

## ***The Nonstate Intellectual: Franco Fortini and Communist Criticism***

---

**Alberto Toscano**

*Despite their certainties, despite my doubts  
I always wanted this world ended.  
Myself ended too. And it was that exactly  
which estranged us. My hopes had no point for them.  
My centralism seemed anarchy to them.*

*As if I wanted more, more truth,  
more for me to give them, more  
for them to give me. Thus living, dying thus.  
I was a communist throughout.  
I always wanted this world ended.*

*I have survived enough to see  
comrades who bruised me broken by intolerable truths.  
Now tell me: you knew very well I was with you?  
Was that why you hated me? My truth is truly needed,  
breathed in through space and time, heard patiently.*

Franco Fortini, "Communism"<sup>1</sup>

---

Alberto Toscano is Senior Lecturer at Goldsmiths College, University of London. He is the author of *The Theatre of Production* and *Fanaticism*, translator of Alain Badiou's *The Century* and *Logics of Worlds* and co-editor of Alain Badiou's *Theoretical Writings* and *On Beckett*. He has published numerous articles on contemporary philosophy, politics and social theory, and is an editor of *Historical Materialism*.

<sup>1</sup> Franco Fortini, "Communism" (1958), trans. Angelo Quattrocchi and Lucien Rey, *New Left Review* 1/68 (July–August 1966): 81.



Toscano, Alberto. "The Non-State Intellectual: Franco Fortini and Communist Criticism." *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities* v. 3 (March 1, 2012), <http://occasion.stanford.edu/node/73>.

Communism is the material process that aims to make the materiality of so-called spiritual things both sensible and intellectual. *To the point of being able to read in the book of our own body everything that men did and were under the sovereignty of time; and to interpret in it the traces of the passage of the human species over an earth on which it will leave no trace.*

Franco Fortini, “Che cos’è il comunismo”<sup>2</sup>

A COMMUNIST CANNOT BE AN INTELLECTUAL. A communist can only be an intellectual. On one column of our antinomic ledger, we note the specifically bourgeois character of the intellectual’s role, the manner in which it embodies a separation between mind and hand, design and execution, reflection and compulsion—baseline premises of capital’s domination. Even, or especially, in the more liberal and humanist exaltations of the intellectual as an Olympian moral beacon, we have learned to make out a universalism whose condition of enunciation is that only some have access to it. On the other column, we register the programmatic conviction that intellectual life is both a generic condition of human beings in society *and* something that will flourish only after capitalism’s demise, through revolutions in pedagogy and the pedagogy of revolution.

Library shelves groan under the weight of all the works that have sought to explore the theory and history of this antinomy—or, rather, of what communists perceived as a living, sometimes tragic contradiction, and their detractors as inconsistency or plain hypocrisy. Recently, Jacques Rancière has wryly encapsulated, from a position of insistent hostility to the very idea of a communism of intellectual guides and masters, the ways in which this antinomy was dogmatically manipulated to legitimize the subjugation of intellectuals by workers, as represented by the party and, vice versa, the subjugation of workers by the party as the self-anointed collective intellectual of the working classes.<sup>3</sup>

But the resonance of such assessments, long after their initial antiparty impetus became obsolete, is in itself a testament to our distance from the postwar entanglement between the political strategies of communist parties and the endemic mutations in the means and ends of cultural production, between the deep inroads of the commodity into domains thereto viewed as immune from abstract commensuration and the molecular development of a cultural and intellectual challenge to established forms of systemic *and* antisystemic thought, particularly in the guise of that multifarious phenomenon that goes by the name of New Left.

Our present distance from the problem of intellectuals is easily ascribed to epochal shifts in our political culture. Signal texts of the fifties and sixties are marked by a seemingly unalterable anachronism. Yet the supposed desuetude of this problem—notwithstanding its periodic and almost invariably superficial exhumations and reinterments—blinds us to some of the crucial analyses and unfulfilled projects thrown up by that period’s intense debates. Bland invocations of the death of the intellectual, together with confident pronouncements about the outdatedness of notions like partisanship and commitment, also contribute to the continued neglect of bodies of work intimately tied to the intense conflicts over the role of the intellectual that traversed postwar Europe.

---

<sup>2</sup> Franco Fortini, “Che cos’è il comunismo” (1989), in *Saggi ed epigrammi* (henceforth SE), ed. Luca Lenzini (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori, 2003), 1656. All translations are my own.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Communists without Communism?,” in *The Idea of Communism*, ed. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2010), 167–77.

That the work of the Italian critic and poet Franco Fortini has suffered from the oblivion accorded to most contributions to the political debate over the intellectual is both unsurprising and deeply regrettable, since he was a uniquely acute participant and critic of that debate. From the 1956 retrospect *Dieci inverni*, collecting interventions from a decade of struggles for an autonomous domain of Left cultural production, produced from within the ranks of the Italian Socialist Party, to the combatively bleak 1990 collection *Extrema Ratio*, tellingly subtitled “On the Good Use of Ruins,” Fortini’s steadfast attachment to the necessity of taking uncompromising positions in the specific battles of the moment—on the right attitude toward Soviet communism, the relationship between literature and industry, the role of eroticism, the language of the militant press, and so on—implied a practice of essay writing little suited to the kind of generic overview that might travel comfortably across decades and borders. Yet this imperative to take sides and take names, for which Fortini became rather notorious, was sustained by an exacting commitment to an unbending and nondogmatic communism, as well as by a conviction that communist judgment in culture and politics must pass through “the eternal narrow door of the mystery of mysteries, that of *political economy* and of its *practical critique*.”<sup>4</sup>

If there is something distinctive about Fortini’s contribution to the debate on the intellectual it lies precisely in its bringing into relief the termination of a certain figure of what he termed “the writer’s mandate,” a mandate tied to a tendentious configuration of the place of cultural and moral leadership in the antifascist struggle.<sup>5</sup> Despite being recurrently accused of moralism himself (Fortini pleaded intransigence and partisanship here, distinguishing between morality and moralism),<sup>6</sup> what his essays of the fifties and sixties brought to the fore was the significance of momentous transformations in the conditions of production of “culture”—whence the imperative for communist intellectuals to interrogate themselves about the forms of cultural production and about the possible autonomy of culture workers from expediently political rationales and contents, an autonomy that is the product not just of self-organization but of self-criticism. As Fortini observed:

Just as the working class bears witness to its right and its will to socially manage production, not only by breaking machines but especially by deciding to stop and restart them according to its own criteria, so the intellectual who rejects himself as a mandarin does not affirm his own belonging to the laboring class by ceasing his activity, unless all others also cease it because they’ve taken up arms; he affirms it instead by continually submitting to criticism and

---

<sup>4</sup> Franco Fortini, “Erotismo e letteratura,” in *Verifica dei poteri*, in *SE*, 13.

<sup>5</sup> For a brief treatment of Fortini’s theory and practice of the intellectual, see Gianni Turchetta, “Fortini intellettuale,” in *Se tu vorrai sapere . . . : Cinque lezioni su Franco Fortini*, ed. Paolo Giovannetti (Milan: Punto Rosso, 2004). One of Fortini’s most significant and combative interlocutors and adversaries in this discussion was Alberto Asor Rosa, the key literary theorist in Italian *operaismo* and eventually a partisan of a disenchanted entryism into the Italian Communist Party that Fortini was never attracted by, to put it mildly. See Alberto Asor Rosa, “Intellettuali” (1979), in *Un altro novecento* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1999); and, more recently, Alberto Asor Rosa, *Il grande silenzio: Intervista sugli intellettuali*, ed. Simonetta Forti (Bari: Laterza, 2009). For Fortini’s polemic against Asor Rosa’s attack on his own attachment to a concept of values understood as “choices organized in a system or hierarchy,” see Franco Fortini, *L’ospite ingrato primo*, in *SE*, 987–88.

