Contemporary class composition analysis: The politics of production and the autonomy of the political

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Abstract
The political and organisational routes opened up on the contemporary left following the financial crisis have seen a revival of class composition analysis as a means of comprehending a broad array of social and economic phenomena both within and beyond the workplace. Contextualising contemporary class composition analysis as a long-standing component of autonomist Marxism, this article argues that its application amid the left’s electoral turn exposes to scrutiny deeper-running weaknesses. The article first presents a history of class composition analysis through operaismo into postoperaismo. The second part of the article discusses four interconnected new directions in class composition analysis: Hardt and Negri’s Assembly; the analysis of social composition offered by the Notes from Below collective; Keir Milburn’s analysis of ‘generation left’; and, finally, the uptake of some of these ideas among commentators on the left of the British Labour Party like Paul Mason. The article then discusses the theoretical and strategic implications of these contributions through the prism of critiques of class composition analysis put forward by other theorists in the autonomist Marxist tradition. Noting the possible limitations confronting the application of class composition analysis to contemporary challenges faced by the post-crisis left, the penultimate section considers Labour Process Theory as a theoretical alternative implicit in recent critiques of contemporary class composition analysis, arguing that while Labour Process Theory’s analysis of the ‘politics of production’ captures the contingency of the connection between the workplace and formal politics, it leaves unresolved the lack of a distinctive theory of the latter on the contemporary left. The final section reconnects the discussion to the legacy of

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operaismo by exploring Mario Tronti’s recently translated work on the ‘autonomy of the political’ as a more substantial articulation of the specificity of politics against the backdrop of class conflict at the point of production. The conclusion relates this back to recent strategic issues in the Labour Party and broader labour movement.

**Keywords**
autonomist Marxism, class, class composition, labour party, labour process, operaismo, politics, politics of production, postoperaismo, work

**Introduction**

Popularised on the UK left by the Conference of Socialist Economists (CSE) (1976) and Big Flame (Thompson 2018), class composition analysis (CCA) stems from the work of Italian operaists (‘workerists’) (Alquati 2013; Bologna 1976; Panzieri 1976; Tronti 2019). As a strand of autonomist Marxism, operaists (see Steinhoff 2021: 75–97) have traditionally been interested in ‘the laws of development’ that govern the relationship between two modalities of the composition of the working class, and the ‘forms of behaviour’ that are produced by their interaction (Wright 2002: 49, 2014: 369). The technical composition represents the organisation of labour-power as an ‘economic input’, in the form of which capital materially structures the working class through processes of division, management and mechanisation. In some accounts the technical composition is also taken to include the ‘forms of reproduction’ of the class that lie beyond the workplace in the family and community at large. The political composition, meanwhile, represents the struggle of the economic input ‘labour power’ to politically constitute itself as the working class autonomously of ‘both the labour movement and capital’, fighting for its own ‘needs and development’ by means of ‘refusal, resistance and re-appropriation of surplus value’ (Dyer-Witheford 2015: 29; Wright 2002: 3–5). In this way operaismo has tended to approach class not as an empirical given but a simultaneously economic and political category defined through processes of both ‘decomposition’, through which capital fragments the working class, and of ‘recomposition’, through which the working class arranges itself in response. A central focus of CCA is which of these processes has primacy at any one time, and the social and industrial settings that provide the most advanced and up-to-date demonstration of the ‘political laws of motion’ of labour and capitalist development (Mueller 2020: 15–16; Wright 2002: 3–5, 78).

The contemporary reception of CCA has been mediated through the development of postoperaismo in the nineties and noughties (Hardt & Negri 2001). As charted in these pages at different points over past decades (Pitts & Dinerstein 2017; Thompson 2005), postoperaismo’s shift in focus away from the workplace to society at large proved popular with a contemporary left increasingly disconnected from class politics. However, today we see a renewed interest in original operaismo and the central role it granted labour in the formation of political subjectivity. Represented in recent contributions to this journal (Cant & Woodcock 2020; Kearsey 2020), CCA finds new relevance applied to the
modes of resistance and activism produced by the technological and organisational innovations of the platform or gig economy.

This article considers how this new relevance of CCA is mediated by the electoral turn undertaken by the contemporary left. This is a source of increased sophistication and potential significance, the translation of radical theory into reformist praxis marking a compromise with the constraints presented by the current horizon of political possibility. In a recent co-authored contribution (Thompson et al. 2022), I argued that there is a risk this ‘militant method’ makes an awkward fit for the strategic calculations specific to the parliamentary sphere as the primary locus of struggle and social transformation. Our critique contended that, put to the test politically, deeper-running weaknesses of CCA are exposed to greater scrutiny.

This article proposes a possible reconstructive route through some of the impasses we raised in that contribution. The first section of the article presents a history of CCA. The second section presents four aspects of the return to CCA each with different perspectives and purposes: Hardt and Negri’s (2017) most recent work, Assembly; the analysis of social composition offered by the UK collective Notes from Below (2018); Keir Milburn’s (2019) analysis of ‘generation left’; and the strategic uptake of cognate ideas among commentators on the left of the British Labour Party like Paul Mason (2021). The third section considers the theoretical and strategic implications of these contributions through the prism of the criticisms of CCA offered by other scholars in the broad tradition of autonomist Marxism (Dyer-Witheford 2015; Holloway 1992, 2002; Wright 2002).

The final sections of the article gather materials for an alternative. The article follows Thompson et al. (2022) in arguing that CCA tends to identify shifting sites or agents of determination according to the (dis)satisfaction of scholars and activists with different sections of the working class in pursuit of pregiven political aims. While, as previously argued, this method might have some limited purchase for revolutionary strategies for social transformation, it arguably has less to offer a left whose priorities have become subordinated to the prerogatives of formal politics. That earlier critique, however, remained confined to historical events and contemporary political calculations rather than deeper theoretical disagreements, stopping short for reasons of space and purpose of fully articulating an alternative conceptual apparatus.

One of the contributions of this article is to fill in this theoretical gap. Some critical tools with which to appraise CCA’s weaknesses are located in a countervailing yet closely related set of ideas emerging from with the same broad CSE tradition represented in the pages of this journal: Labour Process Theory (LPT) (Brighton Labour Process Group (BLPG), 1977; Cressey & MacInnes 1980; Friedman 1977; Thompson 2010). The penultimate section of the article concludes that the confinement of LPT to the ‘politics of production’ enables a contingent view of the connection between the workplace, class composition and formal politics, but leaves unresolved the lack of a distinctive theory of the how class power can be strategically advanced in this sphere. Having considered the necessary and self-imposed limitations of LPT as an alternative to CCA, the final section reconnects with the legacy of operaismo by probing the potential relevance of recently translated work by a central compositionist thinker, Mario Tronti. Tronti’s ‘politicist’ turn away from operaismo and orthodox Marxism, the article concludes, has much to offer the development of a left ‘political science’ attuned to the times.
Having selected for appraisal a handful of contemporary CCA perspectives united by their specific approach to generational, financial and technological trends in dialogue with operaismo, the article concludes that the theoretical resources provided in Tronti’s later work aid these admirable attempts by activists and scholars alike to identify strategically important actors and activities for the construction of class power. Tronti lays bare the need for a clearer articulation of how the construction of class power by workers and unions in industrial settings relates to the building of class power in the sphere of practical politics. Drawing upon Tronti’s political turn, the article concludes that the mutual autonomy of struggles at the point of production and struggles in the parliamentary sphere may do more to advance the cause of building class power than deterministically collapsing the one into the other. It closes by noting the contemporary relevance of this insight for the Labour Party and labour movement in the United Kingdom today.

