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*Descensus ad Inferos: Man and Machine in the Postwar Industrial
Landscape of Vittorini's Politecnico*

Abstract

The end of World War II and the Liberation of Italy from the Nazi troops coincides with the emergence of a new role for intellectuals who try to juxtapose the physical liberation of the Italian peninsula with a cultural liberation. This is one of the reasons that led to the creation and circulation of many new journals that contributed to debates regarding contemporary society and the changes triggered by the advent of the “second industrial revolution”, the so-called “Italian Miracle”. One such journal, *Il Politecnico* (1945-1947) considers these changes by proposing an active role for the intellectual who must “protect” rather than “console” the human subject, as Elio Vittorini, the director of the periodical, states in the inaugural issue. This paper focuses on an excerpt from Franco Fortini’s contribution to the final issue of the journal, his “Diary of a Young Intellectual Bourgeois”, in which he describes his experience visiting a factory in 1947. Fortini, one of the most prolific and original authors of *Il Politecnico*, contributed essays, translations, and poems, always situating himself somewhere between literature and politics. In this piece, he provides a series of reflections on the new industrial landscape. My analysis closely examines Fortini’s encounter with a “monstrosity” at the “heart of the factory”: a sandblaster who is “condemned” to wear a “protective suit”, which is incapable of protecting the worker from losing his humanity day by day. The aim of this paper is to reveal, through the account of a rare factory visit of the ’40s, the problematic relationship between Human and Machine and the risks posed to the former by the new Italian industrialism.

Il Politecnico, which bore the subtitle “Settimanale di Cultura”, was a weekly Italian periodical published by the editor Giulio Einaudi between September

29, 1945 and December of 1947.¹ Displaying clear Marxist tendencies, the “cultural” magazine arose from a leftist group of intellectuals directly involved in Italy’s postwar liberation. It was supported by the Italian Communist Party (PCI), though not without considerable controversy (as evidenced by the pages written by Palmiro Togliatti, the leader of the PCI). In fact, the demise of the magazine, only two years after its founding, was caused by the controversy over the “relationship between cultural activity (or authority) and political activity (or authority)” (Fortini 1972, 70).

The relatively short interval of time during which *Il Politecnico* operates was nonetheless particularly intense and rich with regard to the numerous debates intended to shed new light – or shadows – on the various facets of recently liberated Italian society.² Among the many intellectuals that wrote for *Il Politecnico* were Felice Balbo, Adriano Buzzati, Franco Calamandrei, Italo Calvino, Giorgio Caproni, Giuseppe Del Bo, Franco Fortini, Giulio Preti, Stefano Terra, and Ugo Vittorini, to name only a few. The guiding principles of the journal were summarized by its director, Elio Vittorini, in the first issue and concern the role of the intellectual and the relationship between society and culture, principles that would be constantly reprised throughout the journal’s short publication history. Vittorini encourages a review of the principles at the nucleus of contemporary tensions in the dichotomy between society and culture. He asserts that culture should “protect” rather than simply “console” the individual and help individuals to free themselves from the societal chains of “exploitation and slavery” (Vittorini 1945). Vittorini affirms the historical necessity of a “new culture” and the formation of “a political and intellectual class” that would both absorb and transform the plurality of existing tensions in political consciousness:

1. The periodical was published on a weekly basis until April 6, 1946. *Il Politecnico* became a monthly magazine (“Mensile di Cultura Contemporanea”) on May 1, 1946 until the last issue of December 1947. For the differences between the two versions, see Zancan 1984.

2. Between the Liberation and the years immediately following WWII there was an intense growth of journals and periodicals, that can also be seen as a symbol of great hope for the new society. Cf. Mondello, 235.