<sup>6</sup> In one of his polemical texts against Pasolini, Fortini defined the difference as follows: “Morality is a tension toward a coherence between values and behavior, and consciousness of their disagreement. It becomes politics; it is the private name of politics. Moralism is the error of those who deny that there can or must be values and behaviors other than those that are present to morality at a given moment; and it thinks that the contradiction can be halted, even for a moment, by the formal unity of the individual.” Franco Fortini, “Pasolini non è la poesia,” in *Questioni di frontiera: Scritti di politica e di letteratura, 1965–1977* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977), 259.

transformation the forms and the spaces (institutions and languages) that capitalist society offers to his activity. The activity of the intellectual, which historically has been that of the “specialist of negation,” can also be that of producing certain “positivities” which contain in themselves their own negation.<sup>7</sup>

Fortini particularly abhorred the complacent reveling in rhetorical positions whose putative content was vitiated by their actual place in an increasingly commodified and instrumentalized culture industry, or within the instrumental cultural policies of political parties and the state. With the relentless, polemical vigilance that characterized his writing, he closely tied the political trajectory of the figure of the intellectual to the political economy of cultural production: “The class analysis of the situation of one’s own work is indispensable to any political action and to the quality of any work that operates in the sphere of ideology.”<sup>8</sup> Yet he never abandoned the idea of communism as both destructive movement and universal pedagogy—as well as the often solitary requirement to judge, evaluate, and criticize. After all, intellectuals are, to borrow one of his own formulations, functionaries of the negative.

Throughout all of Fortini’s engagements with his contemporaries, the innumerable and uncompromising criticisms leveled at those politically closest, and sometimes at himself, there transpires a communist ethos that tries constantly to take upon itself the contradiction between solitary judgment and collective solidarity, between the privilege of one’s stratum and the partisanship for and with those denied access to culture, between mastery and its abolition. Turning to Fortini’s analyses of the political decline and integration of the intellectual allows us to make out some of the neglected origins of our present predicament and provides a salutary antidote to contemporary invocations of the cognitive and the immaterial. It also reminds us that any attempt to embody or explore a communist hypothesis necessitates a relentless work of negation and construction that is attentive to the concrete ways in which an antagonistic culture can be produced and sustained.

The resilience-in-obsolescence of the intellectual as moral voice, the disjunction of communist ideas from any prospect of a communist culture, the boosterism for a knowledge-based economy without any real interrogation of the politics of knowledge itself—all these elements of

---

<sup>7</sup> Franco Fortini, “Intellettuali e Nuova Sinistra,” in *Questioni di frontiera*, 141.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 134. See also Franco Fortini, “C’è un cattivo odore nell’aria,” in *Un dialogo ininterrotto: Interviste, 1952–1994*, ed. Velio Abati (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003), 694–95; and Franco Fortini, “Lettera ad amici di Piacenza, 1961,” in *SE*, 944–53. Fortini was particularly prescient in his description of that mix of mass intellectuality and precarious work that has only recently come to the fore of social and political analysis. In 1968 he wrote of the “huge numbers of students and teachers, young and old, professionals and amateurs, in offices, houses, and libraries, who work the papers of the culture industry, translating, compiling, summarizing, abridging, polishing, with fixed-term contracts, by the column, the page, the line, the word, with or without contract, with or without the right to outsource, in conditions of seriousness and dignity that decrease in inverse proportion both to the profit margin projected by the customer and to the initial investment.” Franco Fortini, “Una opportuna premessa,” in *Venti quattro voci per un dizionario di lettere: Breve guida a un buon uso dell’alfabeto* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1968), 16. On Fortini’s attention to the mutable character of “industry” in the culture industry, and on his criticism of much of the 1968 generation for “projecting onto the ideology of conflict a practice that should have moved instead toward the transformation of one’s own profession,” see Sergio Bologna’s fine essay “Industria e cultura,” in *“Uomini usciti di pianto in ragione”: Saggi su Franco Fortini*, by Velio Abati et al. (Rome: Manifestolibri, 1996), 13–41. It is always worth heeding Fortini’s dialectical warning: “In order not to act out the comedy of virtue one should know that every intellectual labor is a commodity. But in order not to act out the comedy of cynicism one should know that every intellectual labor is intelligence and politics.” Franco Fortini, “Scrivere chiaro,” in *Insistenze: Cinquanta scritti, 1976–1984* (Milan: Garzanti, 1985), 116. In the same volume, see also “A un detenuto,” a letter to a prisoner involved in the armed struggle, where Fortini discusses the “mass intellectual” (213).

our present make Fortini's distant, untimely probes into what it means to be a communist critic and intellectual an important resource for anyone wishing to work the present against the grain. To reconsider Fortini today also means measuring the seemingly unbridgeable chasm between the twentieth-century meanings of communism and any present resuscitation of the term. For Fortini, as for other heretics, the foremost task was to wrest communism from its monopolization by state and party while not colluding with an ambient anticommunism, which, even in its most left-liberal guise, could not but spell protracted doom for any prospect of collective intellectual emancipation.

Fortini's work, like that of many of his contemporaries in the New Left, broadly construed, was one of determined challenge to a monopoly of negation (i.e., a monopoly of the critique of capitalism) exercised by postwar communist parties—though it was a challenge that based itself on a critically sympathetic reading of some of the very figures often attacked for their services to a Stalinized communism, Brecht and Lukács in particular.<sup>9</sup> Fortini never ceased exploring the question of the relationship between the intellectual and communism understood as a nonstate state,<sup>10</sup> a position haunted by all the obstacles and contradictions of transition—of dominating nondomination and mastering masterlessness, of employing isolated, separate organizations in the fight against specialization and separation alike—as well as by catastrophic retreats into sheer instrumentality.

Following Fortini's work, from the enmity in comradeship against established communism, to the critical collaboration with Far Left groups and forces in the sixties and onward, and further, to the grim ebb of the eighties and early nineties, disabuses one both of nostalgia for the party and its much-vaunted cultural hegemony and of any celebration of the emancipation of emancipation heralded by the disaggregation of Leninist or Stalinist legacies. Honed with and against the "official" communism of the twentieth century, with and against the state and state-like entities that claimed the communist banner, Fortini's figure of the communist intellectual and critic is of vital interest today, when communism risks being detached as a horizon or an idea from its cultural conditions of actuality and practice.

If there is a crucial leitmotif to Fortini's numerous interventions into the debates over the social and political role of the intellectuals it is that of breaking with a sterile or pernicious persistence in (mis)applying the Gramscian notion of the organic intellectual to the postwar context. As he stated in the 1965 preface to *Verifica dei poteri*, his crucial collection of essays in and around this theme, there was a need to free oneself from that notion in order for intellectuals, in both their specific and their generic acceptations, to enter directly into the national and international class struggle.<sup>11</sup> As a stubborn opponent of any romantic rhetoric of immediacy ("no true life but in the false," he once declared),<sup>12</sup> Fortini did not intend this directness in the sense of a

---

<sup>9</sup> The translation of Brecht's speech at the communist-led 1935 International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture is the pivot for Fortini's crucial essay "The Writer's Mandate and the End of Anti-fascism," which I discuss below. For Fortini's take on Lukács, a sophisticated if qualified recovery of Lukács's critique of avant-gardism, with a sensitivity to the continuities between the "tragic" and "extremist" young Lukács and his older self, see "Lukács in Italia" and "Il giovane Lukács," in *Verifica dei poteri*, in *SE*, 234–73.