A theoretical overview of CCA

Operaismo originally arose from a rejection of the temporally and spatially rigid relationship between the material and the subjective posited by orthodox Marxism, assigning no inevitability to the progression from the technical to the political composition (Alquati 2013; Wright 2002: 48–49). The conviction that classes were composed through struggle overcame the orthodox Marxist understanding of the working class as sharing only an original state of dispossession, the incoherence of which led Leninists to propose a party or vanguard to bring order and discipline to its disparate parts (Kolinko 2003). Refusing to force all workers into the straightjacket of a premature unanimity based on the experience of exploitation, CCA recognised that forms of organisation like unions and parties expressed ‘the concrete character of the class’ only in certain historically specific circumstances appropriate to the requirements of its recomposition (Cleaver 2000: 67). Hence, while the relationship between the workplace and political subjectivity undoubtedly possessed an underlying directionality for early operaists, the most sophisticated among them saw the form it assumed as contingent.

Thus, for foundational operaists like Panzieri (1976, in a translation published by the CSE), class recomposition was not simply a result of the organic composition between variable and constant capital at a given stage of capitalist development, but itself a catalyst for the latter’s reorganisation. In this way, the shifting organic composition is ‘not the outcome of a neutral, purely scientific process of technological progress’, but rather the result of capital’s drive to ‘decompose’ the working class. Each successive attempt at decomposition in turn provided the basis for recomposition. New technical compositions, for instance, permitted workers under Taylorism the power to ‘stop the line’, generating the institutional power wielded by the Fordist ‘mass worker’ (Dyer-Witheford 2015: 29–30). The militancy of the mass worker, as the sum of ‘individual labour-powers’ politically composed through struggles (Wright 2002: 76–77), provoked capital to technologically revolutionise the labour process at pivotal sites of operaist activism and analysis like FIAT Turin (Mueller 2020: 128).

While operaismo’s ‘Copernican inversion’ of class perspective (Tronti 2019) escaped the ‘economic rationality’ of orthodox Marxism, CCA still tended to presume the presence of an intrinsically antagonistic class subject whose ‘material articulation’ at the point
of production would generate a political composition focused on the revolutionary overthrow of its subordination ‘in pursuit of a new political unity’. However, the explanatory primacy awarded the technical composition elided the ‘contradictory reality’ of working-class political behaviour (Wright 2002: 3–5, 78), running counter to operaismo’s founding assumption that working-class power played an autonomous role in driving capitalist development rather than being determined by it (Mohandesi 2013: 91–92).

One response to this impasse was to deny ‘any necessary relationship between the labour process and class behaviour’, as did groups like Potere Operaiao. However, this often simply displaced the necessity and determination previously attached to the point of production to the ‘social factory’ instead. Epitomised in the ‘factory-city’ organised around FIAT workers and their families in Turin, the social factory compromised all domestic and public settings in which the reproduction of labour-power and socialisation of the working class occurred. The blurred lines the social factory established between ‘the plants where surplus value is created, the residential zones where labour-power reproduces itself, and the centres of administration’ was seen to have accomplished a new material articulation between the technical and the political composition ‘pregnant’ with revolutionary possibility. Action in this domain was seen to strike at the heart of the production of labour-power itself, with groups like Lotta Continua leaving the plants behind to fight for ‘self-reduction of housing, food and utility prices’ in the city streets (Cleaver 2000: 70–71; Dyer-Witheford 2015: 30; Wright 2002: 80, 138). For these analyses the social and industrial compromise constructed around the mass worker was exploded not only by working-class refusal of the wage-productivity bargain but also by the students’, women’s, anti-war and Black power movements (Cleaver 2000: 73).

These shifts, some thought, represented the ‘annihilation’ of ‘a whole culture of industrial class struggle’, including both its technical composition in the labour process and its political composition in parties and unions. This raised the spectre of the decomposition of the ‘very concept of class itself’ (Dyer-Witheford 2015: 37), tentatively opening CCA to gender, race and culture (Mohandesi 2013: 92–93).

For the postoperaists that emerged from these shifts, the new social movements that surged in the space vacated by the traditional working class recomposed themselves in the form of the ‘social(ised) worker’ – later, for Negri, the ‘multitude’. From this perspective, where the mass worker had previously captured the relationship between the progressive abstraction of labour and its socialisation, it described the productive relations of only a specific section of the working-class and remained conceptually confined to the labour process. The ‘social(ised) worker’, meanwhile, represented a class recomposition in the face of technological change the conditions of which spanned the entire ‘arc of the valorisation process’ beyond production. The new ‘unity of abstract social labour’ this generated was seen as overriding and subsuming the specificities of age, gender and ethnicity inside and outside the factory. A central site for the socialisation of this new composition was the increasing ‘massification’ of ‘intellectual and technical labour’ from the seventies onwards, its pivotal actors being university students and intellectual workers seen as representing the ‘productive intelligence’ of Marx’s ‘general intellect’. Symbolising the refusal of assembly-line life, the law of value was seen as increasingly inadequate for mediating the ‘reproduction of this class of workers’ (Wright 2002: 141, 156, 163–164, 201). This was later theorised through concepts of ‘immaterial labour’ and the ‘crisis of
the law of value’, which, while germane to the topic at hand, have already been extensively surveyed elsewhere in this journal (Böhm & Land 2009; Pitts 2018).

Stressing the proletarianisation and factorisation of intellectual labour over world-shattering ‘general intellect’, operaist holdouts like Bologna saw the move from the mass worker to the socialised worker owing not to a material change in the technical composition but an ideological abandonment of the politics of production. Ignoring the continuities and commonalities of material conditions across both manual and intellectual labour, the category of the ‘socialised worker’ dissolved the connection between concrete particularity and political behaviour present in the mass worker, putting in its place a mish-mash of different phenomena and antagonisms that ironed out ‘specific and contradictory’ elements. The socialised worker – subsequently the ‘multitude’ – resembled a ‘generic proletariat ... yet to appear as a mature political subject’ (Wright 2002: 171–174, 201–202). The likes of Bologna (1979, published by the CSE) maintained that ‘the behaviour exhibited by the new social protagonists did not stem from a material location extraneous to the world of production’, in the social factory at large. Rather, it stemmed from the incapacity of contemporary politics to legitimise the material needs attached to the changing labour process in a rising service sector characterised by self-employment, subcontracting and casualisation, which in turn reshaped class composition along lines of age, geography and gender (Wright 2002: 207).

For postoperaists like Negri, meanwhile, this composition represented the new forms of liberation emerging through, and not against, labour itself, as the New Economy granted workers ‘greater freedom and autonomy’ (Boffo 2014: 428). Postoperaists assumed the immanent capacity of the multitude to self-organise amid these shifts. Investigating working life in the same nascent creative and digital industries that formed the focal point of postoperaist analyses of ‘immaterial labour’, however, Bologna (2013, 2018) reached the more circumspect conclusions that postoperaist hype functioned as a convenient alibi for a new economy whose precariousness obstructed the practices of self-protection, representation of interests and coalition-building. These were indispensible to earlier class compositions like the mass worker and, contrary to postoperaismo, continually relevant to attempts by ‘autonomous’ workers to recompose themselves as a class using more traditional organisational and institutional repertoires (Boffo 2014: 428–434).

**New directions in CCA**

Politically, these prior strands of CCA sought to locate segments of the working-class with specific political behaviours and strategically important economic positions, whether manufacturing in the sixties, education in the seventies, or digital from the eighties onwards (Wright 2002: 207). Today’s CCA locates such a segment in the young urban graduates who live and labour in a platform economy characterised by precariousness: gig work, private rental, financialised debt and technological surveillance (Mueller 2020: 128–129). The cycle of struggles in the period following the financial crisis exposed this emergent class composition, its diverse grievances articulated through the same platforms that helped create it (Dyer-Witheford 2015: 150–151). In the apparent absence of more conventional and coordinated modes of class struggle, the ‘avant garde’
of the post-crisis left in the United Kingdom and elsewhere took up the legacy of CCA as a theoretical and methodological toolbox for the political organisation of this incoherent generational and economic subject (Englert et al. 2020: 134). This revisited core operaziop preoccupations around youth, reproduction and the social factory in the new context of the so-called ‘asset economy’ (Adkins et al. 2020) and ‘rentier capitalism’ (Christophers 2020).