Society is not culture because culture is not society. And culture is not society because inherent within it is the eternal refusal to “give Caesar his due” and because its principles are only *consolatory*, since they do not provide timely renewal or keep up efficiently with the times, as they live with society itself as society itself lives. Can we ever have a culture capable of protecting man from suffering instead of only comforting him? A culture that impedes and avoids suffering, that helps to eliminate exploitation and slavery, and to overcome poverty – this is the culture into which all old culture should be transformed.³

Among its various themes, «Il Politecnico» addresses social problems, politics, economy, philosophy, literature, art, and cinema. While many articles address the topic of industry in a broad sense, very few actually describe and depict factories or their inner workings. Among the relatively scarce examples are reports of prominent industrial corporations, such as Fiat and Montecatini published in several issues of the journal. The authors of such reports clearly show their political orientation by giving priority to recovering and rebuilding production without neglecting working conditions and the quality of life of factory workers. Technological progress should respect working conditions and be harnessed to improve the quality of work and life, a position in clear contrast with the Bedaux System and its standardization of human labor and work measurement, which was for a time adopted by Fiat, with the result that its employees were “exploited at length with scientific methods”,⁴ a rationalized hell where “the Tramp miraculously manages to come out alive” (*ibid.*). The reference to the film *Modern Times*,

³ *Ibid.* [La società non è cultura perché la cultura non è società. E la cultura non è società perché ha in sé l’eterna rinuncia del «dare a Cesare» e perché i suoi principii sono soltanto *consolatori*, perché non sono tempestivamente rinnovatori ed efficacemente attuali, viventi con la società stessa come la società stessa vive. Potremo mai avere una cultura che sappia proteggere l’uomo dalle sofferenze invece di limitarsi a consolarlo? Una cultura che le impedisca, che le scongiuri, che aiuti a eliminare lo sfruttamento e la schiavitù, e a vincere il bisogno, questa è la cultura in cui occorre che si trasformi tutta la vecchia cultura]. My translation.

⁴ [Alla Fiat l’uomo fu sfruttato a lungo con metodi scientifici], (V. P. 1945). On Charles Bedaux and his relationship with Italian companies, and Fiat in particular, see Bigazzi and Bloomenkrantz 2000). Regarding the relevance of scientific methods in models of industrial production, Matthias Kipping reminds us that “in 1930, the Bedaux System had become the most widely used method of payment-by-results in the United States” (1999, 197). See also Laloux 1950.

which came out during the same period in which the Bedaux System was adopted in the Fiat factories, serves as an admonishment against what a factory should not be.

The alternative proposed by the journal is to make factories a place of “social justice that reassures workers” rather than a place where workers are subjugated by capitalistic power and in which being alive paradoxically comes to mean “no longer having any reason to live”.⁵ It follows that the concept of social justice, one of the cornerstones of individual well-being and, more generally, of social progress, cannot be attainable without first completely “banning the specters of unemployment and a widespread economic crisis”.⁶ This can be seen as one of the signs of the political compromise that the new Republic accepted, in this specific case a distorted hierarchy of values that prioritized lowering the rate of unemployment and economic growth over working conditions, echoing the major concerns (or lack of concerns) that characterized the period of the “economic miracle.” This conflict of interests and ideologies, which “reached dramatic and decisive heights by the time of the spring elections of 1948”, went on to determine the nature of the Italian Republic in the following decade (Ginsborg 1990, 72).

Employment in factories coincided with the longing of postwar Italian society for what essentially amounted to a kind of rebirth: to reprise its vitality, revive manufactory production, and wake up from the nightmare of the war. The Liberation and economic recovery after the Second World War were met with trust by a society that wanted to be “re-formed”, to be reconstructed and to reconstitute itself in a debilitated country that “produces little and eats even less”⁷ (Accornero 1973 77). The Liberation therefore seemed to present an opportunity for rebirth and lay the foundation for the “miracle” that Italian society needed and invoked. And it was the glare of this “miracle” – but also that of the bombs during the war – that presented the image of the factory to decimated Italian cities as a phoenix anxious to be embraced by the new Italian working class.

⁵ Ibid. [non avere più nessuna ragione di vita].

⁶ Ibid. [stati completamente messi in fuga gli spettri della disoccupazione e di una generale crisi economica].

⁷ [paese stremato dove si produce poco e si mangia pochissimo].

It is no coincidence that the powerful image of the factory emerged in intellectual discussions that took place throughout the editorial history of the *Politecnico*, offering ostensibly enlightened observations from a privileged and unconventional point of view. The last issue of the *Politecnico*, published in December of 1947, included five short stories by Franco Fortini in a section entitled “Diary of a Young Bourgeoisie Intellectual” [*Diario di un giovane borghese intellettuale*]. Each of the stories or autobiographical anecdotes is accompanied by a precise date: September 11, September 12, September 13, October 2 and October 4, temporal coordinates that place us in the period several months after he began working for Olivetti (Dalmas 2014, 212). Each of the five stories, with the exception of the one dated September 13, are representations of and reflections about the author’s direct experiences with the industrial world. Three of them (September 12, October 2, and October 4) are introduced by a brief conversation with “a certain guy (an engineer)” or “Doctor M.”⁸ and often recall events related to the war and partisan activity.