<sup>10</sup> This formula is intended to resonate with the notion gleaned from Marx by Lenin of "the transitional form of [the state's] disappearance (the transition from state to non-state)." V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), 68, from the section entitled "Destruction of the Parasite—the State."

<sup>11</sup> *SE*, 377.

<sup>12</sup> Fortini sympathized with the well-known dictum from *Minima moralia*, "no true life in the false," even recommending it as a correction to the political vitalism of the student movement. See his "L'ordine nel porcile," in

spontaneous, vital immersion into struggle. It was a challenge to the mediating function of the party as guide, framework, and element for the work of communist writers and artists. In disputing the cultural leadership of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the ambivalences of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI)—to which he critically belonged for the first decade after the war—Fortini was responding to what he perceived as the stifling of a nonconformist revolutionary culture in the 1944–48 period, as insurgent and innovative energies were channeled into a project of national conciliation within the broader horizon of Soviet allegiance.

At the heart of Fortini's diagnosis and prognosis in the fifties and sixties lay the belief that the specific parameters of the subsumption of culture under capitalism rendered regressive the very notion of a "social mandate" for intellectuals,<sup>13</sup> understood both in a traditional fashion, be it clerical, academic, or moral, and in a manner organic to the direction of the party, namely as crystallized in the figure of the antifascist intellectual.<sup>14</sup> Fortini's essays constitute a profoundly polemical and self-critical attempt to inquire into the task of a communist critic bereft of the certainties of a mandate but unwilling to collude in a cynical or deflationary acceptance of the obsolescence of the relationship between politics and writing. Though it could be argued that the predicament probed by Fortini remains more neglected than unresolved, and the occasions for his interrogations may appear all too distant, even unintelligible (without some philological inquiry) today, we still abide in many ways in the unwelcoming space he sought to delineate in *Verifica dei poteri* and later texts.

When the fate of intellectuals is feebly invoked today, it is rarely, except in complacent celebrations of liberalism's prevailing overall authority and authoritarianism, that the crucial role of the (communist) party-form is dealt with. Fortini's frontal consideration of the fraught relationship between political organization and intellectual production is instructive in this respect, providing a reading of the party as the latest and final instance of the intellectual's social mandate and traversing the end of the conjunction between party and intellectual without either denying the significance of political organization or heralding some fatuous unmediated freedom for writers and artists. Having traversed the first postwar decade committed to a struggle for both unity of the Left and the cultural autonomy of intellectual work, Fortini judged that, under the

---

*Un dialogo ininterrotto*, 181. But he added his dialectical negation (in Italian: *Non si dà vera vita se non nella falsa*) to counter the depoliticizing valence in Adorno's thought. Political and intellectual truth could emerge only in the constant struggle against and negation of social falsity.

<sup>13</sup> Fortini's exploration of the politics of intellectual work, and his various proposals regarding the political work that could be carried out by intellectuals, took place against the background of a bleak estimate of the place of the intellectual in late capitalist society. "Whether writer-critic or philosopher-critic (according to Lukács's distinction), he finds himself integrated in an organization of culture that renders his spiritual powers derisory or extremely limited. At the same time, he is absolutely isolated, stripped of any corroboration [*verifiche*] for his work, dedicated to an activity that coincides more and more with doubt about his own function." Franco Fortini, "Critica," in *Ventiquattro voci*, 162. Fifteen years later, he is even bleaker: "The mandate that the bourgeois class conferred upon art and literature, a mandate of pedagogic and religious substitution for the sake of humanity, is exhausted; twenty years ago [when he wrote "The Writer's Mandate"], I could think that it was only the writer's mandate that was exhausted; today this is a global situation; it fully implicates all intellectual roles—the only thing that surprises me is the extraordinary length of this death-agony." Franco Fortini, *Il dolore della Verità: Maggiani incontra Fortini*, ed. Erminio Risso (Lecce: Piero Manni, 2000), 47.

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that although Fortini is clear about keeping his distance from the Italian Communist Party's pretense of shaping intellectual activity, he does not claim that the party's postwar policy is really an embodiment of the notion of the organic intellectual. In effect, we could see in his critique of the antifascist intellectual the critique of a situation in which both the politician and the writer-artist qua intellectuals are stuck in mutations of their nineteenth-century, pre-Gramscian, guises—the former in a realist-administrative mode, the second in a moral-testimonial one.

banner of communism, intellectuals and the party were involved in a superstructural dialogue of the deaf.

What the ideology of antifascism hid, according to Fortini, was in fact a situation where intellectuals demanded from the party a kind of social and political status—a “situation” that the party could not really concede, since this would have involved abdicating some of its crucial prerogatives, particularly its role as the collective intellectual of the proletariat. Conceding the autonomy of communist intellectual production would have meant for the party the acceptance of a kind of dual power. It would have also required the recognition that a fusion of political organization and intellectual production was a fallacious anticipation in capitalist times of what could genuinely be true of only a communist society, in which the separation of political and intellectual functions would be rescinded. Moreover, while the party turned to artists and intellectuals to provide the “conscious reflection” of reality, more in the sense of aesthetic and scientific representation than of propaganda proper, “the formal character of artistic and literary expression makes every content ambiguous; and then, imagining itself to be meeting the naïve demands of artists and writers halfway, the party, before resorting to stipends or deportations, rescues them with contents, that is, with thematic proposals. And these, even when they are accepted, turn into unexpected formal results. The upshot is a permanent and—to the extent that the real terms are mystified—useless conflict.”<sup>15</sup>

The immanent contradiction gnawing away at the figure of the antifascist intellectual and at the cultural policy of communist parties in the West—between aspirations toward moral autonomy and service to the party and its guidance—is compounded by the undoing of the social and material preconditions for any specific, separate “mandate” for artists or writers in the postwar integration of culture and industry, under what was commonly referred to at the time as “neocapitalism.” Rather than being allotted a place from which to guide or criticize, or in which to produce works already accorded a certain valence, the artist or writer driven by a political impetus, seeking some role in which to exercise his function, is confronted by “an apparently compact surface, devoid of footholds.”<sup>16</sup>

Here it becomes absurd to hanker, in a nostalgic or rebellious manner, for a writer who would regain “the social status inherited from romanticism, which made of him the voice of national conscience or the historian of private life; and equally impossible and consolatory is the return to the mandate and the status that the workers’ movement tried to confer to the writer, whether (in a long phase between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) as the inheritor of the Enlightenment and the mission of the bourgeoisie or (in the period between 1935 and yesterday) with the formation of antifascist fronts.”<sup>17</sup> The impediments thrown up by the contradictory jurisdictions of politics and intellect, politics and art, are exacerbated by the loss of a cognitive function for the products of writing. Not only is the demand that writers provide “revelation and discovery” vitiated by the party’s subordination of writing to theme and content, but artistic form, immersed in the acidic waters of the culture industry, loses its orientation toward praxis. Whichever way one looks at it, “the degree of translatability of the artwork between its proper order and that of knowledge-

---

<sup>15</sup> Franco Fortini, “Mandato degli scrittori e fine dell’antifascismo,” in *Verifica dei poteri*, in *SE*, 138. Aside from a short piece in the *New Reasoner*, this is, to my knowledge, the only essay of Fortini’s to be translated into English to date. See “The Writer’s Mandate and the End of Anti-fascism,” *Screen* 15, no. 1 (1974): 33–72.

