

Christoph Haffter

The transcendence of the political Revolutionary doubt in Luigi Nono's music

Abstract

The current debates about the politization of art often suffer from the fact that we take for granted what we understand by politics. I would like to take the controversies about the political in Luigi Nono's music as an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of this peculiar category. I would like to differentiate first between three paradigmatic conceptions of the political in order to, secondly, examine the political content of Nono's overtly political music from the 60s and 70s. The assumption that guides me is that the political content articulated in Nono's works is linked to the idea of the political transcending itself.

Keywords

Politization of art, Experimental music, Operaismo

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c.haffter@unibas.ch (University of Basel)

Throughout his life, the composer Luigi Nono regarded his music as part of the communist movement. It was intended to contribute to the abolition of class rule (Nielinger-Vakil 2015). However, the reception of his music is divided on this point. Many critics saw in Nono's late work of the 1980s a disillusioned abandon of the political commitment (Assis 2006; Metzger, Riehn 1981; Tadday 2024). Pieces like the string quartet *Fragmente – Stille. An Diotima* (1979/80) play on nuances of sound on a very soft, slow and fragile level without delivering any explicit political message. Other critics have followed Nono's self-interpretation and defended the continuity of the political even in those works that do not set political slogans to music (Nanni 2022). However, both camps agree that Nono's earlier works from the 1960s and 70s were unquestionably and explicitly political music.

The reason for this unanimity regarding this earlier period lies in the texts that are set to music in these works. Most famously, *Canto Sospeso* (1956) are songs based on the last letters by victims of fascism, the scenic work *Intolleranza 1960* (1961) draws a parallel between anti-fascist resistance, the Algerian liberation movement and proletarian upheavals, the *Fabbrica Illuminata* (1964) works with documentary material from Italian factory workers, *Per Bastiana* is based on a Maoist hymn and *Al Gran Sole Carico d'Amore* (1975) quotes Louise Michel, Lenin, Brecht, Che Guevara and Al-lende. However, Nono himself was sceptical about this unanimity in the discourse about his music. In a text entitled *Music and revolution*, for example, he complains that the critics identify the political only in the source texts of his music (Nono 1975: 114). For Nono, the political content of his art was rather to be found in the complex relationship between musical form and the quoted thought material.

The dispute over the interpretation of Nono's music points to a deeper disagreement. It concerns the concept of the political itself. Or perhaps one should formulate it even more sharply: the dispute over Nono's music is itself a dispute over the concept of the political. According to Carl Schmitt, the distinction between the political and its opposite is itself a political act (Schmitt 1932: 8). The concept of politics receives its meaning only from the contrast, the difference it establishes. If we say that something is a "matter of politics" or that a task requires a "political solution", then this can mean, for example, that this matter should not be decided by the judges. Politics then stands in contrast to the realm of law and jurisprudence. However, the concept of the political can also be put in opposition to morality, to the social or the economical realm. Schmitt insisted that the framing of the concept of the political and its distinction from other concepts can be of decisive

political importance. To take a more recent example: even those who say that *everything is political* presuppose a contrast – the contrast between the political public and the non-political private sphere – and then claim that nothing falls under latter. According to Schmitt, all these conceptual definitions are not merely a theoretical matter, but are linked to interests, possibilities for action and positions of power.

If one follows this reasoning, then the dispute about the political nature of Nono's music is itself a political dispute. But one does not have to follow this reasoning, just as one does not have to follow the conception of the political that Schmitt defends. The current debates about the politization of art often suffer from the fact that we take for granted what we understand by politics. I would like to take the conflict about the political in Nono's music as an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of this peculiar category. For only when the concept of the political has lost all apparent self-evidence can we realize what depends on it: and realize what is at stake in the dispute about the political in Nono's music.

In the following, I would like to differentiate first between three paradigmatic conceptions of the political in order to, secondly, examine the political content of what seems to be some of Nono's unquestionably political music from the 60s and 70s. The hypothesis that guides me is the following: the political content articulated in Nono's works is linked to the idea of the political transcending itself. This idea of a political overcoming of the political connects Nono's music with the idea of revolution.

1. *Three concepts of politics*

In today's discussions about politization and activism in art, the concept of the political usually remains vague. There is a general agreement on a series of so-called "political" questions and problems; and as soon as a work deals with such issues or "thematizes" them, as it is often called, the artistic work is considered political. This way of talking about politics, which is peculiar for the art discourse, stands in contrast to the established meaning that the concept of politics has in the wider public sphere. In this usage, which ranges from daily newspaper to political science, politics is defined by a series of institutions. When someone ends up in *politics* or becomes a *politician*, it usually means that she is involved in parties or other associations with the aim to take up a public office – be it as a member of parliament, a member of government or some other decision-making position. In this sense, the political refers to everything

that has to do with the attainment and exercise of state power: the political is the state. It thus contrasts with the private professional activity or the involvement in associations or religious communities of the civil society, for example, but also with the activity in the arts and sciences. According to this institutional concept, a public statement on a controversial issue is only political if it is part of an ensemble of acts that aims at gaining, exercising or maintaining state power. Of course, state institutions are surrounded by a whole court of informal influence and opinion-making, and it will not always be possible to decide where this area of pre-politics begins and ends. But the concept of the political characterised in this way allows a sufficiently precise distinction to be made between the mere thematization of the political and the execution of a political act.

However, the institutional concept which identifies the political with the state, runs into the problem of circularity. For it shifts the question of the political to the question of what the state is. The modern state is a network of institutions that organise, structure and control a territorially limited society. But which institutions belong to the state, and which belong to pre-state society? How does state power differ from other forms – such as economic or cultural-symbolic forms of power? At the end of such questions, one will be inclined to answer, tautologically, that it is precisely *political* power that is formalised in the institutions of the state. It is Carl Schmitt who identified this embarrassment of the institutional concept of politics. Hence, his essay on the concept of the political begins with the sentence: “The concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political” (Schmitt 1932: 7). Schmitt’s infamous essay therefore introduces a difference into the concept of politics that has remained influential for a large family of political theories right up to the present day, from Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau to Jacques Rancière and Oliver Marchart (Laclau, Mouffe 2001; Marchart 2008, 2019; Mouffe 2005; Rancière 1995). It is the difference between *politics* – or *police* in Rancière’s case – as the institutions of the state, and the *political* as the field of antagonisms, of friend-foe relationships, of alliances and enmities that underlie politics. The antagonisms of the political find an institutionalised expression in politics, but they can also manifest themselves outside of these settings and even intensify into armed conflict. Since Schmitt, the main point of this second concept of the political as antagonism has been the irreducibility of the political distinction between friend and foe, between allies and opponents, between us and them: this distinction is not reducible to any higher norm, it is not legitimated by any criterion, standard or reason that would justify one’s own affiliation to

one group rather than another. Rather, the political distinction is an existential choice without reason, without foundation nor ground; it is an irrational decision. Political action follows from it as a strategy and tactic of fighting the enemy. This fact can be expressed with less pathos by saying that this concept of the political is non-normative. In Chantal Mouffe's moderate version, it sounds like this:

By "the political" I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by "politics" I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political. (Mouffe 2005: 16)

To take account of "the political" as the ever-present possibility of antagonism requires coming to terms with the lack of a final ground and acknowledging the dimension of undecidability which pervades every order. It requires in other words recognizing the hegemonic nature of every kind of social order and the fact that every society is the product of a series of practices attempting to establish order in a context of contingency. (Mouffe 2005: 25)

This non-normative concept of political antagonism at the root of politics has the advantage of realistic sobriety. Non-normative theory looks the whole ugliness of politics in the face. Politics is a matter of getting one's hands dirty, because its paradigm is the, more or less violent, struggle. Reflecting on this definition, it becomes clear why Schmitt considers the concept of the political itself as a move in the political struggle. By defining the political as the existential decision for the friend and against the enemy, the theory itself carries out a strategic manoeuvre against the enemy. In Schmitt's case, the historical background is well known: The non-normative concept of the political is directed against the justification of post-WW1 reparation payments in terms of guilt and responsibility. Schmitt denounced these demands as a confusion of moral and political categories: war, as a political conflict, is beyond morality and justice. In the more recent theories by Mouffe, Laclau, and Marchart, this nationalist motif is replaced by the idea of a left-wing populism that frees itself from the interpretative framework of Marxism and takes on the ugly battle against authoritarian neoliberalism.

However, the non-normative concept of political antagonism suffers from the fact that it must dismiss as a deception the internal perspective of political actors, their self-interpretation. For in this perspective, the political struggle is not about fighting enemies, but it is a struggle for the realisation of norms such as justice, equality and freedom. From the Schmittian

point of view, these concepts are merely strategic means for weakening the enemy. In the self-interpretation of political actors, it is precisely the other way round: for them, the strategy and tactics of fighting the enemy are merely means for realising such norms.

This normative perspective is paradigmatically captured by the concept of politics that Hannah Arendt defended (Arendt 2005; Arndt 2019; Raimondi 2014). For Arendt, the whole area that the Schmittians call the political – the more or less violent assertion of individual and group interests – falls under the concept of the *social*. According to Arendt, politics only begins when the battlefield of the social is left behind, when social identities, group affiliations and interests are put aside in order to set new norms for acting together. Only in these rare moments in which people engage in a process of collective self-determination, in which they transcend their perspectives towards a common horizon and agree with others on new rules of action – only in these moments of collective realisation of freedom can we speak of political action.

The freedom of movement, then – whether as the freedom to depart and begin something new and unheard-of or as the freedom to interact in speech with many others and experience the diversity that the world always is in its totality – most certainly was and is not the end purpose of politics, that is, something that can be achieved by political means. It is rather the substance and meaning of all things political. In this sense, politics and freedom are identical, and wherever this kind of freedom does not exist, there is no political space in the true sense. [...] What is crucial for us here is to understand freedom itself as political and not as a purpose, possibly the highest, to be obtained by political means, and to realise that coercion and brute force are always means for protecting or establishing or expanding political space, but in and of themselves are definitely not political. They are phenomena peripheral to politics and therefore not politics itself. (Arendt 2005: 129-30)

If we summarise the three paradigmatic definitions of the political, the following picture emerges. The non-normative concept of the political extends to all areas of life. For groundless antagonisms can break out even in the most intimate and insignificant aspects of life and ignite from all conceivable differences. It goes without saying that artistic works fulfil political functions in this sense, whether their authors intend it or not. The institutional concept of politics can be incorporated into this concept. It designates the realm of procedures and institutions that seek to mediate, depict, organise and control the antagonism of the political. Politics is the normalised surface, the institutional form of the underlying battlefield of the political. Only a few works of art fulfil a direct function in this realm of

normal politics: monuments, memorials, representative buildings, portraits of rulers, national anthems or agitation songs would be such cases in which artistic works are part of the exercise of institutionalized political power. Finally, the normative concept of politics, as envisaged by Hannah Arendt, shares with the non-normative concept a disdain for day-to-day political business, for professional politics in state institutions. Unlike the Schmittians, however, she does not expand the emphatically political into the permanent threat of social antagonisms, but narrows the political down to those rare moments of collective norm-setting in which freedom is realised. Whether art can be a function of political freedom in this emphatic sense is at least questionable. For the decisive factor of such political freedom lies in the binding nature of the rules that are newly set together. In comparison, artistic expressions always remain floating, non-binding: they offer interpretations, but do not finalise an agreement. Be that as it may, we can think of the extension of these three concepts of the political as concentric circles, the largest of which is the field of antagonisms of the political, the middle is the institution of politics and the narrowest of which are the moments of political freedom.

2. The political content of Nono's music

Against this background, I would now like to address the question of how the political *content* of Luigi Nono's explicitly committed works can be determined. I therefore differentiate between political function and content. The question of political functions concerns the place and effectiveness of art in political action. The function of a work cannot be determined by looking at the work itself but depends on the contexts of its political instrumentalization. The question of content, on the other hand, concerns the idea that a work articulates. This content can be political, even if the work does not fulfil any political function – and conversely, works without political content can be politically instrumentalised.

On the surface, the common theme of Nono's works of the 60s is a kind of negative monumentalism. They express the heroic suffering of left-wing resistance against fascism, imperialism and capitalism. This expression is *monumental* in Nietzsche's sense: it is the recalling of heroic deeds that should reanimate the present by providing people with a model of self-determination and creative power (Nietzsche 1972). Nono's monumentalism is *negative* in that he does not celebrate the victors but commemorates the tragic victims. Even the resistance against fascism is

not staged as a victory by Nono, but as heroic suffering and struggling that continues to the present day. This interpretation of Nono's works fits with Adorno's sentence that the false is a sign of itself and of the true: *falsum est index sui et veri* (Adorno 2012: 127). By giving expression to it, suffering indicates its own falsity – i.e. that such suffering should not be – and thus points in the direction of the true – i.e. to that which should replace in the future the suffering of the past.

But the Adornian sentence about the self-evidence of the false indicating the direction of the true is deceptive. For the memory of past suffering is common to all political tendencies. The mere remembrance of the victims of the past allows for the most diverse political conclusions – as we are currently experiencing impressively in the memory of the Holocaust and the Nakba. The depiction of suffering only acquires political content when it is related to the political question of what needs to be done to prevent such suffering in the future and to do justice to the suffering of the past.

In order to grasp the political content of Nono's works, we must therefore leave this surface of negative monumentalism and enter the political situation of the time. Nono's theoretical background is Marxism. Marxist theory has traditionally taken a sceptical view of institutionalised politics: it regards the state as an ideological form that is at the service of the ruling class. Marxism therefore bears a certain resemblance to the non-normative conception of politics. The decisive difference to the Schmittians, however, lies in the fact that in the Marxist framework, the conflictual basis of the state is not interpreted as *the political*, i.e. not as a field of unfounded antagonisms. Rather, at the basis of the state lies social reproduction, which in the capitalist social formation is structured by the antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. This antagonism is not groundless or irrational but is understood as resulting from a certain formation and organisation of production and reproduction. What Schmittians call *the political*, is called class struggle by Marxists. As a member of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), Luigi Nono was influenced by a certain variant of Marxism popularized by Palmiro Togliatti. This long-standing General Secretary of the PCI had a decisive influence on the strategy of a specifically Italian path to socialism (Ginsborg 2003; Wright 2017). The basic idea behind this political strategy was that the social conditions for a communist seizure of power must first be created in post-war Italy; in concrete terms, technological and industrial development must first be driven forward before a radical reorganisation of political institutions can be successful. For this reason, the PCI refrained from attempting a revolutionary seizure of

power for the time being and instead integrated parliamentary democracy: it decided in favour of the reform course. Nono's self-understanding fits in with this strategy: his music, too, fights for the communist movement not by calling for the upheaval, but by renewing, differentiating and advancing musical forms of production (Nono 1975: 101-2).

In the 1960s, however, this strategy of the PCI came under increasing pressure: left-wing splits formed within the communist movement, criticizing Togliatti's moderate course as a betrayal of the workers' struggle and attacking the party organisation as a top-down domination of the labour movement (Galimberti 2022). This criticism gave rise to the theoretical current of *operaismo*, which opposed the hierarchical party organisation with the spontaneous self-determination, self-organisation and self-administration of the workers – the *operai* – in the large industries of Northern Italy. In this context, their spokesman Mario Tronti coined the term of the autonomy of the political: The sphere of political organisation and power was, according to this idea, more than a reflex of economic-technological development. Rather, politics has its own momentum and obeys its own laws. Therefore, the transformation of the state cannot wait for the development of the productive forces but must be driven forward independently of them. This dispute over political strategy dominated the Italian left until its collapse in the events surrounding the failure of the *compromesso storico*.

Nono's militant works from *Intolleranza* to *Al Gran Sole* fall into this period of political controversy on the Italian left. The political questions present in these works concern the relationship between party organisation from above and labour struggle from below, between avant-garde and mass movement, between planning and spontaneity, between *dentro e contro* and *strategia del rifiuto*: whether the bourgeois state can be restructured from within or whether the power of the bourgeoisie must be fought head-on through occupation, wildcat strikes and sabotage. Beyond this Italian context, the relationship to the different situations of the international labour movement forms an even more complex field of political conflicts: The heritage of Stalinism and the Soviet Union, the solidarity with the South American revolutions and the decolonial struggle, the relation to Maoism and Vietnam.

What superficially appears to be the negative monumentalism of left-wing resistance is, against this background, fractured into a multitude of possible motifs that suggest very different political consequences. Luigi Nono's militant works display this very fractured character: Both in their fragile dramaturgy and in their musical texture, they are a fully composed

of hesitations and doubts, reminiscent of the famous description from Marx's *18th Brumaire*:

On the other hand, proletarian revolutions, like those of the nineteenth century, criticise themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltriness of their first attempts, seem to throw down their adversary only in order that he may draw new strength from the earth and rise again, more gigantic, before them, and recoil again and again from the indefinite prodigiousness of their own aims, until a situation has been created which makes all turning back impossible, and the conditions themselves cry out: *Hic Rhodus, hic salta!* Here is the rose, here dance! (Marx 1975: 107)

The political content of Nono's works must be interpreted from within this situation of left self-criticism, from the gruelling battle of the proletarian revolution. Somewhat schematically, one can observe in the 1960s a departure by Nono from the moderate line of the PCI. The PCI derived its legitimisation from its leading role in the anti-fascist resistance. When Nono emphasised the continuity of the *resistenza* in the post-war period in many works of the 1950s, he was still very much in line with the PCI. *Intolleranza 1960* takes up this motif but processes it in a peculiar way. The work traces the emergence of a worker's class consciousness. For personal reasons and by chance, the protagonist called the fugitive ends up in the extreme situation of mass demonstration, imprisonment and torture. This moment of deepest blackness, this state of hopeless suffering is transformed into an image of hope that appears to the fugitive as an angelic song¹.

The specific political content of the work appears in this image of hope rising from the hopeless field of political struggles. It is the musical figure of this high female voice, and not the rather problematic libretto, which characterises Nono's position in the left-wing controversy. With recourse to the concepts introduced at the beginning, the scene can be understood as an intrusion of political freedom into the immanent space of social antagonisms. The image of the normative concept of a politics that would be the realisation of freedom does not take on the musical form of a triumph or an idyll. Rather, it is the musical image of transcending the political-

¹ Cf. Nono 1962, part II, scene 2, pp. 175-82 / bars 214-55. The passage corresponds to 54'00''-57'10'' on the recording of the Salzburger Festspiele production from 2021 by the Wiener Philharmoniker with Sarah Maria Sun (soprano) published on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kuYjhRY2wjo> [April 25, 2025].

social antagonism leading to a radical openness: it sounds as if the music itself does not yet know how to continue. Politically, this openness means turning away from the instrumental understanding of the political as power struggle, but also a rejection of the strategy of *dentro e contro* and the idea of leading the labour movement from above. What this position stands for politically is the idea that the proletarian revolution can only succeed if it constantly and radically questions itself, constantly puts its guidelines and organisations up for debate, revises and renews them.

With *La Fabbrica Illuminata* from 1964, Nono moved even closer to the left-wing opposition to the PCI that was theoretically represented by *operaismo*. In this work, Nono worked with field recordings and interview material from a steel production site by *Italsider* in the region of Genova. The piece is for tape and solo soprano. The tape mixes choirs and the prerecorded soprano voice that shout the claims of the workers, accusing the miserable conditions in the factory. Its climax is a line where a female worker compares the factory to a concentration camp. These vocal lines are embedded in a montage of harsh noise textures which are presumably based on the recordings of the soundscape in the steel production site. The process of developing a work for and with struggling workers is the musical counterpart to the operaist programme of a political theory that only emerges in collaboration with industrial workers. While the PCI pursued a course of increasing industrial productivity, *operaismo* formulated a critique of industrial labour itself: In its most radical form, this critique was not concerned with improving working conditions, but with the abolition of industrial wage labour as such. The political content of this work is therefore not merely the depiction of the workers' misery, but the vision of a transcendence of the struggle, again embodied by the directionless, constantly restarting and searching final song of the soprano, which rises from the choral hell of the factory halls².

The idea of a political freedom that emerges spontaneously from the social conflicts of the class struggle and transcends it, this operaist conviction is diametrically opposed to the principle of the Communist Party as defined by Lenin. Lenin's theory of the vanguard of the Communist Party, which organises and unifies the diffuse labour movements according to the principle of military chains of command, was explicitly designed as a counter-model to the spontaneous class struggle of the trade unions and striking

² Cf. the recording of *La fabbrica illuminata* by the Institute for Computer Music and Sound Technology and Sarah Maria Sun (soprano) on *Les Espaces Electroacