The ‘Fragment on Machines’ and the *Grundrisse*: The Workerist Reading in Question
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Faced with a highly concrete dilemma, the protagonists of Western films often cite a passage from the Old Testament. Torn from their proper context, words from the Book of Psalms or from Ezekiel nevertheless seem to fit naturally into the contingent situation in which they're pronounced. Philological care is inappropriate in the moment of peril, in the middle of a gunfight or some abusive act. The biblical citation is short-circuited with some urgent practical necessity. It was in this way that Karl Marx’s ‘Fragment on Machines’ has been read and cited since the 1960s.

Thus wrote Paolo Virno in the first issue of *Luogo Comune* (1990), a journal that returned to the Marxian ‘Fragment’ in order to reflect politically on what was underway at Italy’s universities. It was the heyday of the *Pantera*, a student-movement that had emerged in December 1989 in order to protest the privatisation-measures proposed by education-minister Ruberti. Virno continued: ‘These pages [those of the “Fragment”], written almost breathlessly in 1858 and with pressing political tasks waiting to be attended to, have been cited many a time by those seeking rough-and-ready orientation in the face of unprecedented workers’ strikes, mass absenteeism, the behaviour of the younger generations, the introduction of robots at [the Turinese FIAT plant] Mirafiori or the rise of office-computers. The story of the “Fragment”’s successive interpretations is a story of crises and new beginnings’.¹

¹. Virno 1990.
In what follows, we intend to read the history of these interpretations against the grain, while seeking simultaneously to promote an authentic confrontation with some of them. Our essay will also involve an incursion into the prehistory of said interpretations.

The story begins with the fourth issue of the Quaderni Rossi, published in 1964. It was there that Renato Solmi published the first Italian translation of the ‘Fragment on Machines’. Marx’s manuscripts from 1857–8 were first published by the Moscow-based Institute of Marxism-Leninism, in two instalments (1939 and 1941) and under the title ‘Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie (Rohentwurf)’ or ‘Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)’. In 1953, the manuscripts were re-issued by Dietz, the Berlin-based publisher of the works of Marx and Engels.

Marx’s piece on machines was enthusiastically received by Italian Marxists, who discovered in its pages the possibility of a new reading of Marx: the ‘Fragment on Machines’ was seen by them as containing that surplus of subjectivity by which the established interpretations of the Italian Communist Party’s Stalinist orthodoxy could be subverted. In ‘Plusvalore e pianificazione’ ['Surplus-Value and Planning'], an essay published in the same issue of the Quaderni Rossi as the ‘Fragment on Machines’, Raniero Panzieri discovered in Marx’s notes from the Grundrisse ‘a theory of how capital becomes “unsustainable” once it has reached its maximum level of development, once the “giant” productive forces enter into conflict with the system’s “limited foundation” and the quantitative measurement of labour becomes patently absurd’. Here we glean the basic coordinates of what will become Italian workerism’s line of interpretation. Capitalism is viewed and analysed as having reached its ‘maximum level of development’, and it is seen as giving rise to a contradiction between the superabundant development of the machine-system and the system’s limited foundation, a contradiction that renders absurd the ‘quantitative measurement of labour’. Panzieri was not to be the one who would push this approach to its conclusion. Other workerists – Mario Tronti and Toni Negri – would develop his intuitions to the point of declaring the law of value defunct.

In order for them to be able to do this, the Grundrisse needed to be played off against Capital. But here too, it was Panzieri who led the way. ‘In the fragment we have cited, one finds the model of a direct “transition” to communism – against numerous passages from Capital and the Critique of the Gotha Programme’. This statement would be echoed by Mario Tronti, for whom the Grundrisse represented, in all its freshness, a book ‘more advanced than the other two’, viz. Capital

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4. Ibid.