Here we focus on three appearances of contemporary CCA – Hardt and Negri’s ‘technical composition of the young’, Notes from Below’s ‘social composition’, and Milburn’s ‘generation left’ – as well as how similar ideas have been taken up in and around the Labour Party post-Corbyn. These perspectives are selected for the resonant approach they adopt to generational, financial and technological dynamics, in dialogue with operaismo. While by no means exhaustive of all contemporary CCA, the uptake of these ideas beyond the narrow confines of academic Marxism also marks them out as worthy of our consideration – indeed, over the course of the period in which this article was revised, Milburn’s ‘generation left’ thesis continued to circulate by means of a widely read article in the US magazine *Rolling Stone* (Childs 2022) and a related segment promoting the thesis on British daytime television show *Politics Live* (BBC 2022). From its fringe origins, this suggests contemporary CCA chimes, in some way at least, with the tenor of the times.

**The technical composition of the young**

Inspired by the rise-and-fall of the left’s post-crisis horizontalism and its later populist electoral turn, Hardt and Negri’s (2017) *Assembly* represents a new and substantial post-operaist recuperation of CCA. While they maintain a focus on the relationship between labour and political subjectivity, for Hardt and Negri (2017: 17), the operaist assumption that the technical composition determines the political composition mirrors the orthodox Marxist progression from class-in-itself to class-for-itself, implying the incapacity of workers to represent themselves except via hegemonic fractions that impose ‘the hierarchies of capitalist production’ onto political movements.

Whereas previous class compositions were characterised by representation through forms of institutional and organisational mediation, a digital, ‘post-industrial’ economy based on a ‘commons’ of ‘social, productive and reproductive cooperation’ dissolves the traditional relationship of representation and mediation between the technical and political composition, and the distinction between the politics of production and formal politics more widely. This is because what they call the ‘technical composition of the young generations’ transcends the traditional sphere of production and its precarious conditions to encompass a cooperative sociality that collapses the political composition into the technical. This cooperative sociality is developed in ‘biopolitical’ forms of immaterial production spanning knowledge-intensive or care-centred sectors incorporating the ‘production of humans by humans’. This, ‘technical composition of the young’, forged in ‘biopolitical’ production, thus refutes any dialectical dualism between the material conditions of working life and the political composition of the class. The same combination of social and technological phenomena that characterise contemporary labour directly, rather than dialectically, defines the ‘political model of new institutions’. For Hardt and
Negri (2017: 238–239), the commons of social cooperation that characterise contemporary immaterial production, and the young immaterial labourers who occupy them, represent the tendency of the technological forces to dissolve private property – itself a new technical-political composition.

Expressed in post-crisis social movements and their translation into left electoral projects, this new class composition confronts the reinforcement of the existing relations of production by an ‘old, unravelling political composition’ represented in ‘propertied elites’ who extract surplus-value from the commons through financialised means. Hence, for Hardt and Negri contemporary class struggle follows the production of value well beyond the employment relationship. Class struggle instead centres on the connection between the economic and the political established in what they call the corrupt ‘benefits and privileges’ appropriated by the ‘financial and propertied elites’. Rather than interventions in the workplace, then, Hardt and Negri (2017: 64–66) promote the demand for a basic income as a possible form of redistributive remuneration commensurate to the value produced by the contemporary commonwealth of cooperation.

**Social composition**

Hardt and Negri’s collapsing of the distinction between the technical and the political composition joins other attempts to revise and expand CCA’s boundaries. German autonomists Kolinko (2003), for instance, propose to extend the analysis of worker subjectivity outwards from the workplace to the material conditions of the capital relation as a whole, including labour-power’s reproduction in the community, home, family and other institutions. Inspired by this, UK collective Notes from Below (2018) retain a dogged defence of the workplace’s centrality with a complementary perspective that transcends the workplace alone, represented in recent *Capital & Class* contributions (Kearsey 2020; Cant & Woodcock 2020) reporting militant inquiries in the gig economy.

While Notes from Below follow traditional CCA in using the concept of the technical composition to illuminate the ‘hidden abode’ of production, they suggest that since the seventies CCA shows less success analysing what they call the other ‘hidden abode’ of social reproduction. In conventional operaist CCA, they observe, workers only come into focus outside the technical composition when they ‘decide to act politically’. When workers ‘shop, eat, relax or sleep’, meanwhile, operaismo tends switch off. However, the working class constantly redefines its composition through struggles beyond the workplace in social policy, rent/housing and consumption – all instances of ‘material organisation’ alongside the labour process. Apprehending the consequences both ‘hidden abodes’ – production and social reproduction – imply for the political composition of the class, Notes from Below propose, requires an analysis of *social composition* alongside the technical.

In the resulting model, the *technical* composition sees labour-power organised into a working-class, the *social* the latter’s organisation into class society, and the *political* its self-organisation into a ‘force for class struggle’. The progression of technical-social-political compositions is characterised by what Notes from Below call a ‘leap’. Just as ‘through class struggle, capitalism changes itself’, so too does struggle render contingent the movement from technical to political composition. While the former sets the conditions
for the latter, there is nothing mechanical or predictable about the ‘leap’ within which the ‘working-class political viewpoint’ forms.

The insistence on the ‘social composition’ of working-class life at large is not synonymous with an abandonment of the workplace or the working class as an actor or agent of change. Against the postoperaist search for revolutionary subjects ‘everywhere but the workplace’ in the ‘free labour’ that fills the social factory, compositionists in this current stress work’s status as the ‘primary site of struggle’ (Englert et al. 2020: 135; Notes from Below 2018). For Notes from Below, the pivotal position certain strategic fractions of the class occupy in production and circulation grants workers an ‘intuitive’ privileged perspective. However, workers may struggle to see how their own work recreates capitalism every day and thus require the assistance of militants via operaist ‘workers inquiry’ (Pitts 2014; Woodcock 2014) which uses CCA to decode and represent the ‘perspective of the working class’. Whereas operaists confined their inquiries to the workplace, Notes from Below’s ‘social composition’ enables the analysis of ‘the whole ... working class’, including the unemployed and unwaged work. They write, ‘has to begin ... from an exact and positive knowledge of the conditions in which the working class – the class to whom the future belongs – works and moves’. In this way, the leap towards social composition and an expanded notion of class struggle nonetheless retains a classical faith in a working-class trusted with a well-worn historical mission.

**Generation left**

Keir Milburn’s (2019) *Generation Left* represents a compelling book-length development of Hardt and Negri’s focus on youth and Notes from Below’s focus on ‘social composition’. For Milburn, the 2008 crisis constituted a ‘moment of sudden and unpredictable change that ruptured society’s sense making’ and subsequently defined a generational composition assembling those worst affected by the deeper-lying political and economic tendencies the recession expressed. Milburn suggests that preloaded experiences prejudice the capacity of older generations to comprehend the consequences of such events, whereas younger generations carry fewer memories and preconceptions and thus quickly grasp their import. The differential distribution of these ‘intellectual and psychic resources’ at a moment of crisis separates one generation from another. The political composition of a generation is not automatic, but rather coheres where a vanguard ‘hegemonize[s] the wider generation by providing “a more or less adequate expression of the particular ‘location’ of a generation as a whole”’ (Milburn 2019: 19–21).

