—with a language and through a methodology that, despite her taking distance from Negri's most recent work, remains close to the original spirit of the Italian *operaisti*—the state of labour politics in contemporary China and the prospects of escalating labour contention primarily in this country.

Noting the massive increase in factory strikes during the last decades, Pun moves to offer a close reading of recent events at Jasic Technology factory in Shenzhen. There, we are made aware of the hopeful alliance struck by Marxist students and factory workers—once again reminiscent of the Italian *Hot Autumn* of 1969–70—in the attempt to force management to concede the formation of a local union in face of increasing state-backed management repression. While the events at Jasic ended with the defeat of student-worker solidarity, Pun argues that the formation and pursuing of a unionizing agenda 'signifies that there is a new era of Chinese workers' political awakening' and that this awakening stands for the 'active

exploration of which way China should go and which involves a call to challenge the neo-liberal capitalist society and rebuild a truly socialist society' (2019:15).

While broadly sympathetic with Pun's project, my goal here is to problematise her approach by suggesting that some of her theorising may benefit from the very same 'workerist' medicine that Italian *operaisti* offered to the overly hopeful socialism of post-war Italy in the attempt to eschewing some of its more idealistic tendencies. Can the political sensibilities of a past generation of foreign factory workers and labour scholars shed any light on the perils and prospects of China's new working-class politics? I suggest that Pun's inspired interpretation of labour mobilisation in China can be retained only insofar as it is complemented by the insights first developed within the Italian 'workerist' tradition. These are about shifting the analytical focus away from state dirigisme and managerialism and onto the moving terrains and articulations of class conflict under twenty-first century capitalism. An ancillary set of suggestions deal with the shortcomings of interpreting class as a shorthand for productive work alone, given the availability of a more scalar terminology such as the workerist template of 'class composition'.

The similarity of Italy's development in the 1950s and 1960s is striking when compared to China's 1990s and 2000s: rapid industrialisation, changing relations of production, new industrial technologies, mass internal migration, the making of a new class composition, increasing numbers of strikes and other forms of labour unrest, and the change of the situation of women. Of course, one obvious difference is with the degree of technological advancement reached by factory production in China today and the impact this has on workers' skills, their sense of self-worth and their collective capacity for antagonism. As the literary critic Qin Xiaoyu puts it: 'Today, industry has developed to a point that workers no longer need to master any particular skill. Complex production systems are run by high-tech automation, while across-the-board systematization has meant that workers are locked in one step of the process, doing the same simple motion over and over [...] The intelligence and skills of these workers have been made obsolete' (2016: 22).

In his 'militant investigation' of the Italian computer factory of Olivetti in the early '60s the workerist Alquati (1962) had already noted how technological advancements not only amplified the ratio of extraction of surplus-values, as in Marx, but enabled an incremental form of control over the social intelligence of factory workers that progressively conferred the political high ground to capital's initiative. That is, high-tech machines are the accretion of the collective intelligence of workers which function to increasingly displace living labour from the locus of production while retaining its creative power. For what concern China, one recent study suggests that 'among the four firms that possessed comparative employment data before and after automation, the workforce reduction rate in the production line ranged between an alarming 67 and 85 percent' (Huang 2018). Pun's article largely downplays this aspect of contemporary Chinese shop-floor conditions, failing to note how, despite increased labour combativeness, the ongoing automatization of Chinese labour, especially in the electronics and automobile industry, may inevitably relegate the success of individual factory struggles to something close to socialist flag-weaving.

But my point here is not just one about the looming threat of automation for Chinese labour. Rather, what I wish to point out are its broader methodological and theoretical implications for an understanding of future Chinese labour politics. Pun's analysis locates the origin of second-generation Chinese migrant workers' political awakening in the altered relationship between their subjective experience of the precarious conditions of factory work and the objective

structural forces that leaves them no alternative but to sell their labour to factory owners. Drawing explicitly from E.G. Thompson and implicitly from a long tradition of Marxist theoreticians who see in class consciousness the most immediate pathway to transformative politics, Pun falls very short of reinventing the ‘workerist wheel’ when she concludes that: ‘as a weapon of social struggle, class analysis, must be reactivated by rooting it in class experience from below, that is, for instance, in the everyday micro-politics of a labor regime in which the Chinese workers themselves are in confrontation with capital and the market’ (2019:17). And yet, Pun seems happy to conclude her analysis where the workerist one only begins.

