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## **Abstract**

Class composition was the most important concept to be developed within the rich milieu of Italian autonomist Marxism, acutely addressing subject-object dichotomies and organisational problems of internal differentiation in and between classed, raced and gendered social formations. Yet ‘compositionist’ analysis has received remarkably little attention within urban-geographical literatures. This paper reviews and develops the class composition concept, offering the first fully developed theorisation of *spatial composition* and underscoring its relevance for a contemporary politics of space. It stresses the importance of immanent, reflexive non-teleological periodisations of capitalist relations for anti-capitalist struggle through the intertwined concepts of spatial composition and the tendency. Through this theoretical lens it narrates the innovative and under-examined spatial praxis of often women-led urban movements in 1970s Italy, arguing that these remarkable struggles provide vital lessons for thinking through the diverse modalities of organisation and class recomposition emerging in the material geographies of social reproduction today.

## **Keywords**

Autonomist Marxism, Class Composition, Spatial Composition, Social Reproduction, Urbanisation, Henri Lefebvre

## **Rethinking Italian Autonomist Marxism: Spatial Composition, Urban Contestation and the Material Geographies of Social Reproduction**

**Neil Gray**

The movements of Italian autonomist Marxism from the early-1960s to the late-1970s in Italy represent the most radical phase of pro-revolutionary activity in post-war Western Europe. Constituting an anomaly with respect to comparable countries in terms of size, intensity, innovation and duration, they can be re-encountered today as a laboratory of radical praxis with profound lessons for our own times (Hardt 1996). Yet, the full scope of Italian autonomy, most pertinently its innate spatiality, has not received the attention it deserves within urban-geographical studies. This may be because ‘Italian autonomist Marxism’, understood as a broad umbrella term, is often characterised by a distinction between the phases of Operaismo (workerism) and post-Operaismo (post-workerism). The former associated with a

conceptualisation of the industrial ‘mass worker’ (c.1960-1972) and the latter with the ‘socialised worker’, the progenitor of such terms as ‘immaterial’, ‘cognitive’ and ‘affective’ labour and ‘the multitude’ (c.1972-present). Additionally, a primary focus in each case on the waged labour process may also have obscured the political valence of post-war urban restructuring and related urban struggles in 1970s Italy for a contemporary politics of space.

Intimately connected to urbanisation and urban contestation in the 1970s, related feminist struggles in what I term the *material geographies of social reproduction* have also been in significance a broader focus on certain forms of placeless social reproductive theory. By ‘material geographies of social reproduction’ I mean not only the gendered domestic labour involved in reproducing labour-power and the relations of production and reproduction (Dalla Costa and James 1972; Fortunati 1995; Federici 2012), but also the “manifestly spatial” articulations of social reproduction (Winders and Smith 2019:872). By this I mean the often women-led struggles around the *infrastructural means of social reproduction*: housing, health facilities, transport, social services, education facilities and leisure and public spaces (cf. Hall 2020). Rendering visible these innovative yet under-examined struggles in Italy through a spatial composition analysis, I aim to revivify an under-used archival resource for thinking through the diverse spatialised modalities of class recomposition emerging in contemporary social reproduction struggles (Mason-Deese 2012; Zechner and Rubner Hansen 2016; Mohandesi and Teitelman 2017; Gray 2018b; Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser 2019; Risager, 2021)

This paper contributes to a spate of recent work applying autonomist Marxist methods in this journal (Cumbers et al 2010; Gray 2018a, Brown 2019; Hastings and Cumbers 2019; Clare 2020). It aims to clarify the heuristic relevance of autonomist “territorial-community activism” in 1970s Italy (Bologna 2007:46) through a spatialised concept of *class composition* as an organising framework for contemporary urban struggle. The concept of class composition within autonomist Marxism has major utility for addressing prevalent subject-object, production-reproduction dichotomies in theory, as well as problems of internal differentiation in and between classed, raced and gendered social formations (Wright 2002; Toscano 2004; Negri 2005). Despite this potential, it has received remarkably little attention within critical urban/geographical literatures. This paper rectifies this by delving into the under-examined milieu of Operaismo, connecting the crucial concepts of class composition and ‘the tendency’, an anticipatory materialist methodology that was influential within autonomist Marxism

(Toscano 2004; Tomba 2013; Mezzadra 2013), with tendential thinking on the production of space, capital switching and the urbanisation of capital in urban theory (Lefebvre, 1991, 2003; Harvey, 1985). In doing so, the paper aims to show how a spatialised form of ‘compositionism’ (see Berardi 2009:75) can inform contemporary urban theory and praxis, and simultaneously how an urban lens can help illuminate the implicit spatial politics of Italian autonomist Marxism. This will be accomplished by deepening my own work on the spatialities of Italian autonomy (Gray 2012, 2018a, 2018c, Gray forthcoming) with the first extended elaboration of the concept of *spatial composition* (see Toscano 2004; Gray 2018a, 2018c; Brown 2019; Clare 2018, 2020 for nascent iterations). This spatialised conception of Italian autonomist Marxism emphasises the underestimated political-strategic importance of tendential urbanisation to the material geographies, or the *where*, of social reproduction and its subjects.

In its original formulation, class composition involves a protean dialectical relation between ‘technical’ and ‘political’ composition. Technical composition pertains to organised capitalist production, including the division of labour, technological development, planning, supervision and discipline. Political composition refers to the degree that waged and unwaged subjects make collective social force, the overcoming of divisions in and between wage workers and non-wage workers, and the extension of unified organization a basis for counter-power (Bologna 1991; Wright 2002; Negri 2005). Class compositionism is historical-materialist, reflexive and immanent in character, emphasising the “strict bond between subjectivity and objectivity, between mode of production and mode of rebellion” in mutable processes of composition, decomposition and recomposition (Battaglia 2018). *Spatial compositionism* acknowledges both the profound impact of tendential urbanisation (Lefebvre 2003; Harvey 1985) on class composition and the ‘spatial turn’ in social sciences, with a particular emphasis on the classed production, management and contestation of urban space. However, if the spatial turn has often been accompanied by a “deficit of praxis”, then spatial composition analysis, drawing on the partisan, insurgent tenets of Operaismo and compositionism is premised on a radical political topology and an antagonistic relation between “subjective forms of political action and the shifting configurations of space” (Toscano 2004:197,198). Simultaneously excavating the urban environment and the arena of social reproduction as key sites of political-economic contestation, spatial compositionism, I argue, allows for a more extended discussion of heterogenous political recomposition beyond the formal workplace. Crucially, class composition analysis can provide theoretical explanation and empirical evidence for

understanding how seemingly disparate social phenomena might be shaped into class alliances (class recomposition).

