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DECIPHERING HARM. NAMING THE ISSUE IN ITALIAN HEALTHCARE STRUGGLES DURING THE '60S AND '70S

Speaking is a difficult undertaking.

— Laura Conti, *Preface to the school edition* (1982), *A Hare with a Child's Face*

Finding the code of the non-voice is very difficult.

— Franco Basaglia, *Brazilian Lectures*

ABSTRACT

During the 1960s and 1970s, Italian workers' movements brought together concerns for wellbeing, environmental justice, critiques of automation, and the refusal of work into a radical vision for healthcare. This chapter examines three significant case studies that highlight how workers, activists, and trade unionists developed strategies to transform lived experiences into collective narratives. The first case explores Ivar Oddone's use of the "doppelgänger method," first developed with FIAT workers, a technique that facilitated the transformation of personal, somatic experiences into a collective diagnostic tool for collective political action. The second example focuses on how activists in the healthcare movement politicized the concept of toxicity. By developing a vocabulary around "noxiousness," they highlighted the inseparability of workplace health issues from broader capitalist structures. Whereas toxicity often refers to chemical exposure or measurable contaminants, *nocività* named a wider field of embodied, collective, and systemic harms, connecting factory fumes to domestic labour, community health, and environmental degradation and framing capitalism itself as an adverse factor to health. Finally, the article considers the resistance of the "Leboline" workers to the new Methods-Time Measurement (MTM) chainwork management at the Lebole textile factory in Arezzo. The all-female workforce opposed these new rhythms, which introduced an unsustainable work pace causing severe mental exhaustion and adverse health repercussions. These examples highlight the Italian movements' diverse practices of translation and naming as a means to expose and contest the multifaceted nature of exploitation, and their commitment to a proliferation of commitments as the articulation of an emancipatory politics of health. These Italian struggles also illuminate the broader questions of how health can be politicized today amid planetary crises, where the practice of naming harms determines not only what counts as a problem but also what kinds of political responses can be pursued.

KEYWORDS

Political translation, Healthcare struggles, Workerism, Anti-work politics, Ivar Oddone, Lebole workers, Toxicity

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The institution of proliferating commitments

How to name what produces harm? This is the question that runs through the healthcare struggles of 1960s and 1970s Italy, where workers, feminists, medical students and care workers rejected the idea of health as a neutral or self-evident category. From the post-war era until the end of the 1970s, struggles for healthcare occupied an increasingly significant segment of the workers' movements in Italy, generating a range of radical imaginaries in which health, gender, environmental and anti-work politics were explicitly intertwined for the first time. In order to make their embodied and often unarticulated forms of knowledge explicit, that is, the kinds of situated understandings of fatigue, risk, and harm that rarely register in official expertise, and to find a common language to speak about health in all its complexity, activists, workers and medical professionals had to develop strategies for converting lived somatic experiences into political narratives. Their efforts offer an array of collective techniques of articulation and translation that are still relevant for the contemporary context, as the capacity of creating living languages to name both issues and their remediations remains a key dimension of political organizing around care issues in the present.

The emergence of public health as a subject of political struggle unfolded within a context of rapid and extensive industrialization, which had tangible consequences for the workers themselves. In 1960s Italy, the national average witnessed one workplace fatality per hour and one accident every 6 minutes (in comparison, present-day figures indicate an average of 3 deaths per day and 800,000 annual accidents). These statistics solely account for direct deaths occurring at work, without considering the indirect impacts of environmental degradation and the onset of chronic conditions during that time. The number of worker fatalities was so staggering that it was aptly characterized as a veritable class war, as summarised in a slogan of the era: "Going to work must not be like going to war" (Comitato di base di Medicina 1970).

The following pages outline three episodes from the Italian healthcare struggles of the 1960s and 1970s that are particularly indicative instances of their commitment to finding new modes of articulation for the question of health and care: Ivar Oddone's method of co-inquiry, staged through the performative exercise of the "instructions to the doppelgänger"; the Porto Marghera workers' insistence on the need to struggle against the harm caused by work *itself*, rather than campaigning against the toxicity of particular jobs; and the Lebole women's use of contrafacta singing and songwriting, through which they voiced the psycho-somatic toll of the new MTM tempos and reclaimed the rhythms of a liberated time. Each case introduces a distinct modality of naming harm: bodily fatigue, generalized noxiousness, and the erosion of subjectivity under the factory's temporal discipline. Read together, these practices show how struggles did not converge on a single definition of health, but instead proliferated commitments across different terrains. It is in this refusal of closure, in this constant search for new registers of articulation, that we

can recognize how political translation (Iveković 2019) was enacted in practice and how health, rather than a discrete object, emerges as a by-product of wider struggles to reorganize life.

Instructions to the Doppleganger

The first example centres on the process that led to a trade union pamphlet titled *L'Ambiente di lavoro* (*The Work Environment*). This document was first published in 1967 by the Editrice Sindacale Italiana and reissued in 1971 by the newly formed metalworkers' federation. It was the outcome of a multi-year inquiry conducted by the medical commission of the Camera del Lavoro of Turin, directed by Ivar Oddone, a physician, former partisan, and communist militant, together with a group of worker-activists from the 5th FIOM section of the Mirafiori plant. The pamphlet was not marginal: over 130,000 copies circulated, and it was even adapted into a slide show and a comic-strip version, diffusing what became known as the "workers' model" of health analysis across unionized factories.