<sup>16</sup> Fortini, “Mandato degli scrittori e fine dell’antifascismo,” in *SE*, 169.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 169–70.

for-praxis has become minimal”;<sup>18</sup> the parallelism between social-political progress and the progress of expressive forms has also been rendered inoperative.<sup>19</sup>

For Fortini this translates in part into the affirmation of poetry as value (“poetry necessarily belongs to an order of values analogous to that which the capitalist order impedes in a systematic, organized, and inevitable way”),<sup>20</sup> but a value whose relations to social transformation and political will are distantly mediated. I will turn to this question below, in terms of the labile but tenacious link that Fortini wishes to draw between communism and form. But this aesthetic and speculative (or even utopian) response to the condition of the writer has a more unequivocally materialist dimension, which is to be found in Fortini’s attention to the conditions of writing understood both as intellectual labor and as a collective, and potentially political, practice. So it is not just an easily misunderstood notion of formal autonomy that defines Fortini’s challenge to the antifascist instrumentalization of the writer, and the later liberal-reformist tendency of communist parties to welcome bourgeois fellow travelers and advocates; it is the material autonomy of intellectual work as a collective, self-organized political practice that—both in theory and in his own experience with numerous collective journal projects in the fifties and sixties—brought him into conflict with the “hegemonic” aspirations of the Italian Communist Party.

Whereas the political mandate of the writer within the party implies a kind of moral and cognitive service (tribune for the oppressed, witness to injustice, inquirer into capitalist iniquity), Fortini proposed a more “literal” sense of service and engagement:

Writers and critics who have grasped the end of the social mandate do not thereby lack a possible “civic” activity. They elaborate models of critical writing, essayistic language, written information, organization of literary investigation and study, translation, guidance in the domain of literary disciplines; models, however, that do not present themselves as competing with the existing ones, precisely because we know that when revolutionary reality emerges, it is fated to render unrecognizable even the most generous of models.<sup>21</sup>

As Daniele Balicco has explored in his important monograph on Fortini, the latter stands out within the Italian Left debate on the intellectual for his attention to the relation between intellectual labor and abstract labor. By abstract labor we are to understand here not only the fungibility and commensurability of value-producing labor under capital but also the operations of intellectual labor as a labor of abstraction, one that is profoundly affected by its increasing integration into a capitalist society grounded on real abstraction and abstract domination and on the waged or salaried nature of intellectual work.<sup>22</sup> Fortini’s reflection thus takes place under the sign of the

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 172. Elsewhere, Fortini had written: “that knowledge is not true which does not want or does not know how to convert itself into a doing” (“Avvertenza,” in *L’ospite ingrato primo e secondo*, in *SE*, 859).

<sup>19</sup> What’s more, the destructive cognitive and formal energies of the avant-gardes have been homeopathically incorporated by late capitalism, something especially evident in the phenomenon that Fortini dubbed “mass surrealism.” See “Introduzione,” in Franco Fortini and Lanfranco Binni, *Il movimento surrealista*, 2nd ed. (Milan: Garzanti, 1977), 5–26; and the perspicuous analysis in Daniele Balicco, “Fortini, la mutazione e il surrealismo di massa” (forthcoming).

<sup>20</sup> Fortini, “Mandato degli scrittori e fine dell’antifascismo,” 172.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>22</sup> Franco Fortini, “Astuti come colombe,” in *Verifica dei poteri*, in *SE*, 49. Fortini’s vantage point as an employee of the publisher Einaudi and as a copywriter for Olivetti (responsible in fact for some of its most successful slogans), prior to joining the ranks of high school and then university teachers, underlies his abiding attentiveness to the material conditions of intellectual labor and his polemics against the anachronistic vision of the detached, leisured, or bohemian intellectual.

“metamorphosis of intellectual work into *abstract mental labor*.”<sup>23</sup> To borrow Balicco’s heuristic, this abstraction affects both the *role* and the *function* of the intellectual, the first understood as “the history, transformation, and finally destruction of intellectuals as a social group holding the public monopoly of science and speech, and therefore of symbolic social capital”; and the second as “the anthropological form of knowledge as a generically human ability to interpret the meaning of individual and social existence.”<sup>24</sup>

Fortini’s thoughts on the continued civic task of writers, rather than the obsolescent social mandate of intellectuals, would thus represent a way of maintaining fidelity to a specific incarnation of the intellectual function, one that assumes the responsibility that comes with a certain degree of specialization (as “language workers”), so to speak, while affirming the social and economic reification of that specialization itself. Thus, instead of dwelling, like Sartre (whose configuration of the problem was obviously influential on Fortini), on the need to exacerbate the contradiction between the supposed universal vocation of “technicians of practical knowledge” and their intracapitalist and parastatist role—a position still partly internal to the vision of the writer as a moral and political voice—Fortini prefers the notion, associated with Brecht, of a “revolutionary copywriter.”<sup>25</sup>

This can be seen as a means of maintaining a partisan fidelity<sup>26</sup> to an antagonistic class politics while not accepting the mandate that would regard the role of the writer or the intellectual as that of providing the class struggle with hortatory content. Particularly significant in this respect are Fortini’s repeated proposals for collective work on political language, for attention to the modes of linguistic production of the Left, to what he termed “politics and syntax.” Having provided his technical services as a copywriter for Olivetti, he envisaged and practiced the idea of “invisible” service within the movement, provided by writers on the basis of their specific skills. For example, he proposed, in the light of the immense wastage of words that characterized the printed production of the Left, a practice of simplification and “modularization” that, by honing and isolating repeatable “modules” of political writing, would sharpen the efficacy of insurgent

---

<sup>23</sup> Balicco, *Non parlo a tutti*, 17. The work of Hans-Jürgen Krahl, whose early death ended the richest attempt to radicalize the legacy of the Frankfurt School, would provide a very interesting point of comparison with regard to the relationship between intellectual labor, value abstraction, and revolutionary class consciousness. See Hans Jürgen Krahl, “Thesen zum allgemeinen Verhältnis von wissenschaftlicher Intelligenz und proletarischem Klassenbewusstsein,” in *Konstitution und Klassenkampf* (Frankfurt: Neue Kritik, 1971), 330–47.

<sup>24</sup> Balicco, *Non parlo a tutti*, 16. See also Franco Fortini, “Intellettuai, ruolo e funzione,” in *Questioni di frontiera*, 68–73, where Fortini links this distinction to a qualified defense of “specialization in the intellectual processes of abstraction” (72). On the crucial importance of the “use and direction” of abstraction for political struggles concerning education, see Franco Fortini, “Roversi, scuola” (1971), in *Un giorno o l’altro*, ed. Marianna Marrucci and Valentina Tinacci (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2006), 434–39.

<sup>25</sup> Fortini, “Mandato degli scrittori e fine dell’antifascismo,” in *SE*, 163.