The most elaborate text is the one dated September 11. It opens by highlighting the clear “distance between intellectual life and life in the factory”,⁹ (Ibid., 212-213) an admonition for the intellectual who finally sets foot in the places of the industrial production:

Last night I was reading the *History of the Kingdom of Naples* and this morning I spent two hours in B. and F’s shop. I’m ashamed to have waited so long to know what work in a factory is like.¹⁰ (Fortini 1947).

Fortini’s sensibility, reminiscent of that of Simone Weil (of whose works he was the primary translator in Italy),¹¹ leads him to talk about what happens in the factory and take an interest in the people that populate it, to depict the

⁸ [Un tale (un ingegnere); il dottor M.]

⁹ [distanza tra la vita intellettuale e quella di fabbrica].

¹⁰ [Iersera leggevo la «Storia del regno di Napoli»; e questa mattina ho passato due ore nell’officina B. e F. Vergogna a avere aspettato tanto per sapere che cosa sia il lavoro in una fabbrica].

¹¹ Fortini was Italy’s main translator of Simone Weil’s works, starting with *L’ombra e la grazia* (1951), *La condizione operaia* (1952), and *La prima radice* (1954), all of which were published for the Edizioni di Comunità by Olivetti’s company.

“backs of the male and female laborers bent under the blows of the press”.¹² There is an immediate association between the sheets of metal forged by the presses and the oppressive effect of industrial production on the factory worker. In line with the distinction that Vittorini had earlier emphasized between “culture” and “society” – and the former’s capacity to “console” but not to “protect” – here we find a juxtaposition between the primary material of the intellectual (Fortini’s reading of *History of the Kingdom of Naples*) with the primary material of the factory workers, who “for nine hours a day” ceased to exist, if not for their “deformed hands” and “humiliated bodies”.¹³ In an ironic reversal, the annihilation of the human worker contributes to the enrichment of the material product. Moreover, for the writer, the industrial landscape and the work of factory laborers are “monstrous”, largely because it is the machine that imposes “two thousand pieces per hour, cut, forged and folded [which] pass through the fingers of a man or a woman, abstract, unconcreted, literally ‘nonexistent’”.¹⁴ Fortini poses a series of questions that the intellectual during these years must ask:

Liberate work? We have arrived at the point in which we believe that liberating work means only to free it from private exploitation. And yet, even in a communist regime, must the majority of people be condemned to the most insignificant work? The return to artisanal production is a dream. Agricultural production is becoming increasingly industrialized. There is a contradiction between the tendency to offer the masses certain cultural opportunities that qualify them and at the same time the forced existence of unskilled positions. Is unskilled labor, or labor that requires few skills, unsurmountable? Is it perhaps possible to imagine machinery so advanced as to cut working hours in half, but in the meantime, as we wait for this, the most modern industries tend to lower and not to raise necessary qualifications, to create a small minority of specialized workers capable of leading a majority of man-machines. The abjection with which many laborers live (I am speaking of moral alienation) is such that I have been able to listen to various men who amongst themselves have said to prefer unskilled labor to more demanding

¹² [schiene degli operai e delle operaie, piegate sotto i colpi delle presse].

¹³ [per nove ore al giorno [...] non esistevano, mani deformi, corpi umiliati].

¹⁴ [duemila pezzi all’ora, tranciati, forati o piegati [che] passano nelle dita di un uomo o di una donna, astratti, inconcreti, propriamente «inesistenti»].

jobs. One is almost completely free to think, as one's hand move mechanically on their own. 15

Some of these questions will be answered by Fortini himself more than ten years later,¹⁶ with a newfound awareness that “industrialism” entails the “absolute supremacy of industrial production in determining our social destiny”¹⁷ (Fortini 1962, 31). To be qualified as a factory worker risks becoming tantamount to being *unqualified*, to be subjected to a social hierarchy in which physical labor and intelligence are pushed to opposite extremes. The democratic appeal of making unskilled labor accessible to the masses is thus part of an entirely undemocratic process of preventing workers from becoming skilled and of gaining the qualifications necessary to move to the higher levels of the factory:

The tendency to “move up”, or rather to become skilled, almost always corresponds to “social capillarity” towards a condition of privilege. In the precision department, a young laborer, of intelligent appearance, looks through a lens, checking gear scraps five thousandths of a millimeter in size. The task requires his intelligence, his attention, it makes him exist. He started out on the factory floors, having worked for several years

¹⁵ [Liberare il lavoro? Siamo arrivati a tal punto che liberare il lavoro crediamo significhi unicamente liberarlo dallo sfruttamento privato. Eppure anche in regime comunista ci dovrà essere una maggioranza dannata al lavoro più insignificante? Il ritorno verso l'artigianato è un sogno. La produzione agricola tende a industrializzarsi sempre più. C'è una contraddizione fra la tendenza di dare ai più certe possibilità culturali che li qualificano e insieme l'esistenza forzata di un lavoro non qualificato. Il lavoro non qualificato o scarsamente qualificato è insormontabile? È forse possibile immaginare un macchinario tanto spinto da ridurre della metà gli attuali orari di lavoro: ma, intanto, nell'attesa, l'industria più moderna tende ad abbassare e non ad innalzare la qualificazione, a creare una esigua minoranza di specializzati capaci di guidare una maggioranza di uomini-macchine. L'abiezione nella quale vivono molti operai (parlo di alienazione morale) è tale che ho potuto ascoltarne diversi fra essi dire di preferire un lavoro meno qualificato ad uno più impegnativo. Il pensiero è quasi libero, la mano va meccanicamente].

¹⁶ The debate surrounding literature and industry is formalized in the fourth and fifth issues of the literary periodical «Il Menabò», co-directed by Elio Vittorini and Italo Calvino.

¹⁷ [l'assoluto primato della produzione industriale nella determinazione del nostro destino sociale].

with the drills and grinders on an assembly line, and he speaks of it with horror as a humiliating job. He succeeded in getting promoted to the precision department (Fortini 1947).¹⁸

The absence of class-consciousness and the acceptance of the exploitative nature of factory work is the central element of Fortini's narrative, in which the regression of humans is counterbalanced by the economic development of manufacturing industry:

The degradation of man in mechanical labor is objective; the majority of factory workers are not aware of it and bow to it like a plant bends itself to accommodate the garden's plans and wire enclosures. There are people who live in good economic conditions and yet do not leave their factory jobs.¹⁹

Fortini describes a silent genocide of factory workers financed by the industrial world, which goes unnoticed by society's inattentive gaze. The factory and its "chemical vapors and dust from the grinders are slowly killing dozens of men who don't look at you with either hate or even curiosity; they accept it".²⁰ One witnesses what Arendt defined as the sacrifice of the "ideals of *homo faber*" – permanence, stability, durability – "to abundance, the ideal of the *animal laborans*". According to Arendt, then, "we live in a laborers'

¹⁸ [La tendenza a «salire» cioè a qualificarsi, corrisponde quasi sempre alla «capillarità sociale» verso una condizione di privilegio. Al reparto precisione un giovane operaio, dalla fisionomia intelligente, traga una lente, controllando, in una dentatura, scarti di cinque millesimi di millimetro. Il lavoro impegna la sua intelligenza, il suo interesse, lo fa esistere. Proviene dall'officina, ha lavorato per alcuni anni ai trapani e ai rettificatori della produzione in serie; e ne parla con orrore, come di un genere avvilito. È riuscito a passare al reparto di precisione].

¹⁹ [la degradazione dell'uomo nel lavoro meccanico è obiettiva; la maggior parte degli operai non l'avverte e si piegano ad essa come una pianta si piega a seguire il fil di ferro e il disegno del giardiniere. C'è gente che vive in buone condizioni economiche e che, nondimeno, non abbandona il suo posto in fabbrica].

²⁰ [Vapori chimici o la polvere delle mole ammazzano lentamente decine d'uomini, [e] costoro non ti guardano con odio e neppure con curiosità; accettano].

society because only laboring, with its inherent fertility, is likely to bring about abundance” (Arendt 1958, 126).

The bourgeoisie, to which Fortini’s intellectual belongs and with which he identifies (as made clear by the title itself), thrives on the “subhumanity of a majority comprised of these laborers and farmhands from Puglia”²¹ (Fortini 1947). Farmhands and factory workers are equated and conflated into a single group that represents the social base exploited by the capitalist system and which appears confused and disoriented by the future that appeared, through “increased production”, to promise the nation’s future economic freedom and thus their own freedom and that of others belonging to their economic class.²² Because such a liberation presupposes a sacrifice that takes place within the walls of the factory, it is not surprising that factories were often likened during this period to cathedrals or churches. These industrial temples became the sanctuaries of the new neo-capitalist religion comprised of a new holy trinity: raw material, human labor, and the complicity of the machine, which acquired divine status while man became the sacrificial victim through which society would one day be able to liberate itself from the subjugation of labor.

Fortini’s movement through the factory, and eventual arrival at its center and most intimate point of contact between the factory and the factory worker, is less an ascent through production lines than a mystical descent towards the rawest of materials and the invisible underbelly of industrial production:

²¹ [La sottoumanità di una maggioranza, sia essa composta da questi operai o dai braccianti pugliesi].

²² Arendt proposes something similar with regard to the connection between freedom and sacrifice, when she suggests that “man cannot be free if he does not know that he is subject to necessity, because his freedom is always won in his never wholly successful attempts to liberate himself from necessity” (Arendt, 121).

At the heart of the factory, between the ventilation tubes and transmission belts, there is a small room which one enters through a door of opaque glass. Or, better, one does not enter through it, held at bay by a shiver or the commotion.²³

This passage invokes a Dantean infernal landscape where a sandblaster toils, entirely deprived of his humanity, as even his physical body and soul have been emptied and replaced by the shell of his pressure suit:

Inside, in semi-darkness, a man, made monstrous by the pressure suit resembling that of a deep-sea diver that covers his head and by the wax cape that falls from his shoulders nearly all the way down to his large gloves. He is the sandblaster and he hurls the compressed stream of sand, as loud as a drill, against the parts on the counter. The sand covers everything – the machine, the ceiling, himself, it penetrates his clothes and his lungs. He has been doing this for nine hours a day, voluntarily, for years, and he is paid as a manual laborer, with some bonuses, and a liter of milk each day. When he sees us, he stops working, serpent-like sander goes mad, flapping and humming, and he takes off his mask. I can't express what I saw on his blackened face; the dull gaze of a man that had once been, some time ago, intelligent.²⁴

The passage deserves to be cited in its entirety, as it is dense in meaning and offers a *tranche de vie* of working conditions. In contrast with the “cheerful fieldtrips” to factories that would be published in subsequent years in factory periodicals (Lupo and Lacorazza 2008, 6), Fortini's visit presents a descent

²³ [Nel cuore della fabbrica, fra i tubi degli aspiratori e le cinghie di trasmissione, c'è una piccola stanza dove si entra per una porta a vetri opachi. Per meglio dire, non vi si entra perché un fremito e un fragore feroce te ne respingono.]

²⁴ [Lì dentro, in una mezza luce, c'è un uomo, mostruoso per uno scafandro da palombaro che gli copre la testa e per una mantella d'incerato che gli scende sulle spalle fin quasi ai guantoni. È il sabbiatore; e scaraventa il getto compresso di sabbia, rumoroso come una perforatrice, contro i pezzi che si accostano sul banco. La sabbia copre tutto, l'impianto, il soffitto, la persona, penetra le vesti dell'uomo e i suoi polmoni. Così lavora per nove ore al giorno, volontariamente, da anni; ed è pagato come un manovale, più qualche supplemento, e un litro di latte al giorno. Quando ci vede, interrompe il lavoro, il serpe impazzito del sabbiatore si affloscia ronzando e si toglie dal capo lo scafandro. Non so dire quel che c'era nel volto di quell'uomo, segnato di nero; uno sguardo ebete, ma che era stato, una volta, intelligente.]

to the underworld; to reach the opaque glass “door”, he must first pass through a jungle of pipes, belts, and “ferocious” noises reminiscent of Dante’s three beasts.²⁵ If Dante fails to remember how he entered the dark woods in the famous opening verses of the *Inferno* (*Io non so ben ridir com’ i’ v’intra*), Fortini’s pilgrim struggles to describe the man he encounters (*Non so dire quel che c’era nel volto di quell’uomo*): “I can’t express what I saw on his blackened face; the dull gaze of a man that had once been, some time ago, intelligent”.²⁶ Fortini’s laborer, with his protective suit and cape, appears as an infernal creature, with the “crazed serpent” he wields in his “clamorous domain”. The sandblaster’s realm is a hellish place, and the physical description of its inhabitant seems almost dictated by Dante’s law of the *contrappasso*, according to which the souls in hell are punished in accordance or direct opposition with their sins in life:

A bone deformation or perhaps a disease forced him to keep his neck bent towards one side; and beneath his skin there was a large growth, like a tumor. He said a few words, but they were hard to make out, still within the clamorous domain of his instrument, inside the reality of those dark walls.²⁷

The use of the verb “forced” in the imperfect (*costringeva*), beyond its descriptive function, serves to make the time in which the action occurs indeterminate, as infinite and eternal as the infernal damnation it suggests.

Fortini’s dehumanization of the sandblaster and emphasis on merchandise as the center of modern society coincides with Benjamin’s diagnosis of the modern period as an “infernal age” in which merchandise acquired “a truly vampiric” function, sucking life from its victims.²⁸ For

²⁵ See also Schweppenhäuser 2001, 20.

²⁶ [Non so dire quel che c’era nel volto di quell’uomo [...] uno sguardo ebete, ma che era stato, una volta, intelligente].

²⁷ [Una deformazione ossea o forse una malattia lo costringeva a tenere il collo inclinato da una parte; e sotto la cotenna c’era una grossa escrescenza, come un tumore. Disse qualche parola, ma era ancora astratto, ancora nel regno fragoroso dello strumento, nella realtà di quelle pareti oscure].

²⁸ [Una vita propria vampiresca che [...] continua sempre a togliere, succhiandola, vita ai soggetti].

scholars like Schweppenhäuser, Benjamin's condemnation of modern society is tied to the Marxist principle according to which modes of production determine social relationships (Schweppenhäuser 2001, 21). The guide, less bold than the Virgil of Dante's poem but equally lacking the former's divine mandate, recognizes and avoids the dangerous room: "The person who was with me, while familiar with the factory, did not dare to stay and, after a few sentences, indicated, perturbed, that he was leaving"²⁹ (Fortini 1947). In what becomes associated with a sacred act, the sandblaster allows himself to be engulfed by the sand that "penetrates" his clothing and lungs. He is wittingly consumed day by day, for an infinite stretch of time, not unlike the gears of a machine. Like a sacrificial lamb, or "a pilloried man, chained or tied to a wheel, hung in a gage or isolated in a cell, mortified or in prayer [...] a sacred animal in imitation of Christ"³⁰. The description mirrors that which Paolo Volponi would include in his debut novel, *Memoriale* (1962), the protagonist of which similarly explores the monstrosity of postwar industrialism by dissecting the organs of its body to reveal how its vitality and the "economic miracle" were achieved only through the sacrifice of the factory worker.

Fortini notes that the "association of the sandblaster with a sacred victim" is possible only in a "mythical" civilization that "objectifies to the extreme", thus the analogy is at once "literary" and "false", and hides the simple fact that the sandblaster "is a man condemned by certain order of things to a horrifying and slow death"³¹. This condition of "condemnation," interpreted "in the way in which the French speak of a door or window that is *condamnée*", or rather sealed, and which is "irremediably destined to never find redemption" arises not from specific flaws or errors but from one's belonging to the proletariat.³²

²⁹ [La persona che era con me, pur familiare della fabbrica, non osò rimanere; e, dopo poche frasi, accennò a uscire, turbata].

³⁰ [Dell'uomo alla gogna, alla catena o alla ruota, sospeso nella gabbia o isolato nella cella in macerazione o in preghiera [...] un animale sacro a imitazione di Cristo].

³¹ [Più semplicemente, il sabbiatore è un uomo che un certo ordine di cose condanna all'orrore e alla morte lenta].

³² [Nel senso in cui i francesi parlano di una porta, una finestra *condamnée* ... irrimediabilmente destinata a non aver riscatto].

In his conclusion, Fortini investigates the nature of economic progress and the possibility for laborers to find redemption within a society from which they have been systematically excluded:

Beyond the relative progress, matched by corresponding regressions, can there never be, then, a faith in the social redemption (without which all works are dead or dying) that shares its very nature with that individual faith according to which (it is written) the just man lives and through which we believe in the (absurd) possibility of redemption, of reopening this whole part of ourselves that is sealed and condemned on a daily basis?³³

Fortini describes a kind of social progress whose importance and/or absence is often signaled by the *Politecnico*. In an article entitled “The Other Danger” [*L’altro pericolo*], Felice Balbo, an intellectual of the Catholic-Communist faction who in the subsequent decade came into direct contact with the industrial world by collaborating with Italy’s Institute for Industrial Reconstruction, or IRI (*Istituto per la Ricostruzione Industriale*), defines it as a “harmonious” progress that could be achieved in a society in which the advantages acquired by “some *techniques* (industrial, financial, the appropriately-titled positive sciences, machines, etc.)” compared with “other techniques (politics, law, philosophy, etc.)” would cease to exist.³⁴ This harmonious progress is threatened, however, by “unhealthy” relationships between “the *overall techniques* and *man*; a danger to which we might refer as mechanical and brute exteriority”.³⁵ Our society is constantly threatened by this danger, and all inventions that have improved our quality of life have also contributed to our demise:

³³ [Al di là del progresso relativo cui corrispondono relativi regressi, non esisterà dunque una fede nel riscatto sociale (senza la quale le opere sono morte o moriture) che è della medesima natura di quella fede individuale, della quale (è scritto) l’uomo giusto vivrà e per la quale crediamo alla possibilità (assurda) di riscatto, di riapertura di tutta questa parte di noi che quotidianamente viene condannata a morte e suggellata?].

³⁴ [Alcune *tecniche* (industria, finanza, scienze positive propriamente dette, macchine, ecc.) ... altre tecniche (politica, diritto, filosofia, ecc.)] (Balbo, “L’altro pericolo”).

³⁵ [*Le tecniche nel loro complesso e l’uomo*; un pericolo che potremmo chiamare dell’esteriorità meccanica e brutale].

We are killed – in our blood, in our muscles, in our senses – by staying alive in this way. We are becoming animals because there is always within us the immediate possibility of becoming intimate again, but we are becoming machines and mechanical conglomerates of instincts: certainly non-humans. This danger has always existed in man, but has grown in modern civilization; and today, tomorrow, forever to come, it is becoming a chronic disease and an epidemic of contemporary life.³⁶

For Fortini, one means of eradicating this disease and alleviating its symptoms would be the intervention of the free intellectual and the “force of culture” that

means neither poetry at meetings (though it is that, too) or the fight against illiteracy (though it is that, too): It means that the ways of making a man a person instead of a slave or a tyrant must be in the hands and the minds of those who are neither slaves nor tyrants, put people; it means giving them the tools to recognize themselves and giving everyone the tools to recognize them³⁷ (Fortini 1946).

Fortini’s factory visit implies that the very fissure between the human and dehumanized subject, which occupies a liminal space whose elusive borders are marked by the factory walls and gates, merits critical investigation. By physically occupying that space, Fortini makes a call to the ‘free’ intellectual to help forge the lever that could move society forward and restore humanity to those – like the sandblaster – whose status as human subjects had been a casualty of technological ‘progress.’ By *unsealing* the ‘condemned’ door that separates the (intellectual) human from the (laboring)

³⁶ [Siamo ammazzati rimanendo però vivi in qualche modo: nel sangue, nei muscoli, nei sensi. Non diventiamo animali perché c’è sempre in noi la possibilità immediata di ridiventare intimi, ma diventiamo macchine e conglomerati meccanici di istinti: non-uomini certo. Questo pericolo è sempre esistito nell’uomo ma nella civiltà moderna si è accresciuto; e oggi, domani, sempre in avvenire, tende a diventare malattia epidemica e cronica della vita contemporanea].

³⁷[non vuol dire né la poesia ai congressi (benché sia, anche, quello) né la lotta contro l’analfabetismo (benché sia, anche, quello): vuol dire che i mezzi di fare dell’uomo una persona invece che uno schiavo o un tiranno siano nelle mani e nel cervello di coloro che non sono né schiavi né tiranni, ma persone; vuol dire dare a questi gli strumenti per riconoscersi e a tutti gli strumenti per riconoscerli].

animal, Fortini incites his readers to similarly recognize and cross the border between “consoling” and “protecting”.

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