The pamphlet marked one of the union's first attempts to develop a coherent political stance regarding health and safety hazards at the workplace. It coined the slogan *"La salute non si vende"* ("health is not for sale") to challenge the widespread approach among workers to bargaining for higher wage compensation in exchange for dangerous and toxic jobs, rather than collectively seeking to eliminate the hazards at their source. In addition to naming the "work

environment" as a field of struggle in its own right, the pamphlet introduced the principle of "non-delegation" when it came to matters of health and safety. This principle implied that all workers affected by harmful conditions should have a direct say in shaping union demands and strategies, rather than leaving such decisions to technical experts or external authorities.

Within this framework, *L'Ambiente di lavoro* became a practical knowledge tool for both union organizers and shop-floor collectives. Its central conceptual innovation was the idea of *nocività* (noxiousness), broken down into four analytical factors: environmental conditions such as noise, temperature, light, ventilation, and humidity; exposure to toxic substances, including gases, dusts, fumes, and chemicals; physical factors, such as exertion, fatigue, and excessive rhythms of work; and finally, what was termed "mental load." While this last category will be discussed in more detail later, it is important to note here that it already signalled an expanded understanding of workplace harm beyond the purely material sphere.

The "four factors of noxiousness" were widely used to structure inquiries into health conditions at the workplace and became tools of facilitation in negotiations between workers, experts, and union organizers. They were easily understood without diluting medical knowledge, precisely because the categories had been generated through the lived experiences of workers themselves. *L'Ambiente di lavoro* emerged from a collective experiment in naming and taking stock of what undermined well-being, translating contextual conditions into a grammar of experience that could be shared across constituencies.

The methodology behind this process was developed by Oddone and his collaborators. Since external observers were barred from entering the factory, they initially tried to gather information outside the gates of FIAT and in off-work encounters. But these early interviews produced little that could be translated into effective demands. As Oddone later reflected, the main difficulty was a gap in language: the lived knowledge of workers could not be captured by the categories available to experts, and new forms of expression had to be forged to bridge this divide. Gianni Marchetto, one of the FIAT workers initially contacted by Oddone's crew, described the situation in an interview:

> *He was not able to make himself understood, and in turn, he wouldn't understand us workers much either* (...) *He didn't know anything about the production process, the names of the tools, and the operations. Likewise, we had no clue about the technical language used by him as a doctor, even if he had good intentions* (...) (Marchetto 2021)

In response, Oddone proposed to a group of fifteen FIAT workers to experiment with a methodology of collective storytelling that became known as the technique of "the instructions to the doppelganger." Over the course of regular meetings which lasted several months[1], he asked each of them to "give me all

1 These meetings were held within the framework of the "150 ore per il diritto allo studio" workers' education program, introduced in 1973 through the national

the information that would allow me to replace you without anyone noticing". Taking turns, workers thus narrated their personal habits, patters and everyday hacks at a granular level as instructions to an imagined sosia that would need to pass as them without raising suspicions. This approach encouraged the narrators to delve into the minutiae of their daily lives: how does their day start? What do they have for breakfast? Do they have breakfast at all? How do they commute to work? Are they usually punctual or late? And what happens next? The "instructions to doppelgänger" technique represented a novel methodology in union organizing processes, shifting the emphasis from the adoption of shared conceptual vocabularies to the production of collective embodied narration as the element of political subjectivation.

During the dialogues, storytellers were encouraged to map four key relationships in their everyday lives: their relationship with machines, tools, and tasks specific to their job description; with managers and bosses; with colleagues and peers; and with political organizations, such as the party or the union. The very ordinariness of these questions highlighted the epistemic asymmetry between medical experts and workers: knowledge of fatigue, nutrition, housing conditions or the length of commute was not a trivial factor, but a politically charged determinant of health. Within the "instructions to the doppelgänger" exercise, whenever the storytelling would deviate from the descriptive and turn towards commentary, adding for instance, Marxist jargon or personal critical judgements, the narrators would be interrupted and asked to go back to giving instructions more simply, "as one would when teaching another how to drive". This insistence on description over interpretation foregrounded the importance of using language to interweave a shared sense of working conditions: only by staying with the workers' own vocabulary of lived experience could a new diagnostic language emerge that was not transposed from elsewhere or imposed from above. Most importantly, the practice of taking turns in narrating, listening to each other and asking questions and clarification allowed for the group of workers to notice commonalities and patterns: whenever specific diseases or other ailments were found to occur with critical frequency, they would become the focus of further medical research and of targeted demands within factories.