<sup>26</sup> Reference to partisanship in Fortini is not formal; it registers the lessons drawn from the experience of the antifascist partisan war, in which it was possible to “experiment with moral forms of counterpower, understood both as a pedagogy of autonomy and as the practical criticism of the power of institutions and the state” (Balicco, *Non parlo a tutti*, 34). In an interview from 1989, he noted that “Marxist thought, the socialist and communist tradition, has always (at least until the Third International) affirmed that certain values (potentially values for everyone, for the whole human species) are realized precisely to the degree that one forgoes trying to represent, to have as one’s main object, the whole of humanity and accepts being a part, with a partial and partisan perspective.” Franco Fortini, “*Finis historiae*,” in *Un dialogo ininterrotto*, 586.

and antagonistic communication.<sup>27</sup> In 1983, Fortini recalled his militant proposals of the sixties and seventies in the following terms:

I remember arguing that drafting a flyer or a trade union communiqué could and should make the highest demands on a writer's abilities. Instead of carrying out the usual "political services," the writer had to focus his strengths mainly on this "linguistic service." In '68 I had gone as far as arguing that the composition of a flyer was mainly a question of content, that is to say, the "how" needed to match the "what"; therefore, since it was necessary to fight against linguistic waste, it was also necessary to draft certain flyers, for instance, in such a way that on the evening of the demonstration or the strike, the scraps of paper scattered on the ground in the square, the street, or the party section didn't elicit that painful sense of waste, defeat, and futility, because the constitutive elements of the text had to be composed in such a way that they could be reused. The stylistic effort of the drafters had to be such as to create, so to speak, a mobile system, by virtue of which there was no need to throw away the flyer and make a new one the next week—as usually happened—since one could take advantage of the pedagogical value of repetition. Needless to say, I thought the same thing could be extended to the system of newspapers, dominated by the fiction of novelty, which implies a waste of ingeniousness and labor within verbal communication. There is in fact something like an ecology of writing, in particular of communicative, political, and journalistic writing.<sup>28</sup>

Fortini's critic, like Sartre's intellectual, is someone who moves beyond the domain of his competencies, but when he does so it is on the basis of those same competencies and in the direction of a more totalizing perspective. The critic is thus "something different from the specialist, he is the one who discourses about the real relations between men, society, and their history, about and on the occasion of the metaphor of those relations which literary works are."<sup>29</sup> But his struggle against the instrumentalization of intellectual labor under capitalism is not that of a Sartrean "monster" seeking to break his mendacious attachment to bourgeois universality by means of a singular and antagonistic universality.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> In an important response to a 1978 questionnaire from the journal *aut aut*, Fortini advocated the need to curtail the massive waste that characterized much Left cultural production, instituting a "perpetual recycling of the past." "If one were to work well," he wrote, "the elements of which a text is composed—the phrases and clauses—could be reutilized. My dream is a modular culture and language." This modularity is closely linked by Fortini to the idea of a "classical" political language; Franco Fortini, "Il mito dell'immediatezza," in *Un dialogo ininterrotto*, 212. See also Fortini, "Una opportuna premessa," 24–30; Balicco, *Non parlo a tutti*, 77. On Fortini's notion of the "classical," see his "Classico" (1978), in *Nuovi saggi italiani* (Milan: Garzanti, 1987), 257–73.

<sup>28</sup> Fortini, *Il dolore della Verità*, 25–26. The notion of an ecology of writing is the object of "Per una ecologia della letteratura" (1984), in *SE*, 1611–26. See also "Contro il rumore," in *Questioni di frontiera*, 78–90; and "Impegnato, disimpegnato," in *Un dialogo ininterrotto*, 290.

<sup>29</sup> *SE*, 373. See also Balicco's perspicuous definition of critical activity in Fortini's work: "Critical activity should be placed in an intermediate space between aesthetics and politics; its work is not a specialist work but an activity of selection and translation; its aim is the activation of a common and widespread conscious dilation of the point of view on reality; its immediate goal is the possibility of a synthetic interpretation of that reality; the whole, naturally, is oriented toward the political necessity of a radical transformation of the present." Balicco, *Non parlo a tutti*, 52–53.

<sup>30</sup> For Sartre, the intellectual emerges from the fundamental contradictions in the technician of practical knowledge—he is a humanist who is proof that men are not equal, a guardian of universality who holds it as his particular possession, his privilege. He "becomes a monster" when he "attends to what concerns him," which invariably results in being condemned for interfering in what does not concern him. Jean-Paul Sartre, "A Plea for Intellectuals," in *Between Existentialism and Marxism* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 244.

In the first place, the tension is not so much between the universality of a traditional, ideological vision of the intellectual and the particularity of his instrumental role in class society but between two universalities, the one attaching to the mental and moral abstraction of ideas, the other to the real abstraction of capital. As Balicco puts it: “[Fortini’s] is at bottom the story of the struggle between the universality claimed by humanist knowledge and an opposite universality, that of the commodity as social arcanum and hieroglyph, imposing nondeferrable instruments for its interpretation, on pain of the incomprehension of the present, of unconsciousness endured as the determination of domination.”<sup>31</sup> Second, it is a struggle that stays much closer to the specific tools of writing and intellectual work, and in particular to their collective or group use. The seemingly solitary pursuit of poetry and of personal polemic is accompanied in Fortini by a practical attention to the political valence of intellectual collectives, among them the many newspapers and journals he collaborated with or contributed to (*Politecnico*, *Ragionamenti*, *Quaderni rossi*, *Quaderni piacentini*, and *Manifesto*; but also his paid work for establishment newspapers like *Corriere della sera* and *Sole 24 ore*). Where Fortini is closer to Sartre is in the stringently reflexive character of this intellectual practice. As Sartre noted, the intellectual “investigates *himself* first of all in order to transform the contradictory being assigned to him into a harmonious totality.”<sup>32</sup> He “needs to *situate* himself in the social universe in order to be able to grasp and destroy within and without himself the limits that ideology imposes on knowledge.”<sup>33</sup> And this situation must also involve a kind of partisan epistemology from Sartre, which he encapsulated in a striking cinematic analogy, according to which the intellectual must take up the “objective perspective” of the dominated, which is that of

a *tilt shot* angled from below, in which [the elites and their allies] appear not as cultural elites but as enormous statues whose pedestals press down with all their weight on the classes which reproduce the life of society. Here there is no mutual recognition, courtesy or non-violence (as between bourgeois who look into each other’s eyes at the same height), but a panorama of violence endured, labour alienated, and elementary needs denied. If the intellectual can adopt this simple and radical perspective, he would see himself *as he really is*, from below.<sup>34</sup>

Fortini, as he memorably put it in his poem “Translating Brecht,” also thought that one should “Among the enemies’ names / write your own too.”<sup>35</sup> But he wanted the self-negation of the intellectual to operate through the collective self-management of a determinate negation—of his role and of the society that bestows and imposes it upon him—and not a pathetic, ineffectual, or even self-serving “suicide.”<sup>36</sup> Balicco has rightly stressed that Fortini was

profoundly convinced that the political side of culture must be studied and practiced above all in the organization of intellectual labor. If one doesn’t analyze the material conditions of possibility of one’s work, if one does not traverse to the very end the class contradictions

<sup>31</sup> Balicco, *Non parlo a tutti*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> Sartre, “A Plea for Intellectuals,” 247.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 256–57.

<sup>35</sup> On the resonance of this theme in Fortini’s work with Mario Tronti’s plea in “La fabbrica e la società” (1962) that “labor must see labor-power, qua commodity, as its enemy” (*Operai e capitale* [Rome: Derive Approdi, 2007], 52), see Balicco, *Non parlo a tutti*, 135.