This ‘intellectual and psychical’ framework does not tell the whole story, however. For Milburn, 2008 demonstrated how generations draw upon *material*, as well as ideological, resources, in navigating the ‘problem space’ opened up where ‘long-term trends of inter-generational injustice’ crystallise into a ‘generation-forming period of change’. Whereas this material terrain is conventionally addressed with reference to class, not age, for Milburn this represents an increasingly meaningless framework insofar as the category of ‘working-class’ remains confined to an association with older skilled/manual workers, with younger service workers persistently codified as ‘middle class’. This means also that class has become a ‘proxy for age’ in the terms used by pollsters and opinion-formers. Concurrently, age has become ‘one of the key modalities through which class is lived’ and
young people ‘become aware of their actual class position’. Age also represents a ‘fracture’ that renders problematic a cohesive account of ‘mutual class interests’ (Milburn 2019: 21–23). Compared to generations past, younger people face lower earnings and job opportunities, and more debt and barriers to home-ownership. The older property-owners from whom they rent, meanwhile, saw their wealth soar in the post-crisis period, riding the wave of rising house prices. Like Hardt and Negri, Milburn associates contemporary capitalism with elite appropriation of wealth through unconventional monetary policy, low interest rates and an asset-price bubble, the benefits of which have accrued to older people.

The new salience of age does not undermine CCA but resonates with its theoretical and political roots in the struggle to comprehend and represent the ‘problems and perspectives of a new generation of workers’ in the sixties, specifically the young ‘mass workers’ employed in factories like FIAT who prioritised work refusal over worker control (Milburn 2019: 24–26). However, like Hardt and Negri, Milburn sees the move from technical to political composition as complicated by the variegation and networkisation of work, as well as the displacement of antagonism from the production of value in the labour process, towards the extraction of rents in the circuit of capital as a whole. In the context of this ‘complex and variable technical composition’ incorporating the ‘social composition’ theorised by Notes from Below, Milburn suggests that ‘thinking in terms of political generations and events’ rather than class alone can help clarify which actors attain ‘political valency’ in a given composition.

What Milburn calls ‘generational units’ hegemonise the definition and exploration of the ‘problem space’ events produce. Pivotal in the present day is the ‘shared generational location’ produced by the cycle of struggles sparked by the 2008 crisis. With the protest movements of 2011 the crisis resulted in the ‘active’ creation of an ‘international left generation’ organisationally mediated by horizontalist assemblies and consensus decision-making. Later the ‘long 2011’ was organisationally mediated in the left’s ‘electoral turn’. Contrary to Hardt and Negri’s reading of the post-crisis horizontalist movements as a failure of organisational form, Milburn sees generation left’s political graduation from Occupy and the student movement to a wholesale ‘take-over of the Labour Party’ as a famous success. By adopting organisational means better able to communicate beyond these radical milieus to a broader generational audience, the electoral turn hegemonised a precarious youth subjectivity seeking to escape the financialised neoliberalism from which older generations had prospered (Milburn 2019: 30–31, 79–80, 87).

However, according to Milburn, these movements have struggled to hegemonise or overcome other age cohorts, with the political composition of generations ultimately determined by the desire of different actors for the upheaval or preservation of existing material conditions. In this respect, Milburn follows Hardt and Negri in granting a pivotal explanatory power to the ownership of private property and the fear in which it results – private property underpinning a largely unachievable definition of adulthood jealously guarded by those who possess it. In particular, Milburn identifies rentier dynamics as a particular site of de-and-recomposition, insofar as the young face various forms of rent extraction, whether in housing or the platformisation of life and labour. This antagonism, Milburn (2019: 82–3, 108, 115–116) argues, represents the replacement of ‘property-owning democracy’ by a neo-feudal rentierism driven by the ‘corruptive power of the oligarchs’.
In a world where the thing ‘oligarchs fear most’ is ‘raised consciousness’, Milburn contends that the generational character of these economic shifts produces a new political composition based, contrary to the extra-parliamentary politics of most CCA, on a turn towards formal parliamentary politics. While parliamentarianism’s episodic character makes a poor fit for the ‘temporality of movements’ and generation left must resist the subordination of its politics to electoral calculations alone, Milburn suggests, it must nonetheless seize power to implement policies commensurate with the common and collective character of contemporary social (re)production, including, as in Hardt and Negri, a basic income. While Milburn (2019: 120–124) recommends the left sidestep a generational zero-sum game whereby the young rob the old of the assets, there is an urgent temporality driving this political recomposition insofar as ‘the future can’t afford’ this generation’s defeat. As for Notes from Below, the future of the world rests upon the class actor produced by the current recomposition.

**Labour’s ‘new political soul’**

As the UK left regroups following the electoral turn’s rise-and-fall, these new strands of compositionist thinking are shaping how Labour’s remaining radical left attempts to contribute to a broader conversation about how the party can construct a new electoral coalition in the context of a long-standing rupture with so-called ‘traditional’ working-class voters in the ‘Red Wall’. Labour’s electoral decline in these communities had set in long before Corbyn’s leadership, and in the 2017 General Election, the party’s vote actually increased in some ‘Red Wall’ constituencies. However, the vote plummeted again in 2019 as the party struggled to compete on a difficult political terrain shaped in part by Brexit (Beynon & Hudson 2021: 325–329). While there are signs at the time of writing that its disconnection from traditional ‘heartlands’ is being gradually overcome, over the last half a decade Labour has been widely perceived to lay claim instead to the votes of a ‘new’ working class of precarious graduates renting and gigging in the urban platform economy. Adopting such an assessment, the starting point of much commentary has been, in CCA terms, a shift in the locus of political composition away from the workplace to the social factory at large.

As noted elsewhere (Thompson et al. 2022), contemporary CCA is salient to the arguments of left commentators like Paul Mason. Mason (2021) locates Labour’s ‘political soul’ in the emergent class of urban youth whose degrees have left them with little more than low-paid service or platform jobs, debts and shorthold tenancies. Alongside this composition, Mason suggests, the ‘small-town working class’ Labour lost forms only one part of a possible alliance that, won through concessions to mainstream views on defence and security, would ultimately only underpin Labour’s consolidation of its new urban heartlands. For Mason, this displaces work’s centrality in the definition of political subjectivity onto a new ‘terrain of class struggle’. Just as for the operaists of the seventies, the ‘urban, progressive, networked and educated part of the proletariat’ sees work as a useless and meaningless activity, foregrounding instead ‘equality, climate change, transgender issues, male violence or Black Lives Matter’ as poles of exploitation and identification. In particular, Mason suggests, wage labour has been replaced as the main means of exploitation by ‘financialised extraction’ of value through rents, debt and credit,
and the platformised extraction of data from users and consumers. While work is still the basis for much of this insofar as credit buttresses declining real wages and platforms recruit and surveil human labour, Mason suggests that, with labour the ‘source of value’, greater automation leaves economic growth ‘reliant on asset values’ instead. In this context, ‘we are ripped off through every transaction, not just the wage relationship’, with the young feeling the pinch.

Another Labour left commentator, Christine Berry (2021), clarifies the connection between age, work and class at stake in the purported new political composition. For Berry, analyses of class based on work elide the influence of assets, in particular home ownership and pension investments, in materially determining political subjectivity. While still important, material inequalities attached to work are no longer reflected in class composition, with little to divide a more ‘traditional’ skilled or manual working-class from a professionalised middle-class, the latter of which may face a tougher struggle than the former to attain assets with income. Moreover, Berry argues, social conflicts now concern control over assets in creditor-debtor and rentier-tenant relationships rather than a capital-labour antagonism mediated through the battle between workers and bosses for control of the labour process.