Not too dissimilar from the consciousness-raising techniques experimented with by feminist movements during the same period, this approach encouraged participants to create a novel type of space for collective storytelling, where it became possible to foreground their first-hand knowledge on how to mitigate

metalworkers' agreement. Oddone's seminars with FIAT worker-delegates were conducted under this scheme in the mid-1970s, although his earlier work (*Ambiente di lavoro*, 1971) predated its implementation. The "150 ore" granted industrial workers 150 paid hours over three years to pursue study and collective education, often organized through unions and extending well beyond vocational training into broader political and cultural formation (see Bianchini, Paolo, and Francesco Pongiluppi, "Struggle and Health. Sociability and Literacy in the "150 hours" Courses in Turin." *Rivista di Storia dell'Educazione* 11.1 [2024]: 97-109).

harms or to cheat fatigue. For example, in the stories later published in the volume *Esperienza operaia, coscienza di classe e psicologia del lavoro* (Oddone et al. 1977), these included collective slowdowns of the chainwork to carve out secret breaks as well as veritable hacking of tools by adding makeshift extra plastic protections to improve their safety. For this reason, the "instructions to doppelgänger" were often proposed to groups of workers belonging to the same work unit or team. This setting allowed the group to confirm, disagree with, or discuss specific problems and formed the foundation for a political translation that fuelled struggles and demands.

From the issues at work to the issue of work

One of the most important conceptual contributions from this season of struggle was the redefinition of what counted as the opposite of health. As the pamphlet *L'Ambiente di lavoro* made clear, the central analytical lens was *nocività* (noxiousness), broken down into what it called the "fattori di nocività", factors of noxiousness that included environmental conditions, exposure to toxic substances, physical strain, and mental load. These categories gave workers and union organizers a grammar for translating everyday harms into a political vocabulary: not abstract "illness" (a temporary and individual condition), not "fitness" (measured by optimal work performance), but noxiousness as the lived, systemic entanglement of fatigue, humiliation, pollution, and chemical exposure across the workplace, household, and community.

While it may seem close to "toxicity", the analytic and political traction of *nocività* is wider: while the first typically denotes a measurable property of substances or environments, the second captures the systemic and collective dimensions of harm: the ways that fatigue, humiliation, pollution, and chemical exposure intersect across workplace, household, and community.

Nocività encompassed the property of causing harm to living processes and inducing pathologies in both individual organisms and entire ecosystems. Processes or substances deemed *nocive* could have temporary or permanent effects, act swiftly or unfold as chronic conditions, lead to death or diminish the capacity of living beings to reproduce and thrive. By introducing this notion, the healthcare movements strategically broadened the scope of the health problem. They forged connections between the well-being of workers exposed to toxic materials in their workplaces and the living conditions in their impoverished and polluted neighbourhoods. They also considered the conditions of domestic labour, often marked by isolation and devaluation, and the broader impact of capitalist production on the natural environment. While *nocività* carried enormous resonance in the 1970s, it never became fully institutionalized in Italian public health or legal discourse. Today it persists more in activist vocabulary and historical memory than in policy frameworks, which have largely reverted to biomedical notions of "toxicity" or "risk." This partial disappearance is itself telling: *nocività* named a systemic horizon of harm that neoliberal institutions have found difficult to domesticate.

It was in this conceptual field that the Porto Marghera workers intervened with their 1971 pamphlet *Contro la Nocività — Against Noxiousness*. This communiqué was written by the group *Comitato Politico degli Operai di Porto Marghera*, a collective where renowned autonomist Marxist and feminist thinkers, including Maria Rosa Dalla Costa and Antonio Negri, first began their activism in the context of a petrochemical plant site near Venice (Feltrin and Devi 2021). *Against Noxiousness* documents a further moment of radicalization of working-class struggles for health, by asserting that healthy conditions could never be achieved as concessions within the inherently toxic and unjust relations of capitalist production. The document begins with the following statement:

> *It is necessary to immediately distinguish between a form of noxiousness as it is traditionally understood, linked to the working environment (toxic substances, fumes, dust, noise, etc.), and the one more widely linked to the capitalist organization of work.*

To then continue with the following analysis and demands:

> *To correctly pose the theme of noxiousness today […] ultimately means to pose the question of power in its articulation. The only non-rhetorical way of posing and solving this problem is to place it on the organizational ground. In fact, we say that noxiousness must be opposed as it is noxiousness "of work": and therefore [we demand] a reduction in working hours for everyone and not just for "toxic" departments, an increase in wages, regulatory equality, free transport…* (Comitato Politico degli Operai di Porto Marghera 1971, my translation)

In this document, we witness the pivot from the problem of noxiousness *at* work to the noxiousness *of* work under capitalism. This conceptual reattribution carries implications that go beyond rhetoric, allowing the collective to articulate a position that politicizes health not only as a concern related to employment conditions. Here, the right to lead a healthy existence is no longer framed in terms of hazard reduction, but in outright opposition to the technologies, governance strategies, and forms of discipline mobilized to keep capitalism's harms tolerable. According to their perspective, work under capitalism is destined to remain inherently toxic, not only for the constituencies of workers labouring in its factories, but also for the consumers of its products, the users of its technologies, and the inhabitants of the territories impacted by its pollutants, wastes, and externalities.