<sup>36</sup> Franco Fortini, “Il dissenso e l’ autorità,” in *Questioni di frontiera*, 64. In the 1969 preface to the second edition of *Verifica dei poteri*, Fortini criticizes his own flirting with the “proud temptation of disavowing one’s own vocation,” observing that there “is indeed aestheticism in every *declared* desperation” (*SE*, 394).

that deform its self-consciousness and power, if one doesn't take to its ultimate consequences the *critique of one's expressive instruments*, it is possible to continue under the illusion that one is an author above the process of commodification that invades existence; one may even criticize the devastating effects of this commodification on the world, *but without* recognizing its real causes.<sup>37</sup>

Critical activity is here viewed as “the self-reflexive work of a group, of a class, on the social *form* of its existence”; its aim is “to corrode false self-images, that is, to recognize the forced deformation that every subjectivity endures under the bewitched domination of capital.”<sup>38</sup> In this respect, the relation of the Communist Party as a kind of proto-state to the intellectual is no more acceptable than that of the liberal state—both alienate and foreclose the character of intellectual labor as labor, with its specific relations of production, materials, forms of exploitation, and possibilities of self-management.

Fortini's problem is thus that of the “practical possibility of a political organization of culture and of intellectual work that is really capable of knowledge, critique, and power”—against both the Stalinist instrumentalization of intellectuals and a liberal democracy that splits intellectuals between technicians and isolated freethinkers in a marketplace of opinions. Confronting the regressive legacy of intellectual life in Italy, Fortini fights against the status of the intellectual and of culture as a separate sphere, “the expression of a subject *objectively unconscious* of the processes of material transformation of contemporaneity and thus incapable of determining itself as a truly free subjectivity, that is, a subjectivity immersed in the present in the attempt to transform itself.”<sup>39</sup> He insistently pushes for a departure from the separate role of the intellectual and his specialist or aestheticized function, in the conviction that “you do not separate culture from politics, because the organization of intellectual labor is the political facet of culture,”<sup>40</sup> whence the clash both with the political agencies, the Communist Party above all, which wish to take such organization in their own hands, and with that very capitalist culture within which the self-organization of intellectual labor tends to become a structural impossibility.

Fortini faults both Far Left and Communist Party culture, staunch traditionalists and supposedly uninhibited experimentalists, for neglecting the deep and multifaceted questions of the “institutions” of cultural and literary production, the organized material means and ends within which “art” and “culture” take place. As he writes in 1964: “Avant-gardists and their adversaries are willing to put everything in doubt and to bury the rotting corpse of *belles lettres*. Not to modify the structures of literary institutions. To debate at length about capitalism and the culture industry, about Marxism and revolution. But not actually to modify the status of their profession.

<sup>37</sup> Daniele Balicco, “Fortini e il comunismo come autoeducazione politica,” in *L'altrorovescito: Comunismo eretico e pensiero critico*, vol. 2, *Il sistema e i movimenti (1945–89)*, ed. Pier Paolo Poggio (Milan: Jaca Book, 2011), 618.

Criticism is always practical self-criticism: “The critic judges himself much more than he judges others”; Franco Fortini, “Verifica dei poteri,” in *Verifica dei poteri*, in *SE*, 24.

<sup>38</sup> Balicco, “Fortini e il comunismo come autoeducazione politica,” 621. Fortini also speaks of the need for “centers of cultural pressure,” “capable of advancing with severe criteria of (self-)limitation and choice, whereby certain books are not published and not read.” According to him, the problem of the “canon” is one of “minorities that, in the most democratic forms, choose, select, and, I would say, ‘impose.’” Franco Fortini, “Tra valore e disvalore,” in *Un dialogo ininterrotto*, 364–65.

<sup>39</sup> Balicco, *Non parlo a tutti*, 42.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

Books will be closed or opened, pianos played or burnt: but the rules of succession, editing, and combination will remain unchanged.”<sup>41</sup>

What Fortini thinks should be learned from the experience of the first avant-gardes is not a particular attitude or the aim and character of their works themselves but precisely their attention to artistic and intellectual institutions, to group-work and group-strategy, within a practice of often-combative autonomy. What the artists of the sixties should envy in the pre-1930 avant-gardes, suggests Fortini, is their “groupings”: “Those were not only tools of literary war but genuine workshops of forms.”<sup>42</sup> Just as Fortini regards the task of the intellectual as one of constant evaluation and “demarcation,”<sup>43</sup> so he thinks that this can best be practiced through collective, autonomous, and antisystemic intellectual institutions: “The force of a group that aims at a renewal is measured precisely by its capacity to crystallize acceptances and refusals along determinate axes.”<sup>44</sup> Groups, though perennially “exposed to the obvious temptations of churches awaiting the advent,” gain in necessity when they are founded on “an order of common refusals.”<sup>45</sup>

Though Fortini does not renounce his belief in the link between self-critical and self-managing intellectual and artistic groupings, on the one hand, and antagonistic communist culture, on the other—even when the dark ebb of emancipatory politics puts him in an increasingly lonely, if intransigent, position—he does shift his estimation of the particular role of collective intellectual production. The move appears to be one from a horizon of prefiguration, where the group anticipates an actual communist culture, conceived of as a kind of all-round pedagogy, to a position which argues that though writers may provide services or crystallize communist values in the form of their works, they are not themselves bearers of an allegory of a liberated future. While still fighting within the Italian Socialist Party for the development of autonomous collective institutions of cultural production, Fortini had declared:

In the conviction that form and content are one thing, Marxist scholars should prefigure in their own society precisely what will be the instruments of cultural work in a socialist society: journals, publishing houses, research institutes, libraries, but also plans of individual and group research, of the critical control of results, urgencies and priorities (that is, of “demand”), with their related problems of language, translatability, etc. Such a structuring must be the work of political intellectuals themselves or rather their specific political manifestation as producers of specialist culture.<sup>46</sup>

With the perception of a real subsumption of culture by capitalism in the sixties, Fortini becomes less sanguine about this “proposal of a political *anticipation* of socialist society through the institutional self-management of the forms of intellectual labor,” in which intellectual labor attains its political character as “*anticipation* and *prefiguration*, in a present distorted and reversed by the al-

---

<sup>41</sup> Franco Fortini, “Istituzioni letterarie e progresso del regime,” in *Verifica dei poteri*, in *SE*, 70.

<sup>42</sup> Franco Fortini, “Due avanguardie,” in *Verifica dei poteri*, in *SE*, 82.

<sup>43</sup> Balicco, *Non parlo a tutti*, 91.

<sup>44</sup> From an internal 1958 discussion document of the journal *Officina*, quoted by Fortini in “Precisazioni,” in *Verifica dei poteri*, in *SE*, 37.

<sup>45</sup> Fortini, “Istituzioni letterarie e progresso del regime,” in *SE*, 75.

<sup>46</sup> Fortini, “Politicità ed autonomia della cultura,” in *Dieci inverni (1947–1957)*, quoted in Balicco, *Non parlo a tutti*, 82. An excerpt from this collection was translated into English as “Letter to a Communist,” in *New Reasoner* 3 (Winter 1957–58): 113–18. The *New Reasoner* was also the forum for an important debate about socialism and intellectuals featuring, among others, E. P. Thompson and E. J. Hobsbawm.

ienation of the abstract, of a real fragment of a liberated society.”<sup>47</sup> He thus shifts to a greater emphasis on communism as a work of negation:

As with every other form of the organization of associated life, “prefiguration” (if it does not stem from the most immediate and visible negation) is a pleasure that we should deny ourselves the more we are really advancing. Or rather, the degree of its diminution is perhaps a measure of real progress made. The very notions of “organization” and “culture” and “literary institution” must already be used in the awareness that they can be negated or overwhelmed by the mental forces of men, in the act of their revolutionary unfolding. Let us recall the negative definition of communism: “The real movement that abolishes the present state of things.”<sup>48</sup>

If we track Fortini’s diagnoses of, and interventions into, the predicament of the cultural worker, and the possibilities for prefiguring a communist cultural life, we can see that they are deeply entangled with his shifting evaluations of capitalism and its culture industry. But what is the representation of capitalism within which Fortini’s vision of collective, communist criticism moves? What conditions his thinking of the relative weight of construction and negation in emancipatory and antagonistic cultural production?