At the same time as work dwindles in importance in materially determining class politics, the latter is reconfigured by age, Berry suggests, with the interests of older working-class voters ‘fundamentally different from those of a young student who relies on part-time bar work, or a recent graduate who knows they will never earn enough to afford a home’. The former – retirees and older workers drawing income from pensions or benefitting from house price rises – Berry excludes from the working class on the basis they subsist primarily through ‘asset wealth (pensions and home ownership)’ rather than work. The latter – young graduates in precarious employment – are not a déclassé middle class, but the cornerstone of an entirely new working class. From this point of view, once retirees and others are discounted, Labour has not so much ‘lost’ the working class as constructed an emergent coalition around a new version of it. Rather than a stereotypical working class based in skilled manufacturing and manual trades, then, it is argued that Labour and the left should ‘pay attention’ to a ‘new dispossessed’ at the ‘sharpest end’ of the economy – low-paid, insecure service workers who rent rather than own (Khurana et al. 2021). This means that any accurate appreciation of class composition in the contemporary time would include ‘tenants, debtors and consumers’ within its purview as much as workers alone – a recurring theme in the empirical and strategic calculations that have powered CCA since its inception.

**Class composition and the critique of political economy**

The approaches considered in this article epitomise the continuing search for a class subject resonant with the political aspirations of (post)operaismo in its various guises. The identification of a new class composition springing from inequalities based on age, digital labour and the rentierisation of assets reflects the long-standing tendency for CCA to focus on ‘core’ professional, cultural or geographical actors and sites of struggle owing to their pivotal economic position – beginning with FIAT Turin (Kolinko 2003).
In this search activists and scholars look beyond labour alone, while maintaining a theoretical attachment to the primacy of material factors, and a political attachment to the identification of strategic categories of workers who can act as a vanguard. The extension of the technical composition to include a greater social terrain shifts the location of material determination from the factory to the social factory, granting an ontologically and epistemologically privileged perspective to new groups and actors situated at alternative points of production without fundamentally challenging the underlying logic of correspondence between the economic and the political into which CCA originally lapsed.

This theoretical and rhetorical reflex often conceals the absence of any practical means to generalise a given political composition. An exaggeration of the capacity of the struggles of certain metropoles, generations and kinds of labour to generalise themselves politically has come to stand in for any real theorisation of the relationship between the politics of production and politics proper. Operaist CCA arguably had ‘too “pure” a view of the working class, leading to unrealistic ... strategies’ that rest on the presumption of an ‘essential core’ to its identity intrinsically ‘against’ capital. As well as eliding the role of culture and values in mediating and complicating the relationship between material conditions and political subjectivity, such an approach ‘does not adequately recognise the degree to which “labour” as such is caught up in the commodity system’, the working class occupying a position internal, rather than external, to the reproduction of capitalist social relations (Dyer-Witheford 2015: 31). The strands of contemporary CCA considered above attempt to circumnavigate such a ‘purist’ conceptualisation of the working class through bridging to more expansive social terrain. Nonetheless, they are still characterised by the classical compositionist search for a straightforwardly antagonistic class subject whose interests are assumed to be diametrically opposed to those of capital.

Owing to this positivisation of antagonism, CCA has a tendency to ‘homogenise’ both blocs of workers and paradigms of capitalist production (Mohandesi 2013: 88–89). CCA responds to a perceived need to identify rising or hegemonic industries or economic conditions and place the workers or subjects who populate them at the forefront of programmes of political change and contestation. This consequently elides the heterogeneity of work, workers and employment relationships within a given periodisation, and the diverse political and organisational expressions they assume. A focus on novelty in these homogenised paradigms and periods fails to account for continuities and untimely residues that complicate the identification of a single emergent class figure as the generational representative of the cutting-edge of capitalist development and the vanguard of the class as a whole. The mass worker of the factories, the socialised worker of the cities and universities and the multitude of the digital and creative industries were categories analytically and politically as flawed as the understanding of the apparent paradigm shifts they represented, and the networked young graduate of the platform economy may face the same judgement. For CCA, new economic paradigms periodically emerge to comprehensively wipe away the last without trace. But, in reality, epochs blend and coexist such that worker subjectivity can never be cleanly read off from material circumstances and, uncomfortably for compositionist analyses, carry traces of customs and traditions that are holdovers from prior generational configurations. This has strategic implications for a contemporary left seeking a political coalition constructed around new kinds of work and workers – not least because CCA often serves to identify a central
class subject while ‘filtering out the rest’ (Kolinko 2003) at the expense of an analysis of, and appeal to, the working class more broadly, including by addressing culture and other non-economic factors.

This search for new and decisive class actors, in eliminating contradictory and anachronistic elements, thus hypothesises recomposition where in fact decomposition is as important a tendency (Holloway 2002; Wright 2002: 224). Positivising capitalist development as always interconnected with class struggle obscures that its course is accompanied by a much more complex, and often politically unpalatable, array of manifestations of class subjectivity than operaismo permits. Antagonism is treated as something waged between warring classes rather than something that ‘traverses all of us’ individually with unpredictable results. Moreover, antagonism cuts across classes themselves, insofar as class is temporarily fixed through myriad individual contracts between workers and employers such that the relation between capital and labour is ‘atomised and fragmented’ (Holloway 1992: 154, 2002: 46). In this way, processes of de-and-recomposition are formed not only in the workplace, but in the interplay between the valorisation process and the labour process. While contemporary CCA extends its focus beyond the workplace to this broader social totality, it does so only in an optimistic search for examples of recomposition where the labour process is lacking. This skirts the inconvenient truth of decomposition, whereby the progressive complexity of the valorisation process produces ‘various intermediate strata’ between capital and labour and separates ‘secure wage workers’ from the ‘unemployed and immiserated’ (Dyer-Witheford 2015: 28–29). CCA has traditionally attempted to overcome this complexity by theoretically articulating the varied political behaviours of diverse social actors in a series of speculative theoretical and strategic gambits, from the mass worker to the multitude. But in so doing they have ended up ‘flattening’ the specificity of these actors and their behaviours to the detriment of analysis, and thus praxis (Wright 2002: 224–225). The danger is that contemporary attempts to revive CCA produce similarly misleading theories that flow through into misguided political strategies.

The theoretical and strategic gambit of much contemporary CCA is that the key site where struggles are clarified today is not in production but distribution. This displaces the moment of material determination from work to another economic location – financialised or rentierised processes of owning, leasing or speculating on assets, expressed in new class compositions organised on generational or geographical lines. The earlier shift from the factory to the ‘social factory’ took a similarly distributionist bent. For Holloway (1992: 154–155), this reproduced the objective illusions through which productive relations appear in capitalist society, the fragmented and mediated character of class antagonism gaining coherence only by appearing as what it is not. The labour relation being formally mediated through manifold transactions between the buyer and seller of labour-power in the sphere of exchange, its mode of appearance is not one of exploitation to be resolved at the level of the workplace, but an inequality between rich capitalists and poor workers to be resolved through distribution external to the workplace. Rather than a result of so-called ‘false consciousness’, this objective illusion underpins the reproduction of a society organised around the valorisation of value, and generates an internal opposition organised around distributionist critiques of the ‘fragments’ through which productive relations present themselves to us in the abstract form of rent, profit and their
representative ‘interest groups’. In indulging such appearances, contemporary CCA runs the risk of providing a radical spin on the ‘division, divide and rule’ of bourgeois sociology, rather than the ‘interconnection’ between ‘production and the way in which people relate to it, the relations of production’ that characterises the theory of form presented in the critique of political economy.

Understanding the valorisation process as being as much a crucible for de-and-recomposition as the labour process has implications for how we evaluate attempts to extend CCA to the sphere of circulation. The (post)operaist expansion of CCA to the social factory has tended to displace the sphere of production onto new terrain rather than engage directly with the forms through which productive relations are mediated in exchange. This perspective is implicit in the power of material determination Hardt and Negri grant ‘social cooperation’ as the prevailing mode of value creation in contemporary capitalism. Contemporary CCA’s new focus on assets, housing and finance, meanwhile, more capably captures the interconnection between class composition and circulation as there sphere where labour-power is bought and sold and ‘where processes of credit, debt and speculation’ take hold or come to a ‘crashing halt’ (Dyer-Witheford 2015: 81–82).

However, this shift in the site of material determination not only fails to overcome the problems of CCA discussed here, but actually reproduces them. Class decomposition is a key dimension of the objective modes of existence through which capitalist social relations manifest themselves. This complicates attempts to ‘imagine the working-class recomposition necessary to overthrow’ those relations, leaving activists and intellectuals dissatisfied with the disappointing reality of working-class behaviour confronted with concrete material conditions. This ‘political impatience’ leads to a constant pursuit of new class formations that can place radicals on the right side of emergent empirical and political tendencies. This process underpins the opening-up of CCA to moments of the social totality beyond the ‘immediate process of production’. However, in so doing it tends to privilege as the most ‘advanced’ sector of the class those whose ‘working-class behaviours’ are culturally and politically closest to the radicals themselves (Wright 2002: 224–225), excluding moderate or conservative elements. At worst, the durability of the latter has led militants to impose themselves or other social forces as a vanguard to help recompose the class by revealing to it the way the world ‘really’ works. The strands of contemporary CCA charted above having been stimulated by the shift from structurelessness to structure in the so-called ‘electoral turn’, there is a risk that their development and reception is mediated through the new appeal of leadership to a left fresh from the experience of party politics, leading to the presumption that some form of external authority can impose coherence upon the contradictory elements of working-class life from outside.

The critique of political economy, however, implies that class decomposition does not represent ‘false consciousness’ in action. Those subject to the relations of production cannot be ideologically or organisationally cleansed of the objective forms in which those relations really appear because these forms are a necessary aspect of the reproduction of the social totality. Where the ‘popular mind’ does capture ‘the interconnections between social phenomena’ concealed in those forms of appearance, it is where the latter come into conflict with concrete experience. The antagonistic character of the productive relations these objective forms of appearance mediate means that the latter maintain an
openness and lack of closure through which their interconnection can be momentarily clarified to those involved. This openness rules out the notion of revolution as an ‘event’ which abolishes or escapes a previously ‘closed’ system – such as that implied in Milburn’s account of the ‘moments of excess’ experienced by ‘generation left’ – and reveals the system in itself as fragile and open to change and struggle over its terms (Holloway 1992: 156–157).

While a critical ‘defetishisation’ of social forms and the relations they mediate may help clarify the actual conditions for class recomposition, the opposition to isolated fragments like ‘rent’ and their representative ‘elites’ found within many contemporary applications of CCA reinforces the fetishistic forms through which productive relations appear. The practical consequence of the theory is thus inadvertently to compound class decomposition as an intractable component of the same capitalist social relations concealed in these forms of appearance (Holloway 1992: 156–157). Meanwhile, contrary to the vanguardist temptation in CCA, workers require no hegemonic leadership to engage critically and practically with the social conditions before them, and the variety of political behaviours through which they express this, independently of material determination, should be treated as the starting point of left approaches to class politics rather than as a problem to be shirked or resolved.

LPT and class analysis

One closely related alternative to CCA that begins from such a starting point is a specific approach to LPT well-accounted-for in this journal’s history (BLPG 1977; Cressey & MacInnes 1980; Friedman 1977; Thompson 2010), and implicit in the historical and political critique of CCA given in Thompson et al. (2022). From this perspective, LPT and CCA represent two divergent paths from similar departure points. Stemming in part from the UK reception of autonomist Marxism, this strand of LPT shares with CCA the considerable merit of rooting capitalist development in the dialectical relationship of resistance and changing forms of control (Friedman 1977). Like contemporary CCA, it situates this struggle within the context of the circuit of capital as a whole, including processes of valorisation, reproduction, circulation and financialisation (Thompson 2010). While retaining these advantages, it does not carry over the deterministic approach to the relationship between material shifts and processes of class identification that CCA lapsed into against the grain of its operaist foundations. However, the development of so-called ‘core’ LPT (Thompson 1990) as an internal critique of its blueprint in the work of Harry Braverman saw the latter’s ‘class analysis’ and commitment to social transformation discarded for what critics characterise as a more ‘conservative’ and reformist approach (Carter 2021). Post-Braverman LPT, on this account, ‘coalesced into a new orthodoxy’ stripped of any relationship to these revolutionary foundations, their ‘origins in Marxism’, and their ‘radical political implications’.

Inspired by such critiques, there remain countervailing Marxist perspectives on LPT that differ from the ‘core’ version presented by Thompson (1990; see Cohen 1987; Jaros 2005; Spencer 2000; Vidal 2018). The ‘core’ version of LPT, meanwhile, distinguishes between labour’s existence in the workplace and the more contradictory and textured reality of its existence in society at large. This rests on the observation that Marxists have
generally ‘failed to present a convincing analysis of the ... relationship between class struggle at the level of the factory and class struggle at the level of society as a whole’ (Cressey & MacInnes 1980: 5). This failure owes to the ‘empirical unsustainability’ of the link some Marxists posit between politics at the point of production – wherever that may be – and a wider politics of social transformation. It being largely unclear whether the capitalist labour process produces class dynamics resembling those Marxists have traditionally anticipated, the more advanced among the latter – including class compositionists – have tended to ‘displace’ the question of ‘social transformation’ onto different subjects, like youth or students, or ‘superstructural spheres’, like education or consumption (Thompson 1990: 102, 115). While refusing to wish the working class ‘farewell’ for an equally flawed cause celebre, LPT abandons the search for a revolutionary working class or a surrogate for it. In so doing it theoretically ‘reduces the burden on the working class’ represented by its ascribed ‘mission of emancipating the whole of humanity’, for an understanding ‘appropriate to its real rather than imagined intervention in history’ (Burawoy 1985: 5–6, 112). Today, we see this rhetorical burden shouldered by a range of new actors.

For post-Braverman LPT, the politics of production have a relative autonomy from material and economic determinants, and are shaped in interaction with a much broader array of social relations beyond the workplace, including cultural factors that class composition analyses tend to elide. In turn, relations at the point of production – whether factory or social factory – do not necessarily determine broader-scale class politics, which themselves rest on much more diverse and complicated ‘complexes of social practices’ irreducible to the relationship between the technical and political compositions (BLPG 1977: 23–24). In this way, struggles in the (social) factory do not directly structure wider class politics, which are characterised by varied, contingent and contradictory interests irreducible to, and irresolvable through, material and economic processes alone (Cressey & MacInnes 1980: 20–29). As such LPT negates the possibility of a ‘workerist political theory’, whether applied to the mass worker, the socialised worker, the multitude or the youthful political subjectivities onto which the CCA displaces the point of production today.

LPT thus withdraws from making any claim to provide a coherent, totalising class theory that explains how different economic actors behave politically based on interests formed in production (Edwards 1990), accepting instead that this connection is ultimately contingent and context-specific and thus open to interpretation through different frames. This means that LPT is still home to scholarship that combines more radical Marxist underpinnings with its core focus on control and resistance at the point of production. Nonetheless, it has received criticism in these pages for its reformist refusal of a revolutionary approach to collective class struggle (Carter 1995; Lucio & Stewart 1997; Rowlinson & Hassard 1994). In particular, the reluctance of ‘core’ LPT to connect the labour process to broader class analysis has led some to criticise a perceived absence of direct strategic relevance for contemporary struggles. Carter (2021) scrutinises LPT analyses of new class strata such as those associated with managerial and professional work. Scholars like Smith and Willmott (1991), Carter suggests, see the proliferation of such strata as playing a mediating role with reference to the structural antagonisms that underpin capitalist society, rather than intensifying class conflict by reinforcing one side
of the struggle. Carter argues that, by including such strata within a heterogeneous but universal working class defined only by association with wage labour, LPT analyses contribute little to the identification of specific class actors occupying strategically significant positions vis-à-vis the production of surplus-value and wider social antagonisms.

Avoiding some of the reductionism and determinism hardwired into the concept of composition, LPT captures the contingencies of how the politics of production connects with wider class politics only insofar as it does not impose any predetermined significance on politics itself. But this in itself is insufficient. The construction of strategies addressed to the specificity and relative autonomy of formal politics – policy, governance, elections, parties – requires theories matched to their practical demands. In this regard, it is necessary to go develop things further from a purely LPT-informed account of the historical failures of Italian operaismo in guiding the present. To this end, we return to a less well-trodden path within, and out of, the operaist tradition to find a potential theoretical and practical basis for rethinking the relationship between the economic and the political and the strategic implications therein.

The autonomy of the political

The conceptualisation of the technical and political composition, no matter how many new stages or ‘leaps’ are inserted in between, has a fundamental strategic flaw in that it theorises politics as an extension of antagonisms at the point of production and not a distinct and relatively autonomous sphere of activity. As we have seen, contemporary CCA ranges from displacing material determination onto new economic fragments that emergent antagonists must politically recompose, to negating any dialectical distinction between the technical and political compositions whatsoever. Where CCA calls off the search for such an understanding, LPT’s agnostic approach at least affords the theoretical permission to look elsewhere, but ultimately withdraws from offering the basis for a theory capable of connecting the politics of production with strategic questions in the sphere of politics proper. This final section will explore a possible solution to this impasse, remaining in conversation with the tradition of CCA by means of one of its progenitors, Mario Tronti (2020), and the increasingly ‘politivist’ direction taken in his later work, only recently translated into English.

Having inspired CCA, in the seventies Tronti came to see the Marxist tradition – including his own ‘Copernican’ revolution – as hamstrung by its adherence to an incomplete critique of politics derived from Marx’s fragmentary output. Tronti’s ‘politicism’ was glimpsed in the initial formulation of his Copernican inversion, whereby political and subjective struggle compelled capitalist development, but needed restating in the context of the subsequent compositionist lapse into a material and economic determinism. In particular, Tronti’s political turn saw struggle waged not only over material elements but over values. The ‘political’ represented ‘the institutions of power and the practice of taking and keeping power’. The postscript to Workers & Capital (2019), written long after the preceding chapters, inaugurated Tronti’s articulation of the ‘autonomy of the political’. Tronti had become increasingly pessimistic about the efficacy of an operaist extraparliamentary politics ‘distance[d] from the traditional organisations of the workers’ movement’. ‘Vulgar Marxism’, meanwhile, downgraded the political to a
superstructural expression of material dynamics at the base, above which everything was determined by what lies below. The continuity this posited between the economic and the political had been proven incorrect, Tronti thought (Farris 2011: 31–43).

In this context, Tronti (2020) saw Marxism’s ‘cultural tradition’ as an ‘obstacle’ to overcome, its conceptual resources having done more to harm than help the contemporary left. In preserving the traditional Marxist understanding of the determination of the political by economic relations, operaist CCA had reduced society to a factory and specified wage labour as its ‘single engine’. This failed, Tronti suggests, to comprehend with the array of engines simultaneously driving capitalist society, on the terrain of which the working class must struggle using varied methods and modes of organisation. For Tronti, the reduction of politics to economics operative in much CCA did not adequately capture the complex ‘chain of mediations’ that bridged the (social) factory and politics proper.

Rather than a relationship of determination – as posited in much compositionist thinking independent of precisely where the point of determination is located – Tronti saw the economic and the political shaping one other in both directions. This relation exhibits ‘a lag, a being out of sync’, affording space for the state to ‘absorb and temper socio-economic conflicts’. Hence rather than the one always and inevitably driving the other, Tronti perceived separate political and economic cycles – representing ‘distinct moments of the struggle between classes’ – between which there was constant discontinuity in each direction (Farris 2013: 192; Mandarini 2010: 181–182). This discontinuity Tronti understood in terms of the separation between state and civil society foundational to bourgeois liberalism. Rather than ‘an ideological trick of the bourgeoisie’ or a ‘function of class domination’, this separation represents the non-coincidence and capacity for contradiction between political and economic cycles (Farris 2013: 190–198). This separation is the beginning point of any democratic politics, and not, as the revolutionary left tends to imply, a problem to be abolished.

For Tronti (2020), politics as a ‘subjective activity’ and set of institutions and actors at the level of the state has its own history and temporality irreducible to capitalist economic development alone. Indeed, politics is meaningless if bound by economic necessity. Were ‘political organisation’ to ‘slavishly follow struggles within the immediate process of production’, then it would be forever ‘behind the curve’ of capitalist restructuring and thus ‘politically retarded’ and ineffectual. The ‘lag’ between the temporalities of these different cycles provides the space within which the ‘political’ has autonomy to mediate between struggles over capitalism’s complex array of discontinuous scales of activity – including, but not reducing to, workers’ struggle at the point of production as one possible site of struggle among many. For Tronti, it was insufficient simply to struggle over the relations of production in the (social) factory and wait for the resulting political change to fall into place. Rather, it was instead necessary to struggle ‘at the level of the institutions of formal politics’. In its capacity as the ‘centre of mediation’ of the class antagonism, the state need not necessarily rest in the control of capital alone, but also that of labour. In order to wield control, however, labour must demonstrate its ‘ability to govern’ through participation in ‘the practice of negotiation, manipulation and intervention’ associated with politics proper (Farris 2013: 191–192; Mandarini 2010: 181–184).
Highlighting how ‘political initiative’ and intervention can shape the course of economic development, the ‘autonomy of the political’ implies the potential for working-class participation in processes of ‘modernization’ around what Tronti (2020) calls ‘efficiency, productivity and entrepreneurship’. Tronti notes a historical trend for capital to encourage working-class participation in the ‘modernization of capital’ as the price of capital’s own ‘political development’ via the state. This participation provides workers ‘room for movement that is real, and not utopian’ within which workers struggle and capital-labour compromises are struck where circumstances allow. It contingencies managed at the level of the state, this movement of antagonism and compromise represents ‘the normal political struggle that occurs within a capitalist society’, and is the context within which class politics of any kind proceeds. Marxists and the workers movement have tended to fail the further they strayed from this basic line of ‘political realism’. To successfully operate in this context, Tronti argued, it would be necessary to ensure the ‘autonomy of the political struggle from that of the class’ and its organisations (Farris 2011: 47–48; Mandarini 2010: 183). The incapacity of the working class to ‘dominate’ the relations of production at the level of the workplace leads Tronti (2020) to suggest a shift in focus to the terrain of state politics, where the political institutions of the working class – namely, political parties – would have autonomy to win power. This would be achieved through various means non-coincident with a narrowly economistic interpretation of class interest, the latter satisfied instead by other forms of class struggle – via trade unions, for instance – granted their own reciprocal autonomy to operate antagonistically and independently of formal politics (Anastasi & Mandarini 2020). This separation, Tronti (2020) thought, would renew workerist politics by recuperating how reformist social democracy combined ‘a quotidian Menshevik tactic’ of advancing class struggle through an acceptance of ‘given conditions’ with ‘an ideology of pure principle’ that sought to comprehensively reform ‘those conditions themselves’ (Mandarini 2010: 180).

Tronti’s reformist turn should be viewed in light of his political context. The concept of the ‘autonomy of the political’ was addressed to ‘a reality in which the driving-force of the economic ... had ceased to offer an adequate conceptualisation of social change’. The ultimately political interventions of transatlantic governments in the context of crisis and hot and cold wars had produced the Fordist-Keynesian compromise. By the early seventies this compromise was collapsing, and with it the workers’ movement. This ‘decreasing autonomy of the social’, Tronti thought, created space for transformative political interventions based on workers’ organisations engaging at the level of the state (Farris 2011: 42–45; Mandarini 2010: 180). Tronti saw possible grounds for this intervention in the ‘historical compromise’ struck between the Communist Party (PCI) and the Christian Democrats in Italy in the early seventies. Influenced by popular-frontism and Eurocommunism, the PCI sought to strengthen democracy and ‘confront the radicalisation of social struggles and movements in Italy’. In ‘mourning for the labour movement’, then, Tronti came to ‘identify politics’ with the ‘state form’ and the ‘terrain of state-mediation as the only possible level of political confrontation’ (Farris 2011: 58; Mezzadra 2011: 993). This would result in Tronti occupying leading roles and eventually electoral office for the PCI and its more centrist successor parties – as he put it, ‘engaging in opposition from the heights of government, driven by a politics of responsibility and conviction’. These principles would serve as the ‘loci’ where the ‘future of the Left’ could
be rescued (Farris 2011: 31–32, 49). As contemporary autonomists navigate shifting boundaries with social-democratic party politics in recent years, Tronti’s experience may hold lessons for those making similar leaps today.

Analytically underpinning this practical politics, Tronti advocated the critical use of ‘bourgeois science’, which he thought understood the character of struggles with a sophistication ‘often ahead of thinking on the Left’ (Mandarini 2010: 184). In this regard, Tronti saw ‘enemy-thought’ otherwise ‘inimical to the perspectives and presuppositions of Marxism and the working-class movement’ as indispensable for plugging gaps in the analytical, practical and political resources they offered. Tronti’s embrace of bourgeois theory was thus all part of his attempt to escape the ‘petrified forest of vulgar Marxism’ (cited in Farris 2011: 32–35). In this embrace of non-materialist perspectives, Tronti could be read as suggesting a ‘politicism’ just as deterministic as the ‘economism’ of orthodox Marxism (Farris 2013: 199), in that it appears to swap the ‘primacy of the political forces’ for those of the material and economic. However, Tronti’s account is more contingent than this would allow, stressing the primacy of different elements at different points in time, and relativising the merits of materialist analyses according to the character of their context.

In this last respect, Tronti’s search for alternative analytical tools was a response to changing circumstances. Historical materialism, according to Tronti, was limited by its status as a ‘product of early capitalism’, superseded as politics became more specialist, more complex and more autonomous from the economic (Farris 2011: 43–44). In order for the left to be politically successful, it was necessary to realise the different terrain for class struggle that this historical shift affords, which Tronti saw Marx as having been in the wrong place at the wrong time to articulate. Whereas ‘early capitalism’ had provided the social conditions for a theory of the coincidence of politics with economics, the growing conflict between workers and capitalists and sophistication of the state with the rise of industrial capitalism saw the emergence of a ‘professional political elite’ responsible for the ‘management of power’ by means of a capacity for mediating between capital and labour. Out of this mediating function and its milieu arises an ‘art’ and ‘science’ of politics – arguably represented today in what is called ‘political science’ – that it is incumbent upon the left to embrace not simply as a window on the economic, but as an end in itself (Farris 2013: 188–189). Our current period, while characterised by significant material and economic ruptures, sees politics increasingly overdetermine economics owing to upheaval at both the national and geopolitical level. Perhaps, the progression of Tronti’s operaist thought suggests, a different theoretical toolbox – including something resembling a critical political science of and for the left – is required to understand the relationship between the politics of production and politics proper.

**Conclusion**

Being a ‘militant concept’, class composition does not map easily onto mainstream programmes of data collection around social and economic phenomena, nor political programmes of electoral coalition-building (Dyer-Witheford 2015: 131). But this does not stop such connections being made among the recently electoralist left. In this context, the historical and contemporary claims of CCA place an unanswered onus on advocates
to show how its ‘all-embracing categories’ can produce compelling empirical insights on working-class political subjectivity, whether in the workplace or the social factory at large (Wright 2002: 224). Whatever the strategic consequences, the contemporary approaches charted in this article undoubtedly represent influential and cutting-edge steps in this direction, united by their attempts to update CCA in dialogue with operaismo in order to encounter concrete generational, financial and technological trends. There is profound strategic relevance for the future of the left in their identification of pivotal productive subjectivities and locations in the circuit of capital where power can be built and leverage exerted. However, as argued above, they sustain fundamental theoretical issues that have blighted CCA since its inception, namely a tendency to blur the lines between the actions of workers and their unions, on one hand, and the organisations and institutions of party politics and the state, on the other, obscuring the concrete (dis)articulation of the economic and the political. Situating the definition of class composition on the expansive terrain of the social weakens the analytical specificity granted different spheres of activity, to the detriment of strategy.

As argued elsewhere (Thompson et al. 2022) these returns to CCA fail to reckon with its substantial record of failure in the Italian context, and inadequately capture the contoured reality of class politics in contemporary Britain. This earlier argument was mainly justified on the basis of history and demography rather than deep theoretical fundamentals. Developing it further, this article has offered a theoretical critique of CCA rooted in countervailing autonomist approaches to the critique of political economy, in order to clear the way for the proposal of an alternative that bridges to the important empirical and conceptual terrain CCA covers, but using different ontological and epistemological coordinates. Where traditional Marxism has tended to see politics hinging on the economic, and CCA extrapolates the logic of class struggle and social movements to the political sphere, LPT agnostically withdraws from analysis of politics altogether, making only a necessarily limited, and occasionally effective, claim to the investigation of the politics of production alone. It is Tronti’s recently rediscovered ‘political’ turn, launched both within and against CCA, that provides the positive strategic orientation towards politics as an autonomous sphere of activity lacking in these other strands.

Tronti’s conceptualisation is flexible enough to capture how the real story of post-crisis politics in Britain has been the unpredictable autonomy of class politics from narrowly economic concerns, as demonstrated in the Brexit referendum and ensuing political realignment of the ‘Red Wall’ (see Telford & Wistow 2020), which saw 39% of members of the United Kingdom’s then-largest trade union, Unite, vote Conservative (Osborne 2020). In the context of the left’s electoral turn, where workers organisations and social movements became increasingly tied to their mediation and representation in the parliamentary sphere, Tronti’s work suggests the strategic importance of keeping struggles separate. Rather than maintaining an analysis or strategy based on collapsing the distinction between the economic and the political, or subordinating struggles in one sphere to those of the other, it is possible to envisage a way forward for both the Labour Party and the labour movement to advance their aims independently across the different ‘engines’ that for Tronti concurrently drive capitalist society.

The shape of such a settlement is already discernible in the change of direction effected under Unite’s new leadership, hailing from its Organising and Leverage
Department and elected by rank-and-file members over an establishment political machine. On a ‘back to the workplace’ basis, Unite has reduced funding to Labour on the rationale that party politics represents no ‘saviour’ for the labour movement and no ‘substitute for shop-floor organising’ (Maguire 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). Meanwhile, in a period of intensifying industrial strife, the Labour Party is left to chart its own sometimes countervailing path through the combination of material and cultural factors that underpin electoral success (see, for example, Clarke 2022), with increasing dividends at the time of writing. Of course, the workplace remains a central locus for the articulation of the economic and the political. But its consequences for the formal electoral sphere are contingent and unpredictable. In this sense, the left ‘political science’ that Tronti suggests we source from bourgeois theory may provide a surer way to analytically and strategically reconnect workplace dynamics with political behaviour (see, for example, Gallego & Kurer 2022) than anything offered by contemporary compositionist thinking.

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Author’s note

This article represents an individual contribution to a continuing collaboration on similar themes with Jon Cruddas, Jo Ingold and Paul Thompson (Cruddas et al. 2021; Pitts et al. 2022; Thompson et al. 2022), and rehearses arguments to be presented in a slightly different form in Pitts (2022).

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