From this vantage point, it is easy to understand why the Porto Marghera collective was also wary of the trade unions and the Communist Party's efforts to promote the "workers' model" of health analysis. They feared its pragmatic orientation could foreclose the emergence of more ambitious political imaginaries around health. In particular, their analysis of noxiousness as an inherent by-product of capitalist relations of production — in which someone, somewhere, always has to be made sacrificial for the accumulation of capital to continue — opened a productive tension with Oddone's efforts to give workers

tools to directly organize their health and safety demands, even while the critique of the expert as an apolitical agent remained common to both.

Factory workers already carried the crushing weight of survival, and to be tasked with devising remedies for the harm they endured at work risked placing on their shoulders an ultimately impossible responsibility. Rather than transforming health into a horizon for radical demands, such approaches threatened to be too easily co-opted into the diluted reformism of incremental improvements.

What matters here, however, is not only the rejection of reformist containment, but the recognition of the political opening created by naming noxiousness as the lived reality of the work itself. This insight did not remain confined to Porto Marghera. It soon found resonance among other actors, and in particular among those who were then studying medicine, who sought to produce a different imaginary and vocabulary around their future profession. Across Italy, a lively debate was taking place in faculties of medicine, where students insisted that questions of health could not be reduced to technical matters but had to be recast as political problems. In this sense, their critique shared many continuities and overlaps with the trajectory of *Medicina Democratica,* a national movement for health born in the early 1970s from the convergence of medical professionals, workers, and activists, which framed health as a collective right inseparable from struggles against capitalist exploitation.

The students' interventions gave form to a nationwide ferment that reoriented the discussion of health away from the mitigation of hazards and toward an indictment of work itself. A striking example comes from the *Quaderni del Movimento Studentesco Medicina*, published by the Milan-based collective, where we read:

> *"The ruin of workers' health is nothing but one aspect of exploitation; it is determined by the capitalist mode of production and becomes one with unemployment, impoverishment, ignorance, anti-worker violence, and everything that capitalism generates in order to perpetuate itself. In substance: in the fact that the worker must sell in exchange for a wage their intelligent force to the capitalist, in the fact that the capitalist, by paying a wage, can dispose of a functioning and intelligent organism to do with as he wants, in this lies the root of the constant, predictable destruction, legalized and unpunished, of workers' health. To the long-standing evils of unsafe machines, of substances and of noxious environmental conditions, there is added the economic crisis of capitalism and the will to unload it onto the workers through the intensification of exploitation. From all this, it follows that noxiousness derives from the mode of working and not from the material environment in which one works; the noxiousness of the work environment is nothing but a consequence and an effect of the capitalist organization of labour. In fact the way and the intensity with which a toxic substance (dusts, fumes, gases) or a physical factor of noxiousness (temperature, noise etc.) strike at the health of the worker by what is it determined if not by the way and the intensity with which the worker is forced to work, that is for example by the rhythms, the production times, the overtime, the shortages of staff etc., and therefore by the very same capitalist organization of labour?"*
> (Movimento Studentesco Medicina, *Quaderni*, n. 4, Milan, 1975, my translation)

Here is the diagnosis of noxiousness crystallizing into a direct attack on the capitalist organization of life itself. What the medical students articulated was that health is not the prerogative of doctors, nor the burden of workers alone, but inseparable from liberation from work itself — and that addressing it demands a political commitment stretching across professions, workplaces, and society at large.

The mental load

Noxiousness gave the movements a common vocabulary (as other commentators have noted, Feltrin and Sacchetto 2019), and it was crucial in practice, since it allowed actions and demands to link environmental hazards with the organization of labour through the language of health politics. Yet alongside it ran another current, less codified but no less present: an attentiveness to the ways work was damaging minds as well as bodies, harm that carried political consequences as much as somatic ones. Just as important was the dawning recognition that work itself was generating new forms of mental distress, an awareness that blurred the line between body and psyche and that opened up political questions every bit as pressing as toxic chemicals or unsafe machines.

This recognition found a vivid expression in the 1971 edition of *L'Ambiente di lavoro*, where an illustration in the section titled "The Work Environment Today" depicts a stylized worker shielding his face from four coloured balloons. Each balloon stands for a factor of noxiousness, but the fourth, the blue one marked "mental factors", is drawn twice the size of the others. This category of the analysis was discussed in the booklet as "mental load" and it offered a strikingly sharp language for reflection for the time. It identified not only boredom and monotony as forms of intellectual under-stimulation, but also the opposite extremes of stress, anxiety, and excessive responsibility, anticipating concerns about work-related distress that are common today. It also named humiliation in the workplace as a determinant of well-being, drawing attention to the affective and relational dimensions of harm.