In the context of Italy’s so-called economic miracle<sup>49</sup> of the late fifties and early sixties, some of the progressive intelligentsia had entered into a debate on the relationship between industry and culture, capitalism and literature.<sup>50</sup> Fortini, in many ways recasting Brecht’s oft-quoted observation, borrowed from Fritz Sternberg, that “a photograph of the Krupp factory or of AEG says almost nothing about these institutions,” questioned the aesthetic coherence and political relevance of the then (and once again now) widespread demand for representations of capitalism. Fortini argued for a “prophetic,” rather than a cognitive-informative, role for the artwork (as opposed to criticism). To those who called for a literature of neocapitalism, he retorted that the “cognitive power” (*potere di conoscenza*) of art and literature was to be located not in its occasion or pretext (again, unlike criticism) but in its form: “It is art’s last word,” he wrote, “not its first, to *also* be history, psychology, philosophy, and politics. We must deny with all our force the false progressivism according to which industrial reality, in its moment of production or consumption, should find literary expression because it is ‘important.’”<sup>51</sup> Accordingly, “industry is not a theme, it is the manifestation of *the* theme called capitalism.” Consequently,

it becomes ever more difficult to speak today of an industrial truth as distinct from the general truth of society. In the final analysis, “sociological consciousness” should lead one to conclude that one speaks about industry when speaking about any other thing and that the difficulty of speaking about it differs in no way from the difficulty that one encounters if one

---

<sup>47</sup> Balicco, *Non parlo a tutti*, 75, 82.

<sup>48</sup> Fortini, “Istituzioni letterarie e progresso del regime,” in *SE*, 72. See also Balicco, *Non parlo a tutti*, 111.

<sup>49</sup> See Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: 1943–1980* (London: Penguin, 1990), chap. 7, “The Economic Miracle, Rural Exodus and Social Transformation, 1958–1963.” For a critical panorama of the period, see also Guido Crainz, *Il paese mancato: Dal miracolo economico agli anni ottanta* (Rome: Donzelli, 2005).

<sup>50</sup> Fortini was responding in particular to articles published in the journal *Il Menabò* by Elio Vittorini and others. As Luca Lenzini, the editor of *Saggi ed epigrammi*, notes, Fortini was strongly influenced in his main intervention into this debate, “Astuti come colombe,” by Mario Tronti’s theses on the “social factory” (in “La fabbrica e la società,” *Quaderni rossi* 2, later included in Tronti’s seminal book *Operai e capitale*). Fortini’s relationship with *operaismo*, partly explored in Balicco’s *Non parlo a tutti*, would certainly reward further inquiry.

<sup>51</sup> Fortini, “Astuti come colombe,” in *SE*, 47.

really wishes to speak of something true. The mystery of political economy, which Marx had already treated, is today (via the full triumph of industry in society and its imminent or already attained coincidence with the state) the very mystery of our life, the “essence” that lies beneath the “phenomenon.”<sup>52</sup>

Against the modernizing aim to enact a kind of *aggiornamento* and incorporate industrial production into the domain of culture and art, Fortini suggests that this supposed thematization of industry serves to disavow capitalism as a “social unconscious.”<sup>53</sup> With his characteristic scorn for the mealy-mouthed illusions of gradualism, he identifies the enemy in this debate as the “vulgarity of Generalized and Reformist Progressivism.”<sup>54</sup> The capitalist subsumption of culture and politics means that turning to the dynamics of production, discipline, struggle, or the division of labor in the factory can easily divert critical attention from the totalizing presence of the capital relation in the social factory:

How is it possible to speak about industry and literature without agreeing at least on this (but it’s almost everything): that the forms, manners, and times of industrial production and its relations are the very form of our social life, the historical container of all our content and not simply an aspect of reality? That economic structures—in our case, capitalist and therefore industrial structures—are nothing more and nothing less than the social unconscious, that is the true unconscious, the mystery of mysteries?<sup>55</sup>

But how might the social conscious impinge on poetry? This was, after all, Fortini’s own craft, and one that bourgeois society has often identified with a gratuitousness and ethereality seemingly miles away from “industry.” Inversely, what is poetry’s relation to communism and its prefiguration? Whereas the communist copywriter labors to forge collective means of antisystemic communication, and the critic probes this social unconscious without freezing it into fetishized representations, the poet (and it should not be forgotten that Fortini himself circulates between these three figures) approaches communism by way of metaphor and allegory. Poetry—a term used by Fortini to identify not just a form of writing but also an antisystemic value, an aesthetic, as well as a kind of partisanship—relates to that desire called communism as a metaphorical prophecy and a prophetic metaphor of formalized life. Inasmuch as communism is the faculty to form life, consciously and collectively, against the abstract mediation of value, the domination of the state, and the automatism of the social unconscious, poetry, “the organization of an ambiguous lie to speak an ambiguous truth,” offers the “*metaphorical* light of an *inte-*

---

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>53</sup> This is a term that Fortini uses in advance of, but in substantial affinity with, Jameson’s notion of the political unconscious, which he would later cite. See “Opus servile,” in *SE*, 1650–51.

<sup>54</sup> Fortini, “Astuti come colombe,” in *SE*, 54.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 57–58. This question also connects to the difficulty, discussed above, of making the link between aesthetic knowledge and political action, the very problem that Jameson would discuss in the 1980s in the guise of “cognitive mapping” (or class consciousness under the cultural logic of late capitalism). As Fortini puts it: “The writer about whom I’m talking, precisely because he knows what industry is, knows that speaking about it is like speaking of his deepest self, and that therefore only a long chain of metaphors can risk that discourse. I don’t think it is either necessary or useful to establish a direct relationship between the knowledge-for-action needed by any action that wishes to be revolutionary—and thus that wishes to be or claims to be scientific knowledge—and the particular consciousness (of the industrial world) that we can get from literature” (ibid., 64–65). As Fortini wrote on the back-cover blurb for *Verifica dei poteri*, he no longer believed in battles of ideas, but in battles and in ideas (quoted in Balicco, *Non parlo a tutti*, 181).

gral formality.”<sup>56</sup> This is because the “literary use of language is homologous to the formal use of life that is the end of communism.”<sup>57</sup> Poetry provides—in miniature, so to speak—a sense of that thoroughgoing shaping of its material, which in a full-fledged communist formalization would have to be translated into the conscious collective planning and shaping of social life, against the debased anarchy and fetishistic sociality of capitalism.

While the revolutionary class, the class of negation, cannot abide poetry’s illusion of universality, needing to choose its own informal reality against the legitimacy of form, its self against “truth,” it can derive from poetry the “beneficial suspicion that the class struggle fought to abolish classes leads to a higher and inextinguishable contradiction: the one between the unlimited capacity to manage life and its unlimited infirmity.” This can free the revolutionary movement from its propensity for childish optimism, so that it can “assess the amplitude of the nothing that accompanies positive action.”<sup>58</sup> Poetry is thus both the ambiguous allegory of a thoroughgoing formalization of life and the tragic marker of the mortal limits of that formalization.