Let us go back for a moment to automation, what Marx called *fixed capital*, and focus on what theoretical work it plays in the workerist framework. Alquati and Tronti have long maintained that to fully conceptualise class in the context of ever-changing capital innovation, one should break it down to two different aspects: its technical and political dimension. The former highlights labour’s ever evolving relations to the technical apparatus that makes the very condition of factory work, and hence the experience of belonging to the working class, possible. The second aspect pertains to the demographic, historical and cultural baggage that workers bring to wage labour and which inflect the way workers conceptualise their potential contribution to class struggle. It is only by combining these two aspects that one can derive a dynamic notion of class that can be weaponised in actual worker’s protests. By focusing on the technical composition of labour—that is by empirically studying the way in which capital-sponsored automation was intentionally reconfiguring work in the assembly line of FIAT, and with it the very possibility of disruption or refusal of work, Mario Tronti already in the 70s concluded that: ‘the factory may no longer be the place where working class politics can win strategic fights against capitalism, only tactical ones (Tronti 1977: 52-3)’. Thus, regardless the increase in real numbers of workers in China, the possibility of fully transformative labour politics in this country may already be exhausted by fast-paced automation, well before the new working class could come to its own senses.

This is not to say that tactical wins in factories for better working conditions, salaries and representation are not worth the fight. Only that the political terrain these battles can be fought on will forever be owned by the plans of capital. Therefore, and this is where Pun is more explicitly not willing to go, we may be in need of reclaiming the second half of the workerist notion of class, which opens the concept up to experiences beyond the factory and across varying cultural sensibilities for the type of questions we ask of work: what is it and why we do it. Pun notes differences in generations, but there are greater differences to be accounted for and to strategically consolidate on: the political demands of rural returnees and smallholders cooperatives for better services and liveable towns, of female service workers for greater visibility of their plights, and of ethnic minorities for a cleaner and uncommodified environments (see Le Mons Walker 2008; Unger and Siu 2019). Even in the ‘world’s factory’, production is slowly losing ground to other processes of valorization within twenty-first century capitalism: extraction, logistics and finance (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019). What does work look like in these sectors and how effective could labour initiatives taken there be with disrupting, slowing down and retooling capitalism from the inside out?

If, as *operaismo* speculated, capital’s endpoint has nothing to do with profit maximisation, but with reproducing its internal contradictions in a hopeless bid for eternity, any assault to the system that takes production as the sole point of crisis is doomed to achieve only a temporary rebalancing of inequality without addressing the the fundamental facts of its resilience. Rather, what is desperately needed, in China as elsewhere, is a collective vision—We want everything!—that by encompassing the perks and trappings of salaried factory work could also

speak to the invisible and yet-to-be political subjectivities of those who by being strategically located at the transformative edges of capital valorization have still the opportunity to resist capital's blackmailing and refuse commoditised work altogether.

Open Access This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

References

- Alquati, Romano. 1962. Composizione organica del capitale e forza-lavoro alla Olivetti, Part 1. *Quaderni Rossi* 2.
- Balestrini, Nanni. 2016 [1971]. *We Want Everything: A novel*. London: Verso Books.
- Huang, Yu. 2018. Robot threat or robot dividend? A struggle between two lines. *Made in China Journal* 3 (2): 50–55.
- Le Mons Walker, Kathy. 2008. From covert to overt: Everyday peasant politics in China and the implications for transnational agrarian movements. *Journal of Agrarian Change* 8 (2–3): 462–488.
- Mezzadra, Sandro, and Brett Neilson. 2019. *The politics of operations: Excavating contemporary capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Qin, Xiaoyu. 2016. *Iron moon, an anthology of Chinese migrant worker poetry*. Buffalo: White Pine Press.
- Tronti, Mario. 1977. *Sull' Autonomia del Politico*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Unger, Jonathan, and Kaxton Siu. 2019. Chinese migrant factory workers across four decades: Shifts in work conditions, urbanization, and family strategies. *Labor History*.

Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.