The aims of this paper are threefold. Firstly, a more spatialised conception of Italian autonomy. Secondly, a fully developed concept of spatial composition, underscoring its relevance for a contemporary politics of space. Thirdly, a reappraisal of seminal Marxist-feminist debates and praxis around social reproduction through the lens of tendential urbanisation and spatial composition. The first half of the paper proceeds with a brief overview of Italian Operaismo and the method of class composition, before redefining the notions of class composition and the tendency in spatial terms and in relation to the urbanisation of capital. The second half of the paper charts how urbanisation transformed the spatial composition of capital in postwar Italy via secondary literature on Italian urban history, urban sociology, movement documents and urban theory, before examining how feminist debates and movements around social reproduction addressed the new urban conditions. In conclusion, I argue that a tendential understanding of these spatial processes at a compositional level deepens the heuristic value of both urban struggle and autonomist-feminist struggle in 1970s Italy, providing a concrete legacy and inspiration for a renewed, expanded and entwined politics of urban space and social reproduction in the present era.

### **Italian Autonomy and Class Composition: Marx Without Deference**

New production regimes, new forms of waged and unwaged work, new struggles: a new class composition. As always, changes to the composition of the working class demand a debate about the meaning of revolutionary politics—of what, in these different circumstances, it actually means to abolish the capital relation and its state (Wright 1995).

A full grasp of spatial composition as a method requires some understanding of Italian Operaismo and its primary theoretical contribution: class composition. Operaismo is renowned for the worker-student struggles focused primarily on the auto-plants and chemical works of Northern Italy, peaking in the ‘Hot Autumn’ of 1969 with five and half million workers (25 percent of the labour force) on strike (Brodhead 1984). The broader phase of struggle was bookended by the launch of the *Quaderni Rossi* journal in 1961 and the eventual defeat of the workers in the Mirafiori Fiat auto-plant of Turin in 1980 (Wright 2002).<sup>1</sup> Italian autonomy was far from homogenous yet was identifiable by a common theoretical matrix and a predominantly

extra-parliamentary form (Wright 2008). There is not the space here to provide a comprehensive review. However, numerous overviews in the English language are now available, capturing the innovative conceptual repertoire of Italian autonomy: the ‘Copernican inversion’ of perspectives in the capital-labour relation (the class as motor of development rather than capital), workers’ inquiry or *conricerca* (co-research), the mass worker, the critique of the planner state, the refusal of work, the social factory, and wages for/against housework (Cleaver 1979; Wright 2002; Lotringer and Marazzi 2007; Tronti 2019). These categories are all underpinned by a return to the categories of Marx, albeit one “without deference” (Fortunati 2013), and the signature methodology of class composition.

‘Autonomy’, within Operaist currents, means the autonomy of the waged and unwaged to define their own interests and struggle for them; workers’ autonomy from official organisations (often but not always including political parties and trade unions); and sometimes, autonomy from other groups *within* the movement (e.g. autonomy of women from men). Autonomy, in this register, does not mean ‘freedom’ in any idealist sense, rather it means collective self-direction by subjects in struggle against capitalist relations with an understanding that such struggles are immanent to capitalist relations themselves. There is no “good outside” of capitalist relations in the Italian Marxist variant of autonomist thought (Böhm et al 2010). Class compositionism is an immanent method of inquiry and praxis that aims to discover and help generalise self-conscious, reflexive movements which are the antagonistic social expression of general tendencies in the new class composition (Bologna 2007). If the ‘Copernican inversion’ of perspectives in Italian autonomy has sometimes led to a rather unempirical Negrian affirmationism, it is vital also to stress the problem of class *decomposition*: “a process every bit as real as that of recomposition” (Wright 2002:224). Decomposition refers to fragmentation, division and de-massification within both the technical and political composition of capital, for instance via de-industrialisation. Yet, decomposition is always in a mutable relation with political *recomposition*, the massification and unification of struggles on the terrain of the new technical composition of capital. These processes, as I will show shortly, cannot be divorced from the internal contradictions of capitalism and the tendency of capital towards concentration, fragmentation or crisis.

Beyond the “completely mythologised class” constructed by the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and Italian Socialist Party (PSI), many autonomist militants sought an exit from the orthodox labour movement from the early-1960s<sup>2</sup> and an immanent response to the “actual reality of

class exploitation” (Romano Alquati cited in Wright 2002:51). Fine-grained compositional inquiries into the material bond “between workers’ outlooks and behaviours and the form of production” mitigated against reified notions of an essentialised ‘working class’ (Battaglia 2018). This fostered a “theory of praxis or subjectivation”, on the one hand, and “a theory of historical change” on the other (Toscano (2004:198). A useful insight into the political utility of compositionism can be grasped through Sergio Bologna’s (1976, 1991) historical accounts of the ascendancy of the ‘mass worker’ (the relatively undifferentiated, unskilled assembly line worker of Taylorism-Fordism), and the decline of the skilled ‘professional worker’ in the German workers’ councils of the 1920s. For Bologna, the workers’ willingness to self-manage the production process in the workers’ council movements in 1920s Germany arose because of their structural position and self-identification as skilled “professional aristocracies” within the specialised machine and tool industries (Bologna 1976:69). Yet, if this confidence was materially dependent on capital’s need for highly skilled labour, Taylorist/Fordist assembly line processes were already undermining the material basis of such work, and with it the culture of self-management, just as it was being affirmed by the Left in the shape of workers’ councils:

Ford’s innovations were merely a qualitative advance in terms of machinery; in the long run, they represented the progressive extinction of the kind of worker who had ties to his machine, to his company, and to his craft. The highly skilled worker of the engineering industry was to give way to the modern assembly-line worker, who was de-skilled, without roots, highly mobile and interchangeable (Bologna 1976:71).

If capital’s means of attack on the self-management culture of the workers’ councils was “the technological path to repression” (Baldi 1972:11), rather than mourn this loss nostalgically, Italian autonomists theorised the recomposition of industry in this period as a means of raising capital-labour contradictions to a higher cycle of struggle, socialising and generalising antagonistic tendencies in-and-against mass industry through the category of the ‘mass worker’. The mass worker was not a ready-made category handed to Operaismo by the objective reality of industrial development, but rather a strategic neologism designed to conceptualise the recomposition of the labour force within mass industry (Bologna 1991). The demands of the mass worker diverged significantly from the sectional interests of the ‘official labour movement’ (Negri 2005). The mass worker sought to overcome divisions within the production process and *within* the class, demanding the abolition of wage differences and hierarchical job classifications and rejecting piecework and other productivity-linked bonuses that caused

speed-up of labour and extended the working day. They mobilised an array of classic and innovative worker strategies, including ‘wildcat’, ‘checkerboard’ and ‘hiccup’ strikes (short heavily disruptive strikes at sporadic intervals in and between plants), ‘working to rule’, sabotage, occupations and internal factory demonstrations (Brodhead 1984).