The politics of poetry is not in commitment but in allegory: “one should try to form in the literary or poetic work a stylistic structure that in its internal tensions is the metaphor of the tensions and the tendential structure of a human social ‘body’ which through a revolutionary path moves toward its own ‘form.’”<sup>59</sup> Just as literature’s relation to capital and industry is indirect, highly mediated by form, so is the “end of antifascism” also indexed in Fortini by a hypothetical-prophetic re-configuration of the relation between the party and the writer: “If it is true that *the class is the instrument that tends to make possible the formal use of life*,” then “it is possible to write *as if* there existed whole before us that class weapon which the century called the party. To write in its presence, that is, but not by its mandate, absolved from the illusion of seeing the poetic function welcomed by the party.”<sup>60</sup> Though this imaginary party remains at a purely evocative level, it should be noted that Fortini never severs the idea of communism from that of its collective organization. Indeed, poetry itself becomes something like an allegory of (communist) organization.

Fortini’s emphasis on the contemporary predicament of literary and intellectual labor, along with his relentless interrogation of the concrete forms of intellectual production, can thus be seen to partake in a thinking of communism as a “reasonable, possible, and not inevitable hypothesis; a hypothesis founded on the conquest, which is never definitive or complete, of the maximum common development of consciousness and intelligence, the only real premise to a society capable, at least economically, of balancing itself out”; in this context intellectual labor represents “the experimental dimension that is conscious of the conquest, through science and

<sup>56</sup> Fortini, “Mandato degli scrittori e fine dell’antifascismo,” in *SE*, 177.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 181. See also Franco Fortini, “Più velenoso di quanto pensiate,” in *Questioni di frontiera*, 23. On this aspect of Fortini, see Balicco, *Non parlo a tutti*, 50. Consider also this combative statement against the advocates of mere politics and those of mere morality: “so, today, if to those who speak to us of moral principles and transcendence, we must ask, before they go any further, if they believe there is something to change, and what and how, in the social order; to talk, that is, about politics and economics, wages and property regulation; to those who speak of politics and economics, of revolution and a coming humanity, we must instead ask what they intend to do with life as it is now, our possible and limited life, and our death, and refuse their constant reference to the future.” Quoted in Balicco, *Non parlo a tutti*, 102. On the importance of the “limit” to Fortini’s anthropology, see Balicco, *Non parlo a tutti*, 50. On Fortini’s recognition of the limitations that inhere in tragic and existentialist thought, see his “E se il marxismo fosse il futuro?” (1994), in *Un dialogo ininterrotto*, 707.

<sup>59</sup> Fortini, “Mandato degli scrittori e fine dell’antifascismo,” in *SE*, 184.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 185. On Fortini’s criticism of the party-form, see “*Finis historiae*,” 587–88; and Balicco, *Non parlo a tutti*, chap. 2.

political recomposition, of a common and shared objective consciousness of the present.”<sup>61</sup> This hypothesis combines, without confusing them, poetry’s allegory of formalization, technical work on the instruments of communication, an attention to collective pedagogy, and the notion of communist criticism as, at one and the same time, the totalization of capital’s abstract domination and its determinate negation.

Throughout the various facets of intellectual and cultural work, in the broadest sense, Fortini asserts the necessity for partisanship and commonality, hierarchy and equality. His communism—and the paradox is intentional, constitutive of his own variation on the “communist hypothesis”—must be “absolutely aristocratic when it comes to values and absolutely democratic when it comes to human beings.”<sup>62</sup> Communist criticism is the exercise of negativity toward everything that serves to entrench domination, to abase thought. But it is also an attempt to open collective social life to a knowledge and a practice of the totality. Thus, while poetry allegorizes, but does not prefigure, the practice of formalization, criticism, in moving beyond specialization and competence from a starting point in the rigorous study of language and literature, strives toward totalization.

As Fortini puts it, programmatically, “To practice criticism, to develop a critical discourse, means therefore to speak *of everything* with regard to a concrete and determinate occasion.”<sup>63</sup> In this respect criticism too is an allegory (albeit a very partial and limited one) of a revolution, conceived by Fortini as a form of collective pedagogy, as that situation in which everyone teaches everyone and learns from everyone and in which people do not respect their roles.<sup>64</sup> Communism, as real history and a tenuous, but tenacious, hypothesis, tells us both of the tragic experience (or tawdry reality) of the subjection and instrumentalization of intellectual labor, and of a profound solidarity with the emancipatory dissolution of intellectual labor as a separate domain of life and production.

In the midst of the eighties, that counterrevolution without a revolution, Fortini wrote that “once upon a time there was an old cause” that “wanted to remove the obstacles that forbid the greater number of human beings the comprehension, or consciousness, in the form of science or sapience, of their ‘human condition.’”<sup>65</sup> Moving through and beyond the twentieth-century history of the relationship between communist politics and writing, between capitalism and intellectual labor, Fortini remained—at the cost of conflict and isolation—wedded to the attempt to combine political antagonism, cultural production, and intellectual emancipation in a strategic and collective movement. In one of his later epigrams, significantly entitled “From Everyone to Everyone,” he crystallized his perspective on communist criticism as a collective practice:

Before us lies the road, immensely long but not eternal, of mutual political education, aimed at deciphering the links between phenomena and showing the falseness of the measuring instruments currently in use. Whoever seeks to possess the (mental and/or moral) method to understand how or why the latest book of poetry published in Milan, the rise in the price of petrol, the military expenditures of the Republic of South Africa, and this present argument

<sup>61</sup> Balicco, *Non parlo a tutti*, 43.

<sup>62</sup> Franco Fortini, “Difesa del cretino,” in *Verifica dei poteri*, in *SE*, 189.

<sup>63</sup> Fortini, “Verifica dei poteri,” in *SE*, 25.

<sup>64</sup> In “Il mito dell’immediatezza,” Fortini writes, “What we call revolution is in actual fact a conquest of speech [*una presa della parola*] on the part of everyone, which implies a pedagogical attitude from everyone to everyone [*di tutti a tutti*]” (212). See also “*Finis historiae*,” 575, 583.

<sup>65</sup> Fortini, “Per una ecologia della letteratura,” in *SE*, 1618.

are linked, and by which passages and distribution centers they influence one another, will also have better knowledge of (or will put himself in a position to know) the hidden tunnels through which the various ages of men, the world of reality and that of desire, communicate, and how each of us is made up of the dead and the yet unborn, and thus traversed by a universal coresponsibility.<sup>66</sup>

Though our own time seems far removed from the conflicts in which Fortini forged his writing and his stance, his criticism teaches us that without both the drive toward totality and the horizon of collective pedagogy—as well as the incessant work on the forms and contents, the relations and institutions, of cultural production under capitalism—to speak of the intellectual will be, to borrow the situationist adage, to have a corpse in one’s mouth. A

---

<sup>66</sup> Franco Fortini, “Di tutti a tutti” (1985), in *L’ospite ingrato secondo*, in *SE*, 1073. Elsewhere, Fortini observes how “information and ‘knowledge’ accept the fragmentation generated by a half a century of global civil war without any longer wanting to draw its strategic map—the map of the ‘present as history.’ Instead, they attack, wound, or deride any attempt to do this with the excuse of wishing to avoid ideological simplifications, promoting instead the specialties of experts (economists, political scientists, polemicists, . . .) and always delegating to some other department the risk and the labor of establishing cognitive connections.” Quoted in Mavi de Filippis, “Introduzione,” in Abati et al., *Uomini usciti di pianto in ragione*, 10. In Fortini’s view “ethics and politics require *models of production*, that is, of *syntax*, able to describe and contain the social whole.” Ezio Partesana, “Contraddizioni e potere: Lo sfruttamento dell’ideologia,” in Abati et al., *Uomini usciti di pianto in ragione*, 48.