The analysis of *The Work Environment* highlighted that while the first three factors of harm (exposure to toxins, physical strain, and environmental conditions) could in principle be reduced through pressures internal to capitalist competition (for example, through technological innovation, regulatory compliance, or firms' attempts to minimize compensation costs), the fourth factor pertaining to the mental well-being of workers was projected to worsen in the years to come. In retrospect, this forecast anticipated what today is often described as 'burnout' or the psychopolitics of work: the rise of anxiety, depression, and exhaustion as endemic features of contemporary labour regimes (Han 2015; Berardi 2009). This same forecast was also articulated in *Against Noxiousness*, as evident in statements such as: "In the new factory, coupled with a modest reduction in toxicities and thus in occupational diseases traditionally understood, there will be a strong increase in mental health disorders".

What Italian health activists realised was that chemical risks could always be shifted or regulated away in some places, but the mental noxiousness of work was built to expand, as capital increasingly colonised subjectivity itself. In hindsight, of course, it is possible to see that the toxins and the fatigue never went away, but they were simply displaced to the global South through deregulation, dumping, and offshoring. Yet their intuition was right: capital's cutting edge turned out to be its ability to mobilise our very cognitive and affective capacities. And they also understood something that only seems obvious now: that psychic strain, ecological damage, and the labours of social reproduction are not separate domains, but interlocking effects of the same machinery.

Against The Capitalist Tempo

If the warnings of Oddone and Porto Marghera pointed to the psychic corrosion baked into capitalist production, it was at Lebole that this prognosis found flesh. The women workers of this textile factory organised the first collective challenge to the new techniques of scientific management, turn their fury not only against toxins or fatigue, but against the capitalist tempo itself that stretched nerves and bodies beyond their limits.

When MTM arrived at Lebole in the early 1960s, brought in by Bedaux Consultants, the Italian offshoot of the French-British consulting network founded by Charles E. Bedaux, it marked a radical reorganization of the shop floor. In the eyes of workers, the new "American Department" at Lebole - nicknamed as such not because the consultants were U.S. based (they were reportedly Swiss), but because it felt unmistakably modern and synonymous with ruthless efficiency.

MTM built on the "time-and-motion" science pioneered by Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, who broke human effort into micromovements—*therbligs*—to be filmed, catalogued, and optimized for maximum efficiency (Gregg 2018). The

Gilbreths' vision presented productivity as both science and spectacle, borrowing the languages of cinema and sport to frame labour as a kind of athletic performance. But unlike athletes, who enjoy short careers buffered by teams of physiologists, nutritionists, and doctors, as Gianni Marchetto reminded me in interview, factory workers were expected to endure an endless season, without any comparable care or recognition.

The Lebole women were the first large workforce in Italy to feel the full force of this choreography of efficiency. In the so-called "American Department," the new MTM tempos produced frequent collective fainting spells, insomnia, and nightmares of movements that never stopped. As the system spread across the factory, every gesture was scripted, every pause eliminated, as if the shop floor had become the stage for a brutal choreography, echoing not only the Gilbreths' micrometric vision but also contemporaneous experiments in Britain, where Warren Lamb, a student of Rudolf Laban, had collaborated with Laban and F. C. Lawrence to adapt movement notation originally developed for dance into industrial analysis to increase efficiency.

Yet at Lebole, efficiency turned into suffocation. The system demanded that every microgesture follow a silent script. Workers fainted in groups, and many endured insomnia or nightmares where their bodies could not stop moving. They recalled being sent by the factory doctor to receive "reconstituent injections" ("*punture ricostituenti*") though the workers I spoke to could not say with certainty what the injections actually contained.

The Lebole case gained national attention when one of the workers, during a short break, ended her life by stepping in front of a train, a tragic act that crystallized the unbearable pressures of the new regime. Over the next decade, the women of Lebole became an unmistakable presence within Italy's workers' movement. They did not limit themselves to contesting MTM's brutal tempos or the noxious presence of formaldehyde on the shop floor. Just as urgent were the invisible barriers that structured their lives outside the factory gates. The Leboline was organized around the hours wasted on inadequate public transport, which stretched the working day into an endurance test, and around the absence of public kindergartens, which kept childcare as an unpaid obligation borne by women alone. In naming these issues as part of the same struggle, they refused to separate health from the wider circuits of exhaustion and care. Each demand translated into another, proliferating commitments, weaving together a politics of health that insisted the body could not be divided into workplace and home, production and reproduction.

What makes their trajectory extraordinary is that most of these women had entered the factory from rural, patriarchal, and politically uninitiated backgrounds. Their rapid politicization, and the radical clarity with which they articulated it, was nothing less than a collective invention. It was, in effect, an ongoing practice of political translation: turning embodied distress into a grammar of struggle that others could join. One of the most striking techniques to emerge from this process was their idiosyncratic use of the *contrafactum* technique.

Contrafactum is a compositional technique that likely dates back as far as the origins of songs themselves, and it has been well-documented since medieval times. It involves creating new lyrics based on an existing melody to convey a different message, often with an ironic or satirical tone. While this practice was already common among various workers' movements, who would sing politically charged songs during strikes and mass demonstrations, the Lebole workers (nicknamed the "Leboline") took it further by adapting the lyrics of popular contemporary ballads from events like the Sanremo festival, rather than relying solely on traditional folk songs. These songs were not only sung during demonstrations but also during work, serving as a means of keeping each other informed about negotiation updates and boosting morale.

ERA UNA FOLLIA
DI VIVERE IN TRANQUILLITA'
GUARDA BENE
COME CI HA CONCIATE LA LEBOLE

QUELLE COME NOI ~~BENXPOCOXSAIXCAMPAVANO~~
BEN POCO SAI CAMPAVANO
E DICEVANO
QUELLE TORNANO DA LAVORARE

The translation at play here, then, is not simply one that traces the adaptation of complex political struggles to simpler lyrics that can be more easily put into metrics and sung to a tune. But it was, more crucially, one that was interested in producing an affective politics to accompany said informational content. The politicization of affect through their *contrafacta* is for the Lebole workers a de facto strategy of resistance against the brutal tempo of the factory that is literally consuming their bodies, ageing them prematurely and palpably under the relentless fatigue of factory work and social reproduction labour at home. At the same time, *contrafactum* also intervened in pop culture by weaponizing it against the misery of the factory. While pop music was all about celebrating escapism, romance and consumption, the use of its melodies to speak about a tempo that was killing them in the production of fashionable men's suits was a powerful inversion. This strategy enabled them to confront these challenges head-on, fostering a collective sense of resilience and determination, rooted in stolen moments of recreation and collective writing/sense-making.

We know about the Leboline's contrafacta thanks above all to the work of Antonio "Tonino" Firrao, the ethnomusicologist who followed the case closely and preserved much of the material in his archive. Firrao was part of a wider

milieu of communist and leftist researchers into music who, in those years, were collecting peasant songs and studying how popular repertoires carried memory, dissent, and tools for collective timing. Many of the groups he worked alongside the *Nuovo Canzoniere Italiano,* recording the chants and work-songs of agricultural labourers, where rhythm itself had long been wielded as a political resource, setting the pace of toil and sometimes resisting it. It was precisely this sensitivity to tempo as both discipline and insurgency that made the Leboline's practice of reworking pop melodies into shop-floor testimonies so compelling to Firrao. In their *contrafacta* he saw something new: not only the survival of a tradition, but its radical transformation inside the factory, where song became a weapon against MTM's brutal choreography, a way in which the women made sense of their lives, reclaimed stolen joy, and translated the grinding tempo of MTM into a temporality of liberation.

Political Translation, Grammar, and Health as a By-Product

The implications of workers' autonomy and the refusal of work that were central to the Italian political laboratory of these decades, offer a valuable framework for conceptualizing instituent processes and public/common infrastructures of wellness as something beyond mere state machinery. Italy became the second country in Western Europe, following the United Kingdom in 1948, to establish a public universal healthcare system in 1978. This system, known as *sistema sanitario nazionale* (SSN), was designed as a free-of-charge service accessible to all, regardless of employment status, and funded through general taxation (Giorgi and Pavan 2019). The political laboratory of the preceding decades leading up to the establishment of the SSN proved to be dynamic and influential, extending its impact beyond Italy's borders. It even served as an inspiration for working-class mobilization efforts in healthcare in South America, among other regions.

During this time, a range of innovative institutions were invented and (with varying longevity) established as part of the provision of welfare, not only addressing various health and care issues simultaneously, but also recognizing their interconnectedness. One notable example is the ideation of Territorial Healthcare Units, known as USL, during the creation of the public healthcare system in 1978. These units originally combined a public health mandate with a duty of care for the environment, and they were effective organizations in identifying factories and their pollution as a major factor of risk for both.

Another instance of the instituent effervescence of these struggles (Negri 1992) can be observed in the network of reproductive health centres, known as *consultori*, which were independently funded by feminist movements and later adopted by the national healthcare system. These centres provided educational resources on female anatomy and sexuality, contraception services, and psychological counselling for women in abusive relationships. Additionally, another revolutionary struggle known as the deinstitutionalization movement played a significant role in transforming mental healthcare. While commonly

remembered as a collaboration between psychiatrists and patients to abolish asylums (resulting in a law passed in 1980, making Italy the first country to do so), this movement simultaneously fought for the establishment of a radically new approach to psychiatric care that gave rise to social cooperatives and social enterprises, accompanied by a new legal framework that supported with public resources further experimentation in establishing autonomous therapeutic communities. These communities not only served as sources of independent livelihood for service users, but also acted as a benchmark for transforming work and care relationships on a broader societal scale. These healthcare institutions operated transversally and porously between populations, creating zones of contact and shared analysis between diverse issues, areas of expertise and levels of commitment. They were conceived and organized to act as membranes between different social, political, mental and environmental forms of injustice, actively fostering explicit political goals to sustain these connections and uncover hidden underlying causes. At times, the creation of such connections would be a matter of uncovering hidden common causes of health problems; other times, it would be a matter of committing to the possibilities of political translation over time: creating new epistemologies out of concrete modes of intervention that refused to simplify the multiplicity and complexity of political reality into mere binaries of "for" or "against" (Iveković 2009: 189).