One limitation of the mass worker concept was in its primary focus on the typically male waged workplace, neglecting the unwaged labour of social reproduction, undertaken primarily by women (Dalla Costa and James 1972). Yet, key autonomist feminists emerging from Potero Operaia have acknowledged their dues to Operaismo and the receptivity of the milieu to diverse social subjects, extending the scope of the workers’ movement by embracing students, educators and migrants within a new class composition (Fortunati 2013).<sup>3</sup> For instance, the Southern migrant was often viewed as an ‘othered’ competitor and ‘scab’ by the trade unions, even if Southern migrants comprised up to 60 percent of such strategically important workforces as Fiat Mirafiori in Turin (Vasudevan 2017). By contrast, Operaists viewed the Southern migrant’s difference affirmatively as a vital antagonistic element of the mass worker subject—colloquially termed the ‘rude pagan race’ contra the obedient Northern worker-producer exalted by the PCI. Indeed, the centrality of the Southern migrant to the mass worker subject is captured by Wright (2008:125): “in the seventies, ‘migrant worker’ was almost another way of saying ‘mass worker’ within the operaista lexicon”. The pugnacious tactics of the mass worker in Italy’s ‘Hot Autumn’, achieved major wage increases, delinked from productivity deals, but tied to decreases in work rhythms, and the erosion of piecework and divisive wage differentials between workers (Dowson 1973). Between 1969-1973, wage costs per unit in Italy increased by 47 percent, a significantly higher ratio than other industrialised countries in Europe (Brodhead 1984), thus contributing to a tendential profit crisis and the restructuring of industrial development in Italy.

Attempting to grasp the new political composition arising from crisis-generated restructuring in the early 1970s, Negri (1987) argued that just as Taylorism-Fordism created the conditions for the emergence of the mass worker, so de-industrialisation and decentralisation created the conditions for the emergence of the ‘socialised worker’. Defined loosely by productivity, sociability and cognitive capacity across the entirety of social relations under capitalism, the socialised worker figure was viewed by factions of post-Operaismo as a new revolutionary subject for the 1970s. Yet political agency cannot simply be read off material relations in the technical composition of capital. For many within Operaismo, the socialised worker category



lacked empirical veracity and abandoned the rigour of composition analysis to impute revolutionary credibility on a speculative and unproven social subject. This conception tended to flatten out class reality and erase important internal differences within the class (Wright 2002; Battaglia 2018). Notwithstanding the limits of the mass worker and socialised worker categories, the search for immanent iterations of political recomposition within historically conjunctural trajectories of capital accumulation remains pressing. In the following sections on the tendency, tendential urbanisation and the material geographies of social reproduction, I argue that an historical understanding of spatial composition provides a vital methodology for understanding and challenging tendential urbanisation in the new composition of capital while simultaneously offering potential solutions to the organisational problems of difference across sectors and *within* the class across the wider social terrain.

### **The Method of the ‘Tendency’ and the Tendential Urbanisation of Capital**

And yet it was not so difficult to find in Marx *the relationship between the theory of crisis and the theory of working-class political composition* (Negri 2005:53).

The autonomist method of the tendency can help explicate the notion of spatial composition via the urbanisation of capital. Hardt and Negri (2006) provide a brief excursus on Marx’s tendential method in *Multitude*. When Marx conceived of the industrial proletariat as a coming revolutionary subject in the mid-nineteenth century, they argue, industry constituted only a small proportion of the major European economies with agriculture still dominant in quantitative terms. Yet Marx recognised a *tendency* of industrial development that would become increasingly hegemonic, providing the material basis of future struggles. The method of the tendency then seeks to blast open the reified appearance of contemporary capitalist relations, revealing how the developing tendencies of history might constitute a more pertinent reality than contemporary facticity (Noys 2010). Yet for Operaists, identifying latent trends in the developing technical composition of capital is nothing without exposing capitalist development’s limits and crisis points and pointing to their potential overcoming through political recomposition (Bologna 2007; Toscano 2004). In Negri’s early 1970s work, he shows how Marx’s concept of the tendency was based on his theorisation of the ‘tendency of the rate of profit to fall’ (TRPF) in *Capital* volume III (Marx 1991)—a conception at the heart of Marx’s crisis theory (Clarke 1994). But if the theory of the TRPF has sometimes been accompanied by a rather deterministic and “mechanistic theory of catastrophe” (Negri 2005:51), the method of

the tendency, by contrast, insists that collective class organisation is indispensable to the supersession of capitalism.

Tomba (2013) and Mezzadra (2013) problematise a teleological presupposition identifiable in the work of Negri, that was also sometimes assumed within Operaismo's conception of the tendency—the notion that conflict between labour and capital is best undertaken where the capitalist production process has reached its highest level of development. On the one hand, Negri (2005:xliv) observes that notions of a simultaneous, inter-connected development of capitalism and counter struggle had become a “bad dialectic” even in the 1970s. On the other, his conception of the socialised worker suggests a ‘stage’ of capitalism *beyond* heavy industry while simultaneously *assuming* a correlation between capitalist reality and anti-capitalist form. Tomba and Mezzadra, by contrast, emphasise the simultaneity of different labour regimes and forms of exploitation in the present, underscoring the dis-homogeneity of contemporary class composition and questioning the notion of any hegemonic ‘new social subject’ comparable to the homogenised mass worker of the 1960s. Yet, Negri's most useful interpretation of the tendency is evident when he argues against over-determining predictive schemas and for an “adventure of reason” concerned with the *potential* for collective militant organisation immanent to shifting yet materially determinate historical social relations:

The tendency is in no sense a necessary and inevitable law governing reality. The tendency is a general schema that takes as its starting point an analysis of the elements that make up a given historical situation. On the basis of that analysis, it defines a method, an orientation, a direction for mass political action. (Negri 2005:27)

The ‘given historical situation’ or determinate historical framework of capitalism, at least in Italy and the OECD countries, no longer has the same coherence of that which inaugurated the mass worker, and the socialised worker never became the homogenous political subject that Negri predicted. As Bologna (2007) stresses, political recomposition—the generalisation and unification of disparate struggles—is more likely to arise from a material base of *dis-homogeneity* rather than homogeneity in the de-industrialised era. Nevertheless, reflexive understandings of the contemporary technical composition of capital should not preclude attempts to grasp *general tendencies* in contemporary capitalist development in order to understand *potential* material bases for wider and more unified processes of political recomposition. Briefly, we can think such a general tendency in terms of spatial composition,

by connecting Italian development in the latter half of the twentieth century with exemplar urban theory on the urbanisation of capital as a tendential process (Lefebvre 2003; Harvey 1985).

I have previously suggested that Lefebvre's conception of 'territorial autogestion' parallels, in theory, the concrete spatial praxis of 'territorial-community activism' in 1970s Italy (Gray 2018a). It is my contention here that a simple theorisation of tendential urbanisation, considered in relation to compositionism and the tendency, can help reveal the political limits of Operaismo's prioritisation of the factory. At the same time, it can help clarify how, in the face of industrial crisis and labour recalcitrance, the technical composition of capital in 1970s Italy—planning, development, command—was increasingly geared towards urbanisation and necessarily engendered an immanent autonomist politics of space. This argument can be somewhat schematically summarised through three major tendential concepts introduced by Lefebvre: the production of space, the urbanisation of capital and capital switching ('tendential' because they locate significant urban transformation within historical/temporal passages and because they account for crisis in their formulation).

