

## ***Life stories and formation of subordinate subjectivity. Note on social research in Italy by Danilo Montaldi***

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**Abstract:** The social research performed by Danilo Montaldi (1929-1975) represented an interpretation of great interest in understanding the transformations of neo-capitalism between the 1950's and 1960's. In the ambit of a very critical militancy towards the traditional forms of political participation, his attention to subordinates is marked, in our view, by a significant pedagogical aspect. On the one hand, in fact, he focuses on the political and social processes through which subordinate subjectivity is formed, with particular regard to the role played by the institutions, while on the other hand, he examines strategies with regard to his own emancipation from that condition of oppression, based on the idea of education intended as liberation. Where the educational commitment and political commitment merge in the same project of reconstruction of society, looking beyond the drifts of neocapitalism in view of a world capable of recognizing the rights of all respecting each other's differences. This, as has been observed by several commentators, seems to be the most significant legacy of Danilo Montaldi's intellectual commitment.

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### **1. The dark side of the economic miracle**

Used for the first time in the English newspaper, *The Daily Mail*, in May 1959, the expression «economic miracle» in reference to the strong economic growth that was being experienced in Italy soon became the standard term used by historians and the like to identify the transformation of a poor, mainly rural, nation into a global industrial power.

If in 1958 the percentage of industrial workers exceeded those working in agriculture, this was due to a progressive decline from 8 million in 1954 to 5 million 10 years later, which in turn was also preceded by a period where premises, far from planned and ordered, were built in preparation for the launch of the industrial

system, combined with the migratory phenomena that invested heavily in the country, inciting 25 million Italians between 1955 and 1975 to move to the industrial areas<sup>1</sup>. A vast reserve army able to, at least in a primary phase, guaranteed low- cost labour, often without any form of union support, resulting in a shift in social balances and inaugurating a new season of conflict between ruling and working classes.

If it is true, for example, that between 1960 and 1962, in full economic boom, there was a sharp increase in working class combativeness, this also resulted in a four-fold annual increase in strikes, as well as the cyclic battles at the end of the 1970s that signalled a significant increase in quality, when a new historic entity, the mass workers, in part the offspring of the migrants from the south of Italy, gained the limelight and initiated social and political claims for many unprecedented perspectives.

The in-depth changes did not only include, of course, production methods, but also the social relationships that these brought forth, as well as the very identity of the nation under all aspects, from economic and social to anthropological and cultural points of view. Furthermore, changes to the landscape were intense, especially when the housing boom began in the 1950s with its unstoppable and disorderly cementation, often without planning permission, in a race to meet the housing needs of steep demographic growth and internal migrations, especially around large cities, to the point where it disturbed the urban profile of those same cities.

Turin is an excellent example, as this is where the majority of the FIAT factories were located and therefore represented one of the most important destinations for migrant workers. The city grew from a population of 719,300 in 1951 to 1,025,822 just ten years later and over a fifteen-year period saw its *hinterland* expand by 80%<sup>2</sup>.

Apart from the structural aspect of the city, the truly significant changes were related to the everyday life of its inhabitants, who were, as never before, encouraged to buy cheap consumer goods while new cultural models were imported that radically

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<sup>1</sup> Beyond conventions and their unavoidable simplifications that confined the economic boom in the transition between the 1950's and 1960's, historical perspective needs to be widened to gain greater awareness of the problem and consider the many controversial facets by which it is characterized. «In strictly quantitative terms [...] for the five-year period 1958-63, one should not speak of an economic boom: the development and availability of resources are simply acceleration, very sensitive but not clamorous, of the expansive process begun in 1951-52 [...]. What in fact happened in Italy between 1958 and 1963 is a series of previously incubated phenomena, linked by a causal relationship – albeit not always straightforward – that totally changed the country and despite the recession of 1964-65, prevailed until at least 1970». Cfr. Lanaro (1992, p. 223). In other respects, it is appropriate to point out the imbalances that accompanied this great transformation, precisely from the absence of orientation and programming apt to preempt critical situations. «One of the most remarkable aspects of the economic miracle was its spontaneous character. [...] The “boom” followed its own logic, responding directly to the free play of market forces, which resulted in deep structural imbalances. The first of these was the so-called distortion of consumption. Export-driven growth entailed an emphasis on private, often luxury, consumer goods, without the development of public consumption. Schools, hospitals, homes, transport and all primary necessity goods remained far behind the growth of the production of private consumer goods» Cfr Ginsborg (1989, pp. 291-292). As there is substantial literature on this subject, for a detailed study of the historical contingency in question, see Crainz (1997) and Castronovo (2010).

<sup>2</sup> A book with significant proximity to Montaldi's work regarding the southern immigration to Turin was published in 1964. See Fofi (1964).

changed traditional ways of both thinking and living. The cinema and television played an important role in depicting the multiple aspects of life and culture in this new industrial era, representing an ideological bond within the process of standardization from which a new type of subjectivity was formed and modelled.

Such a rapid and profound transformation induced some, if not all as far as Pier Paolo Pasolini was concerned, to consider what was happening as a complete anthropological mutation. In the space of a few years, in fact, a country that still largely conformed to the cultural codes of peasant civilization witnessed an explosion of possibilities and changes to lifestyles that had until recently never before been contemplated.

The growth, though irregular, of pro capita income, which gave Italians access to consumer goods mainly destined towards ever growing exports, was so dramatic that it signalled a dramatic split due to the effect it had on the daily life of the population.

A few figures give a clearer idea of the situation. If in 1958 369,000 cars, 10,000 washing machines and 500,000 refrigerators were produced, by 1963 production of the same goods had reached 1,105,000, 1,263,000 and 2,187,000 respectively.

An emblematic case is that of the television, which as of this period contributed decisively to model not only the imaginary but also the new modes of relationship inside and outside the family, which in turn significantly accelerated the social atomization process that changed the very identity of the population. *More televisions than phones in Italy* is the title of an article published in the newspaper *Il Giorno* in 1966, which stated that the 5 million televisions owned by Italians easily exceeded the number of telephones (4.2 million) in homes across the country.

Such figures certainly say something about the changes that were taking place and that have been examined many times over the years that followed with regard not only to macro-economic and social processes but also from the analysis of subjective experiences, a very precious indicator aimed at understanding the phenomenon in every detail including the training methods that were applied within educational institutions. How did the lives of the population change? How did collective imagination transform and conform in relation to the new cultural models? How were social opportunities perceived in these years of «novelty and great things»?<sup>3</sup> How was subjective functionality formed with regard to these profound transformations?

Naturally these questions transcend the most circumscribed objectives of this article, though they have a significant bearing on the problem, as they contribute to highlighting the complexity of a historical passage in which the price paid for modernization was high with many a contradiction along the way, also in reference to educational issue that deepen the advent of the consumer society.

Promised as a new golden era, the country's industrialization continued under unequal economic growth, which broadened as opposed to narrowing the distance between social classes, even in the context of mobility in many unpublished ways, which emphasized and remixed certain imbalances, such as the divide that separates

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<sup>3</sup> Allusion is made to the title of a recent work that, precisely from the use of the life stories deposited in the National Archives of Pieve Santo Stefano, reconstructs the profile of the economic miracle from the point of view of subjects, even of different ages, that lived it firsthand. Cfr Gabrielli (2011).

the north from the south, the city from the countryside, the centre from the periphery. All this in a reality was rapidly changing, where «consumerism was superseded by supreme deity» (Lanaro, 1992, p. 258), but culminated in uniting the country far more than politics and the institutions while fuelling the progressive levelling of tastes and lifestyles as had never happened before. The pursuit of integration thus became an objective capable of uniting existences from various backgrounds, linked by the need to adapt behaviours and practices of living to the new demands of social and cultural information, also at the cost of giving up significant pieces of their own identity, as is the case with many migrants in industrialized areas. This great transformation literally changed social geography, producing phenomena that became the symbol of mass-making processes, such as the anonymous crowd of the big city, moving in unison, repeating the same gestures every day, sinking into that message that certain pages of *The integration* by Luciano Bianciardi documented with scathing and bitter irony. Aspiration towards the middle class spread to a large extent within society, bringing forth, alongside the new mass dynamics resulting from the transformation in progress, certain vices deeply rooted in the country's history, such as conformism, opportunism, hypocrisy and cynicism, the main elements of that «aggregate without identity and location» which, in the opinion of Paolo Sylos Labini (1976), constitute the average Italian middle class, where individuals were inclined towards finding a cushy position within the production sector with the sole aim of creating a niche in which to safeguard personal privileges. Thus,

the «non-class» accustomed to despise all flags (unless required to hide behind) became the backbone of the nation though renegade in terms of values. Christian Democrat in the Veneto Region and Communist in Emilia or Tuscany, the «cushy worker» became the typical Italian by antonomasia: tastes and cowardice dictating law while the press and television satisfied even the most capricious humour and the film industry and literature of the time depicted a rather sarcastic and derisive portrait that was secretly enjoyed (Lanaro, 1992, p. 276).

This mediocre triumph not only endorsed the country in terms of tastes, lifestyles, and individual and collective behaviours, but also came at the expense of new forms of social exclusion and widespread removal of the costs of modernization itself that not even great and symptomatic tragedies, such as that of Vajont, succeeded in scathing away. There was an entire Italy to be removed on the road to social progress, a whole past to be quickly archived to succeed in keeping pace with the times (Crainz, 2003, p. 7). The economic miracle is also this: the need to clear the field from what constitutes an obstacle on the path of modernization, rejecting in the margins those realities that are refractory to the controversial social assimilation processes that characterize the historical passage in question. What is ultimately obscured is the existence of subordinate subjectivity that is struggling to enter new production and consumption circuits, which in many cases are outside the political and trade union organizations called upon to act in the interests of their constituents. Represented as a legacy of a past ideologically understood as backwardness, but in reality derived from the modes of production of neocapitalism, subordinate

subtleties testify to the dramatic tension between old and new social models as a sign of laceration revealing the dark side of the economic miracle and highlighting the structural imbalances that cross it. Well-documented since the 1950s, in addition to the unmistakable ethnographic work of Ernesto De Martino, are both the researches of Rocco Scotellaro on Southern Peasants and those of Danilo Dolci of Banditi in Partinico: these constitute early examples of attempts to give voice to marginalized people through direct testimonies. The result is that of a social reality far removed from the story that a few years ago took form as a hegemonic discourse on the reality of the country, made of misery, poverty and social inequalities. This reality will remain for long, far beyond the moment of history in question. Problems, however, that concern not only the South, but which invest in many other realities, and that the new migratory waves disintegrate in their consolidated set-up, define a new social and anthropological geography whose complexity emerges from the rhetoric of «Integration» and the same mythology of the economic miracle.

## 2. Immigrants...

In the 1960s, Feltrinelli published a book destined towards a certain notoriety that is still consulted today with regard to the historical reconnaissance of post-war migratory phenomena: *Milan, Corea. Investigation of the immigrants (Milano, Corea. Inchiesta sugli immigrati)* by Franco Alasia and Danilo Montaldi.

Based on a suggestion by Dolci, whose book *Waste* (Spreco) had been published by Einaudi in 1960, the investigation of the immigrants included thirty-five transcribed life stories, collected by Alasia, of people who had arrived in the Lombard capital in the 1950's or were still directly concerned by the migratory phenomenon. The long essay that comments the life stories was written by Danilo Montaldi<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Danilo Montaldi, born in Cremona in 1929, began his first steps on the front of political commitment from the end of the Resistance, joining Italy's Socialist Party when he was very young to later abandon it in 1946 in favour of the Internationalist Communist Party. In the 1950's, a path of political militancy intensified with that of intellectual engagement, and which, although rooted in local affairs, confirmed the birth of the Proletarian Unity Group in 1957, with Romano Alquati and Gianfranco Fiameni, with a view to widening his horizons, as the ongoing relationship with the «Socialisme ou Barbarie» group and with other international realities showed. A collaborator of various magazines such as «Opinioni», «Ragionamenti», «Avanti», «Battaglia comunista», Montaldi participated in the debate on Marxism and Social Sciences matured in Italy, especially after the events of 1956. Editor for Feltrinelli, and translator of works on working culture, in the 1960's he gained popularity with social surveys dedicated to immigrants, the world of *hustlers* and basic militants. While in many respects the positions of the workers, as well as in his friendship with Renato Panzieri, and considered by some to be among the founders of the new left, he still remains a secluded figure in many singular ways, also because of his many and differentiated intellectual interests. As a sign of consistent internationalism, his research on worker subjectivity is in fact independent of other more noted elaborations on all of Mario Tronti's work, starting with the radical criticism of the traditional political and trade union organizations of the Left, which progressively moves away from the real needs of the working class. Danilo Montaldi died in the spring of 1975 in Roja Valley on the border between Italy and France. For further biographical aspects see *The History of the Life and Works of Danilo Montaldi*, curated by Gabriella Montaldi Seelhorst. Present in Montaldi (1994, pp. VII-XIIIV) and now also available in the monographic number of «Parolechiave» dedicated to Montaldi. See Montaldi Seelhorst (2007, pp. 155-180). This is the last edition that henceforth will be referred to.

The result was a long essay which not only provided a detailed description of the reality of the Coree and the urban agglomerations that grew disorganized at the margins of the city right from the years of the Korean War, from which they take the name<sup>5</sup>, but also provided literature on the phenomenon in contradiction to those usually given, questioning many of the clichés that accompanied reflection and research on internal emigration. Meanwhile, there is a refusal of certain economic and social problems associated with the South of Italy that relies on the usual reason given – the feudal residue as a cause of the tumultuousness of many areas of the South – without considering the incidence of capitalist production methods in the modern and contemporary age. Hence for Montaldi, the need to forestall the risk of interpreting immigration as the natural destiny of social realities from a neo-colonial regime baptized as fatally backward and that civilization would be called upon to redeem from that condition. It is therefore to avoid projecting phenomena into a sort of timelessness that prevents reading their historical and social dynamism, thus subtracting grounds for debate, not without moralistic resonances, of bourgeois ideology, as confirmed by the controversy with Francesco Compagna after the release of the book<sup>6</sup>.

This is an aspect upon which the Montaldian analysis constantly returns, not just with regard to immigration, but all the forms of sub-alternity and marginalization that come from a capitalist society. In fact, the intention is to stage the immanent dialectic of social phenomena, as this is the condition that allows for the understanding of the true dynamics beyond conventional and accommodating representations.

Negative are the causes of migration, positive is that they leave. This social dynamic is animated by its own internal dialectics. The pioneers of neo-capitalism find themselves in agreement with the most backward part of conservatism in Italy in presenting mass urbanism as the product of a superior way of social organization and coexistence. Turning back the wheels of history this movement needs as if it were a new prospect of well-being, a symptom of the resources of the system, when it is, on the contrary, the index of social regression, wreaking havoc in the production system and relationships between the city and agricultural areas (Montaldi, 2010, pp. 36-37).

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<sup>5</sup> For example, this passage where Montaldi describes the houses of the «Corea» recounting also something of great significance concerning the social hierarchies that come to be established among the migrants: «The house is built like a cube of concrete, but what you see outside does not say anything; The house begins with the cellar, it is the cellar that allows the construction of the house because it is immediately rented to a family that does not have all the money to build on its own; «A family lives in a cellar, the landlord's family on the ground floor: there are two rooms and a broom cupboard, or a room with a partition. The following year, if things go well, the immigrant has added the first floor, where he will move to. The tenants of the cellar move to the ground floor and the cellar is sublet to a new family that has just arrived» (Montaldi, 2010, p. 59).

<sup>6</sup> Hard comments from Francesco Compagna, director of the magazine North & South «Nord e Sud» and then a prominent political figure in the years that follow who, with regard to *Milano, Corea*, expressed a far from flattering opinion to which Montaldi responded. For further reading see Quagliotti, (2010, pp. 323-327).

In this respect, one aspect of the investigation identifies specificity in a rather significant way, which is of importance to our discourse, especially as it focuses on the weight, certainly not irrelevant, of individual choice. That is to say, unlike other similar surveys, in *Milan, Corea*, «those immigrant peasants thought of what Fordism in the North could give them and not only for the peasant poverty they came from, that is to say with great care for their expectations» (Bermani, 1998, p. 91). This is of great interest in the dynamics through which subordinate subjectivity is formed, highlighting the conflicts that arise when there is a strong discrepancy between the cultivated expectations and the reality faced by immigrants. This is a discrepancy in which anger and disillusion grow, fuelling deviant behaviour as individuals slide towards the margins of social reality while also creating conditions that allow for various forms of exploitation and marginalization that arise from the Neocapitalis. This reality is confirmed, as we shall see, by the controversial relationship between immigrants and institutions investigated by Montaldi.

A few years later, the journalist Giorgio Bocca performed an inquiry entitled «The Italian factory» (*La fabbrica degli italiani*) which underlines the many criticalities of migratory phenomena, highlighting aspects that, although from a different premise, show a significant correlation with Montaldi's arguments<sup>7</sup>. In fact, the image of the «resigned pioneer» as a counterclaim to the mythical figure of the American epic is not only a suggestive literary expedient to recount the reality of the Coree, but it is also functional in emphasizing a particularly interesting aspect, overturning the view of those who complain about the imbalances brought about in northern Italy by immigration, to emphasize the effect industrialization had on the migrants themselves.

To the many questions that were posed regarding the negative consequences of migratory flows on the northern society, Bocca responded with other, more radical questions. He responded with an overwhelmingly useful and healthy overturn which is still pertinent today: what failures does industrialization, in its actual operation, induce in these same streams? (Crainz, 2010, p. XIII).

A shift of perspective that allows one to focus on the formative dimension of this complex phenomenon, on which Montaldi, in the context of a militant search that looks at the conditions for a dialectical overthrow that redeems the condition of sub-alternship, brings significant attention to the awareness that right from the investigation of individual life, the ways in which, in the broader network of social relationships, subordinate subjectivity is created. In this sense, the use of life stories is a particularly precious instrument, as it allows for the detection of both the typical

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<sup>7</sup> Part of the investigation is of course related to the Milanese industrial belt. In an article published in *Il Giorno*, Giorgio Bocca expresses this: «The city areas are hostile and agrarian in much the same way as America was during its conquest: the same deprivation, infamy, suffering, disappointment; Here like in the Far West a generation of risk takers, that build their houses overnight and risk everything they own. But those who think that a new Italian can be born here, hopeful and proud of his adventure, as in America, are probably wrong [...] Pioneers along the belt lack the Emersonian trust that success is linked to merit. We will have resigned pioneers». *Cfr.* Bocca (1963).

motives that share the subjectivity and the peculiarities that each of them brings. Life stories also allow us to unveil the ideological apparatus that ingests subjectivity in preordained schemes that function to stabilize the system.

The initiative of «touching base» through life story research offers, finally, the advantage of redeeming from the particular, connecting with the rest of society, a whole field of interagency relations on which the prejudice and the organized closure of the majorities strikes (Montaldi, 2010, p. 131).

The use of life stories in sociological research in Italy is not new. Consider the pioneering work of Alessandro Pizzorno on co-research, in which Montaldi was, not out of coincidence, particularly interested. In fact the Cremona intellectual has his own peculiarities that have a lot to do with the militant dimension of research, whose meaning must be understood from the complex relationships that sociology had with Marxism in the 1950s (Lopez, 2013). Used beyond rigid constraints such as grids, questionnaires, and modules, typical of a functionalistic sociology from which he was estranged, Montaldi's life stories take form through the direct account by the protagonists themselves, with neither censorship nor direction by the researcher, who does not advance the claim of a point of view other than the reality expressed by the subject he is talking about. His task is to correlate the specific story with the social relations into which it is inserted and expressed. «In fact, there are no language barriers (nor flattery) between the interviewer and the story teller» (Montaldi, 1971, p. 363), as was written in the preface of an Inquiry in Cremona (*Inchiesta nel cremonese*) published in 1956, as he distanced himself from the claims of neutrality advanced by bourgeois sociology.

Of course, the language that is shared by the interviewer and the story teller is not merely a point to draw from, a static and time-long immutable element, but the outcome of a shared construction that moves from a «scientific-political» premise rather than a «psychological-ethical» one (Campelli, 1977, p. 36), in order to build a form of knowledge that is always bound to the perspective of social transformation. This is one of the fundamental principles of co-research, of which Montaldi is considered a precursor (Merli, 1977, p. 59).

Without prejudice to the plurality of models that characterize it, as well as to the intrinsic difficulty of providing a unique definition, being a project whose «open processuality is its fundamental modality» (Alquati 1993, p. 12), the Montaldian co-research presents a number of peculiarities which directly lead to the question of the formative dimension of political action. Strongly critical of the PCI, that Montaldi sees as being caught between Stalinization and reformism and by the progressive bureaucratization of its apparatus, he perceives militancy in a revolutionary perspective in view of a social transformation that moves from below, from a close confrontation with the life and everyday routines of subordinates, aware of the enormous difficulties that this process entails.

Montaldi, in fact,

had no false hopes of being able to unify the multiplicity of languages and disciplines and instruments of different knowledge into a single metalanguage



and an ultra-potent political discourse that, in terms of revolution, could speak, say, instantly instigate the exit from and the alternative to capitalism. Despite the importance it gave to insurrectional moments, including armed struggle (though not terrorism), he thought of revolution as a long process, in which not only the state but also the classes, and therefore also «the class» would become extinct together with its current skills and much of its culture, and subjectivity! In this multiple, multifaceted process, it was crucial that the various subcultures and collective subjectivities of the various parts of the long struggle changed. The processes of formation within the struggle and within the transformation itself (Alquati, 1994, p. 125).

It is therefore in this dimension that the problem of formation is to be clarified for Montaldi, understood also by the depletion of Gramsci, purified by the normalization of Togliatti, in the perspective of a Marxist-Leninism which centred on the problem of the relation between masses and intellectuals, a circular process in which the educator is also educated, breaking with the unidirectional verticality of the bourgeois framework. So much so that

he continually repeated the phrase *What can you do?*. «The educator must be educated»: educated not so much from above in a politically orientated school but in the everydayness of knowledge and experience of the actual situations of class (even subjective) movements [...] And in the sense of a circularity to only those who (in a sense) had actually gone to school from the class in question could then assume to educate the class (Alquati 1994, p 127).

In this sense, Montaldian social research, in its concrete practice, does not seem to refer to the necessity of translating into a clearly codified method, nor does it wish to take on the role of a sociological research model, if it is true, listening to a rough admonition by Sergio Bologna, that «there is no meaner action than to name him a sociologist, to attempt to identify or translate his “direct” stories» (Bologna, 1975, p. 34). Rather, it appears to be a «form of life» (Luca Rossi Initiative Centre, Milan, 1998, p. 142), rooted in the dialectic of social processes, according to the intention of their transformation, always shifting from needs and aspirations that arise from the real life of the subjects: from the knowledge of their daily life in the dimension of alienation that distinguishes it.

For this reason the memories gathered in *Milan, Corea* are not only linked to the need to know the biographies of immigrants before they arrive in the city, but also to know the ways in which their lives are transformed into a new reality and how, in turn, they help to modify it. We would say more explicitly how subordinate subjectivity takes shape in view of the social and cultural dynamics in which it acts and is in turn agitated. In this respect, it is of extreme interest to analyse the ways and forms of discomfort experienced by immigrants extraneous to the integration processes, expelled from the urban context and literally pushed to its margins experience. This is in reference to the social relationships they have with other forms of sub-alternity both in reference to what they establish with the institutions they come into contact

with. The two aspects are naturally linked to each other which together contribute to modelling their subjectivity.

In fact, the immigrant who slides into the extreme forms of discomfort, coming into contact with the world's destitute people, experiences a descent into a hell that has specific peculiarities that need to be taken into account to understand the dynamics from which it is crossed.

The fact that an immigrant builds his own cabin in the area surrounding the hovels of beggars does not mean that there is the same fracture of values and norms that is found in the layers of the fallen population of the city. And yet, it's never a coincidence. The two orders are never indifferent to each other, nor run smoothly and in parallel (Montaldi, 2010, p. 132).

This is how new balances are defined in the field of marginality, which strongly changes its composition not only in material terms, but also supplies a repertoire of tensions, prejudices and representations that alter the expectations of migrants, forcing them to reposition themselves in the social fabric, witnessing the betrayal of many of their expectations. This process is not just about those who, since their arrival, have a rather violent and traumatic impact on urban reality and are in a situation of indigence, immediately occupying the bottom of the social scale, but also about those who end up, for the most diverse reasons, living at a lower class than that which they had anticipated:

There are former graduate employees (40-50 years old) who after losing their jobs and running out of money have continued to lose other things: their homes, family consideration, esteem from others due to their need, and then a part of their own self-esteem, to then find themselves at the Municipal Assistance Office, where they differ from the context because they try to group, because they still read the newspapers because they do not want to stay in the environment for long. But their fallen status can last, however, for years (Montaldi, 2010, p. 120).

Finding themselves in the public service network, they are forced to radically question their identities, mirroring the many and differentiated forms of marginality, becoming themselves a new and significant branch.

Near former prisoners [...] Thieves, people who have illnesses or have lost their minds, beggars, elderly people, labourers that are no longer used to working, alcoholics, others selling their own blood, traffickers, scammers, young people who cannot find a stable job as they do not have a «clean slate», that come from Beccaria, and immigrants who get by as they can [...] Those assisted, in this way, are constantly monitored on a day by day basis. An existence regulated by timetables, stamps, controls and fines which up over time further alters the already shaken personality of those seeking shelter (Montaldi, 2010, pp. 117-118).

If the grip of social assistance tightens around the immigrant through constraints and norms that function as control devices of their existence, moulding their personality to fully conform to the assisted social role, it is then that the whole relationship with the institutions, since his arrival, creates a strongly contradictory dimension under this point of view. It is sufficient to consider that until 1961 a fascist law, which had been in force since 1939, aimed at discouraging internal migration, bound residency to employment. This law created a legislative shortcut that resulted in intensifying the social plight of submerged labour, as confirmed by the network of co-operatives run by early immigrants aimed at the orientation of new arrivals into the world of work: more or less explicit forms of gang master systems that set new social hierarchies and new relationships of power. In other respects, it should be remembered how the inadequacy of town planning legislation allowed for the proliferation of the *Corea* on the margins of the city. If the absence of rules in this regard ends up securing privileges for some, and «*Corea* is always a contradiction, set up and held together by the junctures of profit» (Montaldi, 2010, p. 95), then it is necessary to keep account of the effects, not just the material, that this ghettoization produces on subjective experiences, their self-representations and expectations, relationships with other migrants and with the local ones and the regressive dynamics that it triggers. In fact, «*Corea* remains a city by way of exclusion. Everyone tends to isolate themselves» (Montaldi, 2010, p. 75)

It is also from these contradictions that arise within the institutions, which thus consolidate the subordinate condition, which, in the most extreme cases, for those whose integration process is particularly difficult, is likely to end up in a rut in which one becomes accustomed to consider existence as a simple fulfilment of elementary needs without any aspirations for change. Thus, «it can be seen how the condition of the assisted, lost in the metropolis, is taken by the subject itself not as a possibility, but rather as the only one to live» (Montaldi, 2010, p. 146). With these analyses, Montaldi gets to the root of the problems that lie behind the mirage of integration, highlighting the vast repertoire of contradictions that accompany industrialization itself, showing how subordinate subjectivity, far from being considered under a cloudy lens, as a remnant of development, are actually structural elements of neo-capitalistic production modes. By giving them a voice, Montaldi not only depicts their subjective experience but highlights the reach in the broader social and political sphere in which they are inserted, as members of a social class, whose historical events assume a paradigmatic value.

All of Italy passes through a network of words, men and women, a class, «people born in the midst of meadows by mothers», a creator of values. The waste of energies, the specializations overrun, the *gaspillage* are entertained by the system. The problem of internal emigration is not resolved by immigrants. Much of the immigrants go blank between the various law articles that make up the obstacle, which defend the city from «downgrading». But even their whole life, for deeper causes, is likely to turn empty. (Montaldi, 2010, p. 146).

### 3. ...Margins and political militants

On these existences that are likely to turn empty, but also on their transformative and breaking potential with regard to a reality felt as adversary, Montaldi takes note, as is well-known, in two other volumes, which, even after ten years one from the other, are the result of research that has matured simultaneously and belongs to the same political and cultural project. Both published by Einaudi, respectively in 1961 and 1971, *Autobiographies of the hustlers* (*Autobiografie della leggera*) and *Basic Political Militants* (*Militanti politici di base*) are usually associated by their commentators, as well as by the author himself, as texts that necessarily refer to each other. Two works in fact that «bring the friction points of the “great story” and the daily lives on the lower and rock-bottom social classes together» (Ferraris, 2007, p. 36).

Going beyond the representations of the proletariat as a homogeneous social class, compressed within the limits of a productivity that risks becoming the only parameter with which to identify it, the attention of Montaldi had been directed since the 1950s towards the exploration of those sub-proletarian environments that usually come out of the hegemonic images and speeches in the same tradition as the worker's movement. That is to say that the resulting subjectivity, for the most diverse reasons, is not only refractory to the processes of social assimilation of neo-capitalism but also difficult to separate from traditional political and trade union forces. Thieves, vagabonds, prostitutes, ex-prisoners, borderline characters of all kinds come to form a very composite social reality, that of the *hustlers*, who not only document forms of resistance to homologation in the name of codes coming from the past, but who also serve as proof of the imbalances produced by the social and economic changes in progress.

From moral capitalist and production points of view, these human realities are a sort of internal waste. From the point of view of sociological and materialistic knowledge, these lumpen protagonists of our time are to be regarded as the resultant human of social and environmental transformation and personal character instability, which in these cases led to a dissociation of approved and recognized conduct (Montaldi 1972, p. 29).

In *Autobiographies of the hustlers*, unlike *Milan*, *Corea*, the interviews are not aimed at discovering a specific reality such as the migratory reality, whether in autobiographical writings, collected by Montaldi himself, in which, without constraints and censures, unless by those who recount, their lives are told. Lives of subjects living on the edge, among the barracks built on the banks of the river Po and the suburbs of the province. These are difficult slopes: journeys that move on the boundary between legality and illegality, composed of precarious work and social relationships as unstable, even within codes that define in their own way an ethics and a recognizable representation of the world and of life, in many elementary aspects, interspersed with archaic aspects that derive from a peasant civilization, but not immune to the social and cultural transformations taking place; lives that come from far, among those born between the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries, who have crossed the fascist dictatorship, as in the case of Orlando P, the price of disagreement with years of confinement struggling to find their place in the world, also because they are often not particularly attracted to the discipline and the capitalist organization of work.

These are existences at the margins of society that certainly testify to a world that is disappearing, perhaps telling the end of a historic era rather than the beginning of a new one. Still, it would be misleading to consider these as being totally out of touch with the social processes of contemporaneity, or relegating them to the mythology of a peasant past thought to be static and immutable. Montaldi is well aware of the pervasiveness deriving from the new logic of production and consumption beyond the traditional forms of social belonging, as the boundaries between city and country are subverted by the profound changes that are going on, to how all in the end are living in that «anonymous and universal city exported by the mass media» (Montaldi, 1994, p. 195), hence the alienation from any form of hagiography, towards any type of populist yielding. There is no nostalgic evocation towards this disappearing world, rather the awareness of its full participation in the processes of anomie and alienation that accompany capitalist development. Their existences do not therefore constitute anthropologically irrefutable residues on the new forms of sociality and production. Instead, they are the outcome that reveals all the contradictions and the scope of injustice that development implies. It is not a coincidence that Montaldi's controversy, whether within his works or not, against the «mystics of the wild», concerns not only the conservative position, which compulsorily looks at the world of the *hustlers* in a moralistic way, with a feeling of superiority and perhaps contempt, but also has a lot to do with those who immediately take the people as bearers of instances in themselves to oppose the universe of bourgeois world values. Note, for example, his controversy over Gianni Bosio, who also belonged to a political and cultural world that was close to his own. Nicola Gallerano reminds us that for Montaldi it was not possible to think of «the islands of ignorance as resistance islands» (2007, p. 63). Montaldi does not think that the subordinate classes are apt to conceptualize, even if it is understood as antagonistic in itself, and is convinced that the meeting with culture, in its highest form, allows the appropriation of instruments able to undertake a process of liberation from all forms of enslavement and subordination. This is an aspect which applies to both the marginal and militant. To mark a significant difference, in many cases, is precisely the different approach to a cultural question, which the latter can experience as insufficient to fill in the name of belonging to a social and political affair that transcends it. Hence it is a shame to write of itself in the first place, where the former «has already taken on the rival also its own defects as an advantage» (Montaldi, 1972, p. 40). This very contradiction is what allows him to overcome the inhibition of his own cultural limits and desire to put his or her own life into writing.

Certainly, the appropriation of cultural instruments by subordinates is not thought of by Montaldi as a result of bourgeois liberalism, as an exercise to be carried out against the masses by those who think they can claim a sort of superiority towards them. He himself, on the other hand, does not see himself as totally alien to those subordinates who interpolate and interact with them. He points out Cesare Pavese's lesson, which shows appreciation for the one who «can live a drama of man in his

environment» (Montaldi, 1994, p. 203), because that environment is also his own and there is no fracture between his intellectual life and that of subordinate subjects with whom he tries to build a militant type of knowledge. There is no contradiction between his internationalism and the need to work in the local reality, in the Po Valley where he feels he belongs and will never abandon, so that «each remains in his own furrow, even when the walls have crumbled and it is almost indefensible» (Ferraris, 2007, p. 32). Once again, «the very important question of formation» (Alquati, 1994, p. 193) goes back to the need for a counter-formation that breaks the ideological encrustations and the mystifications of official knowledge, in view of a different kind of knowledge that is both functional to the transformation of Self and the world in which one lives. And here, within this particular model of conjecture, the use of life stories reveals its deepest meaning, as always, to have the dialectical dimension from which it is crossed.

Autobiographies and stories of life effectively reveal their usefulness when they recognize relativity, «inescapable and interesting partiality» in relation to an official vision that is based as much on uncontrolled common sense as it is on the passive acceptance of costume; They are reflected in the memories of the *lumpen* layer problems, conflicts, reports [...] that deny official, selected, classical versions, where the discourse ends up assailing the social set of our years (Montaldi, 1972, pp. 41-42).

Though Montaldi transcribed the life stories faithfully to the language of the writer, there is still a hint of critical reflection. Each of them, in fact, «is never given naked to the reader: it is always commented, dismantled and deconstructed, to gain all that it can give» (Gallerano, 2007, p. 61). Hence the restitution of a social reality like that of the *hustlers* by definition escapes any rigid and schematic cataloguing, in all the richness and complexity that passes through it, like not to mention, among others, the same Pasolini, affected by the density and originality of those life stories (Pasolini, 1977). Montaldi thus presents not so much then a world of lost survivors of history, relegated to a nostalgic memorialist, but life experiences fully inscribed in present historical history, reflecting all the tensions and contradictions of the ongoing transformations.

And it is precisely the theme of transformation that is of primary interest to Montaldi, certainly to unveil the mystic of the wild, but also with reference to the educational scope of the phenomenon in question<sup>8</sup>. This is with regard to the need to build a militant type of knowledge that radically takes on the problem of social transformation, as well as in the lives of the characters that are told, whose life stories are in fact the description of a training path: as Teuta becomes a delinquent,

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<sup>8</sup> This is emphasized in an essay by Paul Capuzzo which explicitly refers to the formative dimension of self-narrative, returning to the famous Leninist motif already mentioned: «Montaldi had no indulgence towards the authentic recovery of a sub-alternate voice that would have somewhat mystically hosted an antagonistic substance. His emphasis was explicitly from the point of view of the transformation, as an educator, yet of an educator who was to be taught by the class, according to Lenin's motto, which was particularly dear to him: "educators must be educated"». Cfr Capuzzo (2007, p. 52).

as Cicci becomes a prostitute, and as such paths interact with the wider sphere of social and cultural phenomena of their time. It means then, as in the case of political militants, to retreat to the pre-fascist era of their formation by bringing out the steps through which each one builds his own subjectivity. This, however, is in keeping with the attitude, well-rooted in the characters of the *hustlers*, through which a significant resistance to the very idea of transformation is made, precisely from a peculiar representation of temporality. «Within the fallen layers, the feeling of time seems to be rather the realization of a high collective and to some extent unalterable fixed memory» (Montaldi, 1972, p. 24).

Measuring with such resistance, which apparently has a lot to do with the need for an identity representation that compensates, perhaps with the emphasis on the adventurous dimension of one's own existence, the disillusionment of a lack of redemption, more, to deal with the partiality and the limits of those life stories. This certainly does not impede the peculiarities they are carrying, but suggests that it is necessary once again to relate it to the rest of society so that it can fully understand its scope. Even on the margins, the *hustlers* in their own way live like political militants conflicting with historical time. Unlike these, however, who have gained awareness of a procession they think they can identify causes and consequences, the *hustlers'* world retains a fatalism that tends to enrich the past rather than to imagine it as a dialectical phenomenon. How much this can be a sort of psychological defence mechanism or how much the outcome of a difficulty deriving from the environment is the fact that this bundle of memory is perhaps an irrelevant part of the way it determines their formation of subordinate subjects.

A different sign is the attitude of the basic political militant, of the other kind is the memory that accompanies it and that, without reticence, is delivered to the public dimension<sup>9</sup>. It will be noted, writes Montaldi at the opening of the volume, «that the engine from which these various consciences are animated is always a conflict with historical time, extending from political reasons to all norms of life and costume» (1971, P. XI). This is an affirmation from which, among many others, two or more considerations can be deduced.

The first concerns the fact that Montaldi himself points out that breakthroughs can be a decisive factor in the way in which subordinates learn about politics, because if it is true that in some cases there is a family tradition, a social environment at the base of militancy, in others there is a fracture towards the context of origin, in view of a commitment that can be realized independently. One element, obviously, to be taken into account as regards the process through which the political consciousness is formed.

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<sup>9</sup> The author considers both to belong to a single political and cultural project, rooted in the same social reality, that of the Cremona province, and what has emerged since the introduction of the volume dedicated to basic militants: «From this cumulative Socialist history, the writer has, for the first time, decided to begin with the knowledge of the most "humble human needs" (Hegel) and met with the documentation from the "hustlers", this time – in comparing a general view of the world and social structures – the protagonists of the most radical critique have been observed with regard to the present society with an 'ephemeral gaze' through which, according to Karl Marx, the dialectic captures things and situations, beings and structures» (Montaldi, 1971, p. XIV).

The conflict over time is then revealing of the dialectical dynamism of the same militancy, since, on the one hand, it refers to a membership dimension that takes place in the sign of the solidarity between subjectivity that participate in a common project, which is also sharing a memory, of a temporality that lasts rather than continuing, it is true that the militant emancipating from the constraints of that belonging, both on the subjective maturity and on one of the widest circles of social relations in which he lives, can only deal with the problem of loneliness. «Where is the drama of a proletarian political conscience in isolation, in the fear of a time of fleeing without the need of protagonists as the militant “knows to be”» (Montaldi, 1971, p. XIX).

It is also from these considerations, the centrepiece of Montaldi's reflections, that the connections with what Walter Benjamin writes regarding the rupture of historical temporality, the linear, progressive and homogeneous temporality that supports bourgeois ideology, has been highlighted in the sign of a continuity designed to become preordained without jumps and breaks. It is Montaldi himself, already in 1958<sup>10</sup>, who refers to the German intellectual in the essay dedicated to the first National Congress of Social Sciences held two years earlier:

The sociological interpretation method is fundamentally foreign (as well as being adverse) to the culture of reformism and Stalinism, which rest on a fatalistic conception of progress and the promise of a revolution from above. (While the conscience of setting historical continuity free – wrote Walter Benjamin – characterizes the action of the revolutionary classes (Montaldi, 1994, p. 281).

Underlining how the responsibility of the left-wing leaders is to integrate the labour movement into the bourgeois and capitalist order instead of comprehending that order so that it can be overthrown, Montaldi provides an interpretation of the basic militia as an autonomous factor over the paths of the same management groups, if they break in their regard, in so far as they are not able to match their historical needs.

Hence the need to investigate, with the new interpretive keys, the problem of worker subjectivity. A low level of social reality emerges of which the methodological and interpretative merit has been appropriately emphasized for the originality and courage of its approach (Quazza, 1976, p. 68), especially in relation to the need to deal with the dynamics of neo-capitalism. On the other hand, the same claim of another temporality, in the sense of discontinuity and break-up, as a source of conflict within its own time, is precisely what seems to put Montaldi in tune with the complexity of the social and political processes of the twentieth century, highlighting their intimate and inexplicable contradictions. In fact, «this is the search for the heterogeneity of the languages and the times that mark the passage of modernity which is revealed to be the most extant part of Montaldi's work» (Capuzzo, 2007, pp. 434-435).

Hence an intellectual legacy that, even from an extreme minority position and difficult to place, due to the refractoriness with which it tries to escape the inertia of any

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<sup>10</sup> There is a significant note regarding this issue in the *The History of the Life and Works of Danilo Montaldi*, curated by Gabriella Montaldi Seelhorst. See Montaldi Seelhorst (2007, p. 160).



discipline, continues to speak to us today. In his original search for the composition and identity of the working class beyond established patterns, political militancy and intellectual reflection merge into the same project: a project that looks at the emancipation of subordinates who cultivate the dream of a dialectical overthrow of the existent, but which is always deeply rooted in the hardness of a historical reality that needs to be thoroughly acquainted and attentive in order to carry out radical transformation processes.

A glass of wine before him, the worker is interviewed like a sphinx. While the worker drinks his acidic wine, the intellect seems to breathe a healthy, proletarian air into full nostrils. As is usual the intellectual Robinson appears to have found his Friday. When someone speaks of the moral health of the proletarians, one must immediately be wary. There is a conservative nerve inside: that one surely took the worker as he was. But as he is, the proletarian has no intention of remaining. (Montaldi, 1994, p. 312).

This is timely observation, not only because it emphasizes the need to escape any kind of classroom mitigation, but also because it emphasizes the will to transform itself as a key element that compulsively moves from dissatisfaction towards a certain state of affairs. This Will, and the sense, even formative, which can be attributed to it, are the motives with which Montaldi confronts us consistently, coming to constitute, in our opinion, one of the traits that perhaps best identifies his intellectual path for a synthesis which appears to be as appropriate as the considerations made at the time by Maria Grazia Meriggi, who recalls how

the deepest content of the sociologist and militant Montaldi's speech is summarized in the search for how it is possible to build a society in which the affirmation of freedom, differences, individuality, even the subjective bizarre – why not? – is no longer the privilege of classes or social classes which can in any case draw upon their contractual force, but of all. Even the losers – the hustlers, the basic militant – could then experience their differences and their paths of freedom, even physically and materially, without being absorbed into either anonymity or madness (Meriggi, 2007, 85).

What is enough, in the end, is to continue to deal with his speech today, without pretending to confine him to some form of codification, if he is aware of how much his originality and richness consist in the desire to scare, beyond existing social structures, traditional forms of knowledge.

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