The three stories presented here are just fragments of the more composite and polyphonic process that led to the epistemological and concrete institution of health as a public good in Italy. The achievements of this season of struggle were inscribed in the newly founded national health system, yet from the very beginning they were systematically subjected to reactionary countermeasures and waves of reform that sought to dilute their radical potential. This ongoing rollback has left Italian healthcare in a difficult and contradictory situation today, though exploring this trajectory lies beyond the scope of the present article. Nonetheless, recalling these struggles remains crucial, as they continue to illuminate alternative models of care and collective provision that have lost none of their urgency. They demonstrate the different registers of political translation, understood not as a literal transfer between languages, but as the work of creating a grammar that enables heterogeneous experiences to resonate across constituencies.

As Paolo Virno (2004) put it, grammar is the shared structure that enables a multitude of utterances: not the reduction of voices to a single "people", but the condition that makes many forms of expression mutually intelligible. Political translation, then, can be seen as the effort to carry situated knowledge and embodied practices into such a shared grammar, multiplying their capacity to mobilize without erasing their specificity.

The first of these commitments speaks to approaches such as conricerca, workers' inquiry and participatory action research, which centre on lived experiences within the complex web of power relations and systemic injustices as a valid source of knowledge. Here, translation encompasses the process of

transforming different expert knowledge, demands, and ideas into a language that resonates with different constituencies and mobilized collective action. In a second sense, political translation became a technique to sustain a radicalization of demands, in a quantum leap from articulating situated problems to unmasking the more systemic nature of exploitation of life in all its forms under the work regime. And finally, improvised language practices such as contrafactum became the site for collective care and solidarity that called attention to how struggles are always simultaneously material, somatic, and affective.

One distinctive aspect that emerged from the workers' healthcare movements that propelled these new institutions into existence was their adept use of language as a powerful tool for political subjectivation across diverse groups. Instead of trying to mobilize around "health," they side-stepped the problem of arriving at a distilled and univocal definition of what might constitute it, and focused instead on giving names (and causes) to its opposites. Yet noxiousness was only one modality of naming. Other registers emerged too: the mental load already identified by the doppelgänger groups, or the psycho-somatic exhaustion voiced in the Lebole women's contrafacta against the relentless tempos of MTM. Each case opened a different grammar of harm, refusing closure and broadening the political vocabulary through which health could be contested. The naming of harms must therefore be understood as a crucial moment of these experimentations in collective health-care: how problems are analysed, who participates in this analysis, and which conceptual frameworks are articulated all shape the political responses that can follow. To frame this through Virno: political translation provided the grammar that allowed different utterances of fatigue, noxiousness, or psycho-somatic time to be mutually intelligible without being reduced to a single idiom. This is also what allows us to theorize health as a by-product: never given in advance, never the result of a single policy or institution, but emerging indirectly from wider struggles to reorganize work, reproduction, and ecological life.

The insistence on naming and translating harms in order to keep "health" open yet politically graspable was not only a feature of the collective practices examined here, but also marked the work of many protagonists of that season of health activism. Giulio Maccacaro, physician and epidemiologist, edited the series *Medicina e Potere* (Medicine and Power), one of the first platforms for critical debates on medicine in Italy, and co-founded the already mentioned *Medicina Democratica* network. As he put it, *"The collective struggle for collective health challenges the entire mode of production and contests precisely that which it cherishes most: its false - or deviant – rationality"* (Maccacaro 1976). Franco Basaglia, who together with Franca Ongaro spearheaded the anti-asylum movement, showed that mental health could never be reduced to individual pathology but had to be understood as the expression of social relations. As Ongaro Basaglia asserted, their work followed "*two seemingly distinct yet deeply intertwined threads: the body... and the coercions imposed upon it (institutions, ideologies, science, social organization)*" (Ongaro Basaglia 1982: VIII). She warned that "*any new institution, no matter how technically innovative,*

inevitably reproduces the same political function as the old one" if the broader social context remains unchanged (Ongaro Basaglia 1982: X). She emphasized the need to "*expose in practice the tight interconnections between specialized domains and the wider socio-economic order they serve to protect,*" and to uncover "*the processes by which any innovative intervention is neutralized… through the ideologization of reality*" (Ongaro Basaglia 1982: XI–XII). Laura Conti, physician, feminist, and early ecological thinker, wove ecological critique into Marxist politics, illuminating how industrial disasters and environmental degradation exposed the porous boundaries between human and more-than-human bodies. Her writing on the Seveso disaster of 1976 (one of Europe's worst chemical accidents, comparable in scale to Bhopal a decade later) helped situate health within planetary entanglements of toxicity and inequality. Reflecting on that experience, she wrote: *"I began to realize that 'environment' is not only water, air, land; that one cannot consider humans in their relationship with nature without also considering them in their relations with other humans, with the objects they produce, or the plants they cultivate"* (Conti 1977: 85).

While all were clinical practitioners, they wrote and spoke insistently in search of new modes of articulation within public discourse, pushing medicine beyond the clinic and into the field of politics. These well-known figures, however, were only the most visible faces of much broader movements that treated healthcare not as a sectoral demand but as inseparable from wider struggles to reorganize life otherwise. Seen from today, a moment marked by the erosion of welfare protections and the depoliticization of health into medicalized, positivist framings, their common thread comes into sharper relief. Across different institutions, knowledge, and practices, they treated health as a regime of by-productions: something generated indirectly, in the interstices of struggles against exploitation and for the reorganization of life. To think of health as a by-product, then, is to carry forward this lesson, contrasting it with contemporary approaches that seek to isolate health as a technical object of policy or as a product, rather than a field of collective invention.

This legacy remains urgent today, not only in Italy but globally. In the wake of Covid-19, amidst the erosion of welfare protections and the hollowing-out of public systems, the grammar of health has been overtaken by two booming industries: fitness and wellness. The fitness industry promises optimization of the quantified self, sculpting bodies for endurance and performance in line with the demands of productivity. The wellness industry commodifies fragments of non-Western practices, stripped of their histories and sold back as natural or ancestral remedies calibrated to gendered anxieties and consumer niches. On the surface they appear distinct, yet they converge: neither confront the material and political determinants of harm, the nocività, nor they claim to counteract. Both displace health into a privatized domain of individual optimization and consumption, erasing the collective and instituent experiments that once made health a terrain of political struggle. Against this backdrop, the inheritance of the Italian movements does not provide stable solutions, but a different obligation: the commitment to proliferating commitments, to never

reducing health to a single object, but to tracing its emergence as a by-product of many struggles, so that naming harms may become a collective grammar, a practice of expression that refuses the reduction of our capacities to the grind of work, or worse, to the status of the superfluous and the sacrificial. To resist reducing health to one essence, one commodity, or one policy, and instead to treat it as the emergent by-product of struggles that cut across work, reproduction, and ecology.

It is in this sense that Franco Basaglia's words remain resonant: "Noi, nella nostra debolezza, in questa minoranza che siamo, non possiamo vincere, perché è il potere che vince sempre. Noi possiamo al massimo convincere. Nel momento in cui convinciamo, noi vinciamo." – "We, in our weakness, as this minority that we are, cannot win, because it is power that always wins. At most, we can persuade. And in the moment that we persuade, we win." In Italian, vincere means to win, and convincere means to persuade, literally, "to win with." In Basaglia's phrasing, victory shifts register: not the triumph of power, but the unfinished work of conviction, persuasion as the only kind of winning worth having. In this sense, persuasion itself becomes a mode of political translation, a grammar of health as collective conviction rather than imposed consensus.

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Valerija Gracijano

Razotkrivanje štete: imenovanje problema u borbama italijanskog zdravstva tokom šezdesetih i sedamdesetih godina

Apstrakt

Tokom šezdesetih i sedamdesetih godina radnički pokreti u Italiji povezali su pitanja blagostanja, ekološke pravde, kritike automatizacije i odbijanja rada u radikalnu viziju zdravstva. Ovo poglavlje razmatra tri značajne studije slučaja koje pokazuju kako su radnici, aktivisti i sindikalisti razvijali strategije da lična iskustva pretoče u kolektivne narative.

Prvi slučaj odnosi se na Ivara Odonea i njegovu upotrebu „metode dvojnika", prvobitno razvijene sa radnicima FIAT-a, tehnike koja je omogućavala da se lična, somatska iskustva transformišu u kolektivni dijagnostički alat za kolektivno političko delovanje.

Drugi primer fokusira se na to kako su aktivisti zdravstvenog pokreta politizovali pojam toksičnosti. Razvijanjem vokabulara oko pojma „štetnosti", naglašavali su nerazdvojivost pitanja zdravstvene zaštite na radnom mestu od šireg kapitalističkog okvira. Dok se toksičnost obično odnosi na izloženost hemikalijama ili merljivim zagađivačima, *nocività* je obuhvatala šire polje utelovljenih, kolektivnih i sistemskih šteta, povezujući fabrike i njihove isparenja sa kućnim radom, zdravljem zajednice i degradacijom životne sredine, pri čemu je sam kapitalizam bio uokviren kao nepovoljan faktor po zdravlje.

Na kraju, tekst se bavi otporom radnica „Leboline" prema novom sistemu MTM (Methods-Time Measurement) u tekstilnoj fabrici Lebole u Arecu. Ova isključivo ženska radna snaga usprotivila se novim radnim ritmovima koji su nametali neodrživ tempo, izazivajući ozbiljnu mentalnu iscrpljenost i negativne zdravstvene posledice.

Ovi primeri pokazuju raznovrsne prakse prevođenja i imenovanja u italijanskim pokretima kao sredstva za razotkrivanje i osporavanje višeslojne eksploatacije, kao i njihovu posvećenost umnožavanju angažmana u artikulaciji emancipatorske politike zdravlja. Italijanske borbe osvetljavaju i šira pitanja o tome kako se zdravlje danas može politizovati u uslovima planetarne krize, gde sama praksa imenovanja šteta određuje ne samo šta se prepoznaje kao problem, već i kakve političke odgovore možemo slediti.

Ključne reči: politički prevod, zdravstvene borbe, radnički pokret, politika odbijanja rada, Ivar Odone, radnice Lebole, toksičnost