Underpinning Lefebvre's notion of the production of space is his conception of 'abstract space' (Stanek 2011). His characterisation of abstract space was based on what Hegel termed the 'concrete universal', meaning that the concepts of production and the act of producing have a "certain abstract universality" within the shifting temporal relations of capitalism (Lefebvre 1991:15). This conjunctural understanding was key to Marx's historically determinate understanding of 'production in general' as the cornerstone of capitalist development and his theorisation of a generalised antagonistic capital-labour relation in the production process (Marx 1993). Lefebvre applied a similar understanding *spatially* through the concept of abstract space, which, he argued, "corresponds [...] to abstract labour—Marx's designation for labour in general" (Lefebvre 1991:307). For Marx and Lefebvre, these real abstractions correspond to historically specific general tendencies in capitalist development, forming a material basis for immanent, dialectical anti-capitalist militancy whether in the workplace, urban space, or across these terrains.

By 1970, Lefebvre (2003) contended that urbanisation was becoming increasingly central to capital accumulation strategies, the economic exchange of space/habitat, and the reproduction of the relations of production. At the core of this process, Lefebvre argued, was a general

‘switch’ of capital from the ‘primary’ sector of industry and manufacturing to the ‘secondary’ sector of land, real estate, housing and the built environment. This ‘capital switching’ thematic has since been developed by numerous urban scholars (Harvey 1985; Beauregard 1994; Christophers 2011) but it was Lefebvre who first grasped this tendential process of urbanisation and he did so in an extraordinarily prescient manner. Lefebvre’s proposition that the secondary sector was *supplanting* the first was initially overstated, but his speculative thesis is better understood as identifying an evolving historical tendency that has only proven more pervasive over time. Corresponding with autonomist understandings of tendency and crisis, Lefebvre conceived of capital switching as intimately bound up with socio-economic crisis. Defenders and critics of political economy alike, he observed, have long understood that over-investment in real estate is an “unhealthy situation” for capital since it disavows an underlying crisis of productive growth while contributing nothing to its resolution (Lefebvre 2003:159-160). Yet, perhaps beyond crisis switching from industry to the built environment, we are now closer to Beauregard’s (1994) view that urbanisation and rent seeking are central to contemporary capital accumulation strategies *irrespective* of conditions in the primary circuit.

A full review of contemporary urbanisation literature is not feasible here. It is enough to say that Lefebvre’s seminal views on tendential urbanisation are widely verified by material reality. As Stein (2019) observes, at a global level, real estate now accounts for 60 percent of the world’s assets, with roughly 75 percent of that figure tied up in housing. Yet, I would argue that the full political valence of this tendential shift for immanent and *generalised* anti-capitalist struggle has remains underexplored by the workers’ movement, in Italy as elsewhere. In the following sections, I address this lacuna through spatial composition analysis, briefly evidencing extensive urban restructuring in post-war Italy in empirical form, before showing, through a combination of empirical evidence, activist and scholarly documentation and my own speculative reflections, how tendential spatial composition activated immanent new forms of political recomposition at the point of social reproduction.

### **Urban Restructuring (Italian-Style)**

In Francesco Rosi’s film, *Hands over the City* (1963), Rod Steiger, playing a corrupt land developer and politician in Naples, tells a gathering of colleagues to shift their investments from industry to land and property: “today’s new gold”. “Why start a factory and have all that hassle with workers?” he asks, “here we can simply build and watch the rents roll in”. The

scene presciently illustrates the social dynamics of urbanisation in this period, suggesting how a new technical spatial composition of capital was developing in 1960s Italy, and the potential repercussions for industrial workers arising therefrom. Between 1955 and 1975, around 25 million people (half the population) changed their place of residence in Italy, especially from rural to urban areas and from South to North, placing enormous pressure on Northern urban infrastructure.<sup>4</sup> The extraction of rent had always been a strength for the Northern bourgeoisie (Balestrini and Moroni 2021) and mass internal migration generated major new markets for rentiers and the Northern construction industry, which became a key sector of Italian national development in the post-war era (Mingione 1977). Housing construction accounted for 29 percent of total fixed capital investment between 1960 and 1975. This is a significantly higher ratio than other industrialised countries in Europe that rebuts any notions of a merely ‘secondary’ land and property sector in post-war Italy (Ginatempo 1979).

Within a wider tendency of capital switching, industrial capital began to invest heavily in property in 1963 following industrial unrest and a downturn in Italy’s industrial growth model. Moreover, following the trajectory of inter-war fascist regimes in Catholic Italy and Spain—where the construction sector, homeownership and ‘familistic’ welfare regimes were central planks of the national economy and authoritarian social order (Di Felicianantonio and Aalbers 2018)—the building sector primarily supplied housing for private home ownership, with marginal state intervention in public housing reflecting its role as a “necessary counterpart to the private-sector orientation of the building industry” (Ginatempo 1979:477). State housing policy, dependent on the banks for sources of credit, had to appease a construction sector that demanded guaranteed high returns on investment capital. The construction sector was also facilitated by tax exemptions, infrastructural development, new eviction legislation in favour of landlords and the eschewal of rent controls and municipal obligations (Ginatempo 1979).

As Ginatempo (1979:465) observes, Italian employers and political parties historically turn to housing construction as a “clearing-house of the employment crisis” whenever social tensions arise through industrial crisis. Such practices, however, mean “freezing capital in an alternative form to industrial capital” (Ibid:469), resulting in a switching of crises from the primary to the secondary sector (Lefebvre 2003; Harvey 1985). In a period of fluctuating economic crises between 1964 and 1979, investment in property maintained substantial profits while workers were consigned to excessively priced, sub-standard housing on a grand scale (Ginatempo 1979). By 1971, many workers were sleeping six-to-eight to a room, shanty towns spread

throughout the large Northern industrial cities, and rents consumed up to 40 percent of wages in parallel with steep inflationary rises in the cost of living (Dowson 1973). The main state housing agencies at the time, INA-Casa and later GesCaL, oversaw a decrease in the proportion of state intervention in new house building from 18.1 percent to 2.3 percent of total investment between 1951 and 1975, a miserable rate by comparative European standards (Mingione 1977). By 1977, Belgium, Great Britain, France and Holland held between 45 and 75 percent of public housing as a percentage of existing housing stock yet Italy held only 7-8 percent (Ginatempo 1979). This brief analysis foregrounds the technical compositional side of Italy's post-war urbanisation process, but it would be meaningless politically without exploring the dialectic between capitalist urbanisation, urban struggle and political recomposition. Fortunately, this socio-spatial dialectic was documented by an often-submerged range of autonomous activists and scholarly accounts, especially during the 1970s.

### **The Tribe of Moles and 'Territorial Community Activism'**

Although they have received insufficient attention, it should be no surprise that the "insoluble contradictions, sources of continual social tension" in the new spatial composition of 1970s Italy simultaneously engendered "wage struggles at factory level, and community struggles against the housing shortage and the class utilisation of towns" (Ginatempo 1979:469-70). A telling compositionist analyses of this urban contestation can be found in Sergio Bologna's 'The Tribe of Moles' (2007), written at the zenith of Autonomia's 'movement of 1977'. Seminally documenting and theorising the 'new social subjects' (waged and unwaged) arising from industrial and urban restructuring, Bologna provides an autonomist interpretation of (urbanised) finance and class recomposition (see Wright 2013), arguing that a considerable part of the political behaviour of the young proletariat during the mid-1970s should be understood as "starting from city planning as a space of intervention in class dynamics" (Bologna 2007:43).

The specific relation between industry, planning, monetary crisis and lucrative internal land and property markets which Bologna outlines closely parallels Lefebvre's capital switching thesis. Property, Bologna (2007:42) observes, was the "first refuge" for the security of the savings of the Italian petit bourgeoisie, and "the basis of the empire" for petrodollars, real estate investment trusts, insurance companies, pension funds, and "the most adventurous kinds of speculative activity". Real estate investment in Italy was intimately bound up with the 'party system', with the PCI and the conservative Christian Democrats (DC) controlling vast tracts of

land, yet with the construction interest holding the financial power to direct development dynamics. Between these factors, land bargaining provided the means to diversify capital from the industrial economy into the property sector, with the construction cycle functioning “as a pump to drain away income from workers and redistribute it to the middle classes on the one hand, and to the ‘construction interest’ on the other” (Bologna 2007:42). Specific financial structures were created to make capital more fungible so that city centres which had previously operated as zones for the “petrification of capital” were now subject to crisis-derived special speculative institutions which accelerated the transfer of property deeds and gave “a considerable impulse to the velocity of circulation of money, without it passing through a process of production” (Bologna 2007:42).

For Bologna, as noted previously, this technical compositional analysis could only be meaningful if it contributed to the potential for political recomposition within the new spatial composition of capital. Rather than yearning back to the relatively homogenous conditions of the mass worker, he insisted that political organisation must measure itself day by day against the new composition of the class, starting “*from a base of dishomogeneity*” incorporating hitherto marginalised groups such as women, migrants, students and the unwaged (Bologna 2007:51). If attacks on the wage via housing costs forced class stratification via suburbanisation and if rent functioned as an instrument of decomposition and geographical dis-unification (Balestrini and Moroni 2021), Bologna maintained that the “reconquest of the city centres” through waves of “territorial-community activism” was a necessary response to this marginalising, fragmenting and decentring process (Bologna 2007:46).

Many such forms of territorial community activism were documented in a vein of under-examined autonomist activist texts documenting the explosive urban struggles of the 1970s. If the autonomist politics of the mass worker period were based on “an objective relation to the form of production and a resulting homogeneity of behaviours and political objectives” (Battaglia 2018), the urban struggles of 1970s Italy based their praxis on a new spatial composition arising from urbanisation as an increasingly central pivot of capital accumulation (Gray 2018a). The ‘new social subject’ borne from this shifting technical composition of capital was increasingly concerned with “conquering and managing its own ‘spaces’” through “the concrete and articulated exercise of power on the social terrain” (Castellano et al 1996:231). The confluence between urbanisation, social reproduction and class recomposition can be grasped in autonomist accounts documenting the overlapping ‘Take over the City’ and

‘autoreduction’ movements. Challenging consumer price inflation, property speculation and the tyranny of rent, Lotta Continua (1973:90), with bases in the student movement, the factory, and the wider community, launched the ‘Take over the City’ campaign in 1970 as an extended “part of the total working-class struggle”. *Take over the City—Community Struggles in Italy* (Lotta Continua 1973) documents multiple urban struggles in this period, including rent strikes, demands that rent should be no more than 10 percent of wages, squatting, mass occupations, grassroots assemblies, autonomist street demonstrations and the formation of independent tenants’ unions for the first time.

The drive to construct surplus private flats at the expense of desperately needed public housing produced thousands of empty new homes across Italy (Marcelloni 1979). This generated social discontent and a signature autonomist politics of appropriation (Gray 2018a). Over 20,000 apartments were occupied in Italy between 1969 and 1975 (Chierki and Wieviorka 2007; Vasudevan 2017). In Milan, 50,000 workers demonstrated in support of housing occupations, and in Turin, factory council strikes wedded to mass housing occupations forged direct links between workers and struggles in the sphere of consumption (Marcelloni 1979). The autonomist nature of these urban struggles founded “an alternative form of territorial organisation and power”, with the struggle for more public housing forming “a demand for the transformation of housing from a commodity [...] to something to be allocated according to its use value” (Marcelloni 1979:259). Conversely, the PCI, PSI and associated unions broadly sought to contain urban struggles within their own structures, pressuring existing institutions for (limited) reform rather than challenging the capitalist organisation of society as a whole (Ginatempo 1979; Quirico 2021).

Grasping the prevailing tendential urbanisation, widespread urban struggles moved from particular to general opposition against the capitalist organisation of the city, while simultaneously developing autonomist forms of self-organisation and class recomposition (Laganà et al 1982). Occupied social centers started to appear in Milan and Rome in the mid 1970s. Established by ‘Proletarian Youth Circles’ in opposition to urban speculation and austerity, they demanded state funding for social services while simultaneously providing social space to meet immediate reproductive and cultural needs (Cunningham 2015; Mudu 2004). Ignited by a general strike for housing in July 1969, Turin, Italy’s major ‘factory-city’, was especially tumultuous in the period between 1969 and 1976. Giving concrete articulation to the often ‘phantom’ claims of the ‘social factory’ thesis (Gray, forthcoming), this urban



contestation functioned as a “socialisation of class conflict, extending outwards from the factory to the whole society” (Laganà et al 1982:226).

The primary drivers of urban struggle in Turin were contemporary industrial-economic crisis, the urbanisation of capital, and the Carli Plan of 1974 (Chierki and Wieviorka 2007). This all-too-familiar austerity plan shifted the burden of Italian economic reform onto the working class through industrial restructuring and inflationary price rises at the level of consumption. Beset by massive increases in public service costs and circumscribed politically by industrial restructuring in the workplace, the defence of workers’ salaries and purchasing power necessarily involved “struggling in the area of consumption” (Chierki and Wieviorka 2007: 78). Indeed, Laganà et al (1982) identify 250 significant episodes of urban struggle in Turin between 1969 and 1976, with 51 percent of cases involving housing, peaking in 1974-75 following the post-crisis restructuring of the auto industry. Organised through autonomist comitati di quartiere (community committees) and comitati di lotta (local action committees), often with the support of radical bases in the unions, housing actions (1969-1973), soon developed into mass movements against big infrastructure planning (motorways, new towns) at the municipal scale (1974-76), helping overturn 30 years of DC governmental control in 1975.

‘Autoreduction’—whereby consumers collectively reduce prices for goods and services—became a central tactic in the autonomist movements. Economic crisis, state repression and an inflation rate of over 25 percent set off a wave of such struggles to protect living standards across Italy (Ramirez 1992). The practice of autoreduction was an important innovation for a number of reasons: firstly, it directly violated the rules of money, property and the law; secondly, it opened up the field of social reproduction and was often led by women and migrants, thus developing the base through processes of recomposition; thirdly, it was often undertaken in consort with radical factions of the unions, challenging the conservatism of mainstream unionism (Ramirez 1992; Chierki and Wieviorka 2007). The autoreduction of transport, utility, leisure, and housing costs (including rent strikes) became crucial aspects of a wider movement “for the re-appropriation of social wealth produced by the working class but unpaid by capital” (Ramirez 1992:186), while developing new terrains of struggle in the arena of social reproduction. As such, autoreduction struggles both “engendered the theoretical developments” of autonomist Marxism “and were clarified by them” (Cleaver 1979:59).

Arguing that compositional analysis is only meaningful if it can uncover the new tendencies of capital accumulation and the new composition of the class, Bologna asked: where are the “mass objectives” which characterised the ‘Hot Autumn’ of 1969? Where are the “new Mirafioris”<sup>5</sup> that might arrest the fragmentation and splintering of “a thousand decentralised moments of struggle”? (Bologna 2007:59-60). In his compositional understanding of the relation between emergent class struggles and urbanisation processes in 1970s Italy, he locates some developing *tendencies* of spatial composition and political recomposition which remain highly perspicacious today. Notably, for Bologna, the emergence of autonomist-feminism in the early 1970s was decisive in the transformation of the wider autonomist movement, prising open the terrain of social reproduction as an essential site of class contestation and social recomposition. As such, after briefly reprising their distinctive contribution to debates on the domestic labour debate and social reproduction, the following section asks what a spatial compositionist prism might add to our understanding of this milieu. The section provides what can only be at this stage a rather provisional theses on how grasping the concept of spatial composition can help us understand the importance of producing and contesting what I term the ‘material geographies of social reproduction’.

### **From the Domestic Labour Debate to the *Where* of Social Reproduction**

Once we see the community as a productive centre and thus a centre of subversion, *the whole perspective for generalised struggle and revolutionary organization is re-opened*” (Dalla Costa and James 1972:17).

As acknowledged in key feminist geographical surveys (Mitchell, Marston and Katz 2003; Norton and Katz 2017; Winders and Smith 2019), Italian autonomist-feminists produced foundational work on social reproduction and the domestic labour debate (see Dalla Costa and James 1972; Fortunati 1995; Federici 2004, 2012). Less discussed perhaps is the milieu’s emergence from Operaismo, including the Potere Operaio branch at the Porto Marghera petrochemical complex, Venice (Feltin and Sachetto 2021) where Maria Dalla Costa, Alisa Del Re and other female activist-intellectuals founded Lotta Femminista in 1971, then shortly after the international Wages for Housework (WfH) network in Padua. The decisive contribution of the WfH network was to correct a gendered lacuna in Marx’s analysis (Federici 2018), by arguing that the *reproduction of the commodity labour-power* is central to capitalist production and the reproduction of capitalist relations. As such, WfH demanded state wages for the

housework involved in “giving birth to, raising, disciplining and servicing the worker for production” (Dalla Costa and James 1972:28). Politically, this de-naturalisation and de-mystification of feminised and unwaged reproductive labour, meant that those who performed reproductive labour must now be understood as “socialised proletarian subjects with the power to struggle as a sector of the exploited class” (Gonzalez 2013).

The conceptual influence of Operaismo was evident in the ‘refusal of work’ and ‘social factory’ concepts, which were germane to autonomist-feminist social reproduction analyses. The ‘strategy of refusal’ is readily apparent in Federici’s characterisation, in 1975, of WfH’s demands as *Wages against Housework* (see Federici 2012:15-22). If male workers within Operaismo sought to negate themselves as producers of value for capital in the ‘hidden abode of [waged] production’ (Marx 1990:279-280), autonomist-feminist currents sought to negate themselves as (in)direct producers of value for capital in the ‘hidden abode of [unwaged] reproduction’ (Fortunati 1995). This position extended Operaismo’s refusal of work perspective to social reproductive activity, while developing an explosive *political perspective* that sought to revolutionise *all* social relations (Gonzalez 2013). WfH’s theoretical strategy can thus be understood, not as a liberal exit from housework through capitalist waged labour, but as a political perspective aiming to mobilise women and men in an expanded anti-capitalist project incorporating both reproductive and productive sectors (Federici 1984).

If unwaged gendered labour and housework was the primary theoretico-practical concern, a geographical/spatial perspective was also evident in Marxist-feminist reworkings of the ‘social factory’ concept. In ‘Factory and Society’, 1962, and ‘The Plan of Capital’, 1963, Mario Tronti (2019) had characterised the social factory as a diffuse site where society in its entirety had increasingly become subsumed as an articulation of production. If highly suggestive in terms of struggles across the social terrain (Cleaver 1979), in practice Operaismo’s focus remained primarily on the industrial waged workplace (Gray forthcoming). Yet, the extra-parliamentary autonomist groups, such as Lotta Continua and the autonomist-feminists, “grasped not only the theoretical concept of the social factory but also the key role of the struggle of non-factory workers—most of whom are women” (Cleaver 1979:58-59). This is evident in Dalla Costa and James’ seminal pamphlet, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community* (1972), where a political understanding of the home as a central site of *production* for capital is linked to the possibility of women’s emancipatory struggle across the entirety of capitalist social relations:

Every place of struggle outside the home, precisely because *every sphere of capitalist organisation presupposes the home*, offers a chance for attack by women; factory meetings, neighbourhood meetings, student assemblies, each of them are legitimate places for women's struggle (1972:38).

And yet Dalla Costa and James would also argue for a rejection of social services as facilitators of 'double work', providing capital with a higher degree of control and regimentation over women's waged and unwaged labour. Indeed, Dalla Costa (1988:25) later suggested that women's defence of the working-class wage through practical struggles around housing, collective canteens, utility bills and childcare provision, were "struggles in defence of a family structure", rather than struggles addressed to more fundamentally altering gender relations and the social relations of capital. This picture, however, is made more complex and contradictory by Dalla Costa's (1988) acknowledgement of the importance of social service provision for providing a degree of women's autonomy from reproductive labour and opening a new terrain of confrontation with the state. Indeed, the WfH network's demand for state payment for housework was influenced by state family allowance payments won in England, France and the United States (Dalla Costa 2015). Moreover, with the abandonment of Keynesian/New Deal policies since the late 1970s, an unprecedented "attack on *state investment in working-class reproduction*" (Dalla Costa 2015:6) foregrounded the question of socialised forms of state reproduction in new and urgent ways.

Federici provides an incisive autonomist anti-capitalist take on the tension between restoring or defending the welfare state or constructing more autonomous forms of reproduction. It is one thing, she contends, to appropriate and self-organise communal services before demanding the state pay for it, it is another to let the state organise communal consumption on its own terms: "In one case we regain some control over our lives, in the other we extend the State's control over us" (Federici 2012:21). Such issues were raised with great practical urgency in the wave of social reproductive struggles in 1970s Italy (Cunningham 2015; Gray 2018a). Notably, the 'feminist' content of these struggles was tied very closely to broader issues of class and community in popular, practical struggles within the wider autonomist and extra-parliamentary movements (Lotta Continua 1973; Ramirez 1992). This activity formed a theoretically related yet different form of struggle (with multiple unknown yet tremendously active women activists) to that which was applied by the more well-known writing and activism associated with Dalla

Costa, James, Fortunati, Federici and other now celebrated Marxist-feminist autonomist theorists associated with the WfH network. If analysis of the gendered labour process was (crucially and necessarily) central for the latter group, less so were the concepts of urbanisation and spatial composition, marking the tendential urbanisation of capital in this period. However, I would argue that is precisely this framework that could provide a compositional understanding of the particular spatialities of social reproduction, such that the full weight and significance of the social factory thesis could have been fully comprehended. This was grasped less by the seminal Marxist-feminist theorists of Italian autonomy and more by the women in groups like Lotta Continua, which made urbanisation, housing and social reproduction central pivots of organising during the 1970s (Quirico 2021).

If social reproduction is a “profoundly spatial phenomenon” (Winders and Smith 2019:872), then a practical political concept of spatial composition, recognising how social practices are immanently bound up within shifting configurations of space (Toscano 2004), can add vital resonance to historical and contemporary debates over social reproduction. A spatial composition perspective that focuses more on the *where* of tendential urbanisation and its social infrastructures—housing as commodity-form, neighbourhood restructuring, transportation, education, public spaces and social service, education and health facilities—provides an essential key to the where of social reproduction; to the sites and domains where social reproductive struggles are enabled or occur. This understanding of spatial composition can contribute to a distinctive politics of social reproduction that reinforces the idea of social reproduction as real *site of struggle* and follows recent demands for a materialist-feminism at the heart of a broader anti-capitalist front if it is to have any real effect on challenging contemporary capitalist relations of power (Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser 2019). This understanding can then align with feminist geographies that seek to focus social reproductive research and critique on how the urban environment contributes to oppressive, gendered structures of social relations (McDowell 1983), on the ‘scoured landscape’ of social reproduction (Katz 2008), the gendered ‘social infrastructure’ of social reproduction (Hall 2020; Luke and Kaika 2019) and radical planning potential for a ‘feminist city’ (Kern 2020). As Arruzza (2014) notes, it is one thing to document or itemise individual links between capitalism, gender oppression and social reproduction, but another to provide theoretical explanation for these disparate phenomena and their significance for class alliances (class recomposition). Bringing together tendential urban analysis with social reproductive theory and spatial composition analysis can provide a crucial methodology for comprehending how forms

of expanded class recomposition—for instance, Dalla Costa and James’ (1972) thwarted vision of a broader anti-capitalist, anti-racist and anti-patriarchal front—can emerge from struggles in what I call the *material geographies of social reproduction*.

### **Spatial composition and the material geographies of social reproduction**

By material geographies of social reproduction, I mean the ‘infrastructures of social reproduction’ (Luke and Kaika 2019), or ‘social infrastructures’ (Hall 2020), that take built form in the urban environment (housing, schools, transportation, hospitals, health centres, nurseries, leisure facilities, and other social service buildings and facilities). These infrastructures are best understood as manifestations of urbanisation and mark the geographical spaces where socialised social reproductive labour is enabled or occurs (to varying degrees). If the extent of gendered labour, as elaborated fully by Italian autonomist feminists, is typically overlooked in contemporary social infrastructures literature (Hall 2020), discussion of social struggle in these material infrastructures is largely absent in key autonomist-feminist works, despite a seeming theoretical grasp of the social factory concept. However, returning to the urban/social reproductive struggles of 1970s Italy through the lens of tendential urbanisation and spatial composition analysis—especially with extra-parliamentary groups such as Lotta Continua—we can see how conscious conflict in the material geographies of social reproduction helped to undermine orthodox divisions between the productive and reproductive spheres and to inaugurate new processes of class recomposition for a broader, more diverse anti-capitalist front (Gray 2018a; Quirico 2021).

Housing construction in the post-war era in Milan was a major tool of social stratification that entailed an enforced exodus from the city centres and the material geographies of social reproduction which had once sustained the working class (Balestrini and Moroni 2021). Citing similar issues in Turin, Bologna (2007) maintained that this fragmenting process of separation via urbanisation was the spur for the new processes of often women-led forms of ‘territorial-community activism’ in the arena of social reproduction. Through the 1970s, it had also become clear that any gains for male workers in relation to the wage were rarely a victory for unwaged women or the entire working class, since any wage rises were routinely recuperated by inflation at the level of consumption (Lotta Continua 1973; Ramirez 1992; Chierki and Wieviorka 2007; Feltrin and Sacchetto 2021). The extra-parliamentary Left’s conflict over the material geographies of social reproduction in this era challenged this divisive reality and was vital for

the new forms of class recomposition that developed on the terrain of social reproduction. That women were at the forefront of these struggles is made clear in the numerous, albeit somewhat obscured, activist-oriented sources and appraisals of this period I have flagged in this paper. This was largely a history of unknown women and men (mainly migrants from the South) whose heroic activist content has been insufficiently acknowledged—in this sense it is typical of many historic struggles over housing and community globally which have tended to be viewed as secondary in relation to workplace struggles (Gray 2018d).

According to *Lotta Continua*, which for the times had a comparatively high level of women in the general membership (26% in 1975) and acting as delegates (27.5% in 1976), women routinely led anti-eviction squads, organised rent strikes and demonstrations, developed links with nearby factory councils and confronted the rent collectors, fascists and police sent to disrupt mobilisations. At a theoretical level, women grasped how urban restructuring was reshaping their practical social experience and recognised that wage gains made inside the factories were being countered by “the use of inflation and property speculation” in the domestic sphere while social services were “determined solely by the needs of large firms”, rather than those who depended on them (*Lotta Continua* 1973:79). Grasping the necessity of independent action in this tendential urbanising context, large-scale housing occupations in this period often targeted empty modern blocks of apartments planned as workers’ housing for industrial workplaces then left vacant by speculators following industrial decline. The central concerns of women in these struggles are evidenced by new iterations of collective living often based on women’s social reproductive needs: autonomist daycare centres, communal kitchens and women-led reproductive health centres were established in numerous occupied buildings to meet pressing social needs, while also subverting atomising architectural design (*Lotta Continua* 1973:80). The profusion of autonomous women-led health centres across Italy in this period was one of the most striking material manifestations of feminist social reproduction theory, with contestation over state institutionalisation of the centres being a central issue throughout the 1970s. In some cases, the autonomy of the centres was defended vigorously; in other cases it was reluctantly acknowledged that some form of state co-option was impossible to deny, yet relative gains in collective social provision for women had been made (Bracke 2014).

The primary role of women was also a central theme in accounts of the widespread autoreduction campaigns across Italy. From January to March 1974 alone, around 5,000 new

private dwellings were occupied in Rome, with similar occurrences in Milan, Naples, Florence and Bologna (Marcelloni 1979). Attacked by inflation, urban speculation and austerity, it was understood that defending class interests and social resources necessarily required struggling at the point of consumption. In this context, Ramirez (1992:192) observes, autoreduction movements around housing and electricity especially, revealed with clarity “the importance of the home as a unit of production, and housewives as protagonists of the struggle against capitalist planning in this sphere”. Capital’s attempt to squeeze more value from unwaged housewives was viewed as an attempt to “contain the cost of labour power” in the context of a rising ‘family wage’ won through factory struggle (Federici 2012:8). As a consequence of the historic sexual division of labour and prevailing social norms, women’s material conditions of work were primarily confined to the home, thus becoming the immediate target of capital’s attack. This condition was accentuated under tendential urbanisation. Thus, struggles around housing and utilities in the material geographies of social reproduction became simultaneously women’s particular struggle against their increased domestic exploitation and part of a generalised contemporary struggle to reduce the rent and utilities burden for the entire working class (Ramirez 1992).

This brief and necessarily circumscribed history illustrates several key points. Firstly, the broader extra-parliamentary movement, especially Lotta Continua, were very aware of tendential urbanisation in Italy during the 1970s and the dialectical opportunities this presented for expanded compositional struggle across productive and reproductive spheres. If the term spatial composition was not used (to the author’s knowledge), something of this sense was vividly captured in the wave of urban, housing and community struggles across 1970s Italy, as explicitly captured in Lotta Continua’s nationwide ‘Take over the City’ campaign beginning in 1970 (Quirico 2021). This broader compositional understanding, I would argue, underscored the significance given to the new forms of struggles over social reproduction which emerged in the 1970s and fostered the expanded composition of those taking part and leading the struggle (including women, migrants, students and the unemployed). A profound legacy of this period is that we are left with a historical approach to urban and social reproductive organising that stresses how any social gains were less the fruit of enlightened policy and more the result of pressure exerted by urban movements’ self-organized struggle (Gray 2018a; Gray 2018d). A conscious grasp of tendential urbanisation and the possibilities of a new spatial composition of capital were central to this consciousness in my view, and this notion finds backing in various contemporary statements by Lotta Continua (Quirico 20201). In different ways, but from a



common background in Italian autonomist and social reproduction theory, there is a burgeoning contemporary body of work examining the link between urbanisation, spatial composition and what I term the material geographies of social reproduction (Mason-Deese 2012; Cuninghame 2015; Zechner and Hansen 2015; Mohandesi and Teitelman 2017; Gray 2018b). In these accounts, struggles over social reproduction in “neighbourhoods, apartments buildings, parks, schools and streets” are envisaged as “a primary site of class formation” and political subjectivation (Mohandesi and Teitelman 2017:52). What is essential is that, like the struggles of 1970s Italy, these new struggles are given theoretical explanation based on the concrete materiality of the new urbanised spatial composition; for this is what will create the necessary class alliances (class recomposition) needed to overturn capital’s dominance over humans and the built environment (see Arruzza 2014).

## **Conclusion**

This paper shows how a spatialised conception of class composition can shed new light on critical urban praxis and the material geographies of social reproduction, while simultaneously spatialising thinking around the history and politics of Italian autonomist Marxism. As Battaglia (2018) simply describes the critical meaning of class composition analysis, the behaviours, forms and needs expressed by political struggles are materially shaped by an objective relation with capital. Since such struggles are increasingly shaped by the play of capital in the urban environment, the concept of *spatial composition*—considered as a tendential form of capital accumulation and imbricated social relations—can help provide explanatory weight to the historically conjunctural relationship between “subjective forms of political action and the shifting configurations of space” (Toscano 2004:198). This materialist Marxist conception holds out great promise for self-conscious, reflexive movements which are the antagonistic social expression of general tendencies in the new class composition (Bologna 2007).

We should be wary of any direct transposition from a period that has long since passed, yet the urbanisation of capital, begun in the 1970s, has only become more entrenched today (Harvey 2012). Pulling together global data on land and property assets (see Stein 2019), tendential urbanisation has moved to realisation, with little sign of abatement in global urbanisation processes. In this context, the concept of spatial composition, provides a crucial, generalised materialist understanding of the potentialities of immanent political recomposition, not least

within the terrain of social reproduction. In a context where wage labour has become a vector of insecurity and instability and where traditional labour organisations and unions struggle to find a repertoire of shared images and signs that would address the symbolic splintering and fragmentation of the labour movement (Wacquant 2008), contemporary political struggles have often taken on fragmented and temporary forms, for instance as demonstrations and actions in public spaces. Thinking through the linked processes of urbanisation, spatial composition and social reproduction provides an opportunity to cohere this proliferation of “decentralised moments of struggle” (Bologna 2007:59-60) around common material concerns.

The urban and social reproductive struggles of 1970s Italy demonstrated the possibility of co-ordinated action and socio-spatial recomposition on the so-called ‘secondary front’ between the waged and unwaged, productive and unproductive workers, women and men, and autonomist groups and radical factions of the unions (Cherki and Wievorka 2007). As Bunge (1977) long ago observed, for the vast majority of the working class (waged and unwaged), the home and the neighbourhood never was a ‘secondary front’ and when social reproduction is properly foregrounded within the new urbanised spatial composition of capital, it can be re-considered as a vital nexus in the constitution of a renewed anti-capitalist initiative, blurring the boundaries of production and reproduction and extending geographically from the home to the workplace to the entirety of everyday life (see Katz 2001; Arruzza et al 2019). The diffuse movements of Italy’s social factory in the 1970s, long pre-empt recent demands that radical feminist insights be mobilised to actively shape and determine the broader anti-capitalist initiatives around production and social reproduction that are necessary to challenge and overcome the inherently hierarchical, divisive and exploitative social relations of capitalism (Arruzza et al 2019).

There is a basic banality in class composition theory which is often overlooked in contemporary political praxis. That is, anti-capitalist political struggle tends to be more efficacious, extensive and generalised when challenging the historically specific materiality of contemporary exploitation (with all its divisions and partitions). This is evidenced in the urban and social reproductive struggles in 1970s Italy which grasped in concrete praxis the immanent, dialectical political potential for class recomposition arising from the tendential urbanisation of capital and the new spatial composition of capital. The great merit of (spatialised) class composition theory is that it tackles this problematic head on, seeking to erase the false divisions and

separations that capital imposes on us for new forms of collective anti-capitalist political recomposition.

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This followed a wave of state repression in April 1979, including the arrest of 16,000 militants, premised on a civil 'state of emergency' declared by the Christian Democrats (DC) and legitimised by the PCI (see Lotringer and Marazzi 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Raniero Panzieri and Antonio Negri, for instance, emerged from the PSI, and Mario Tronti from the PCI.

<sup>3</sup> See interview with Alisa del Re, 26 July 2000. [https://www.autistici.org/operaismo/delre/index\\_1.htm](https://www.autistici.org/operaismo/delre/index_1.htm)

<sup>4</sup> "The workers may have the last word, not those who are on the outside". Ferruccio Gambino Interviewed by Ralf Ruckus, April 2018, *Gongchao*. <https://www.gongchao.org/2018/09/15/the-workers-may-have-the-last-word/>

<sup>5</sup> Mirafiori is a district in Turin that is home to Fiat's headquarters and was once the largest industrial complex in Italy. It was one of the key sites of struggle for the Italian mass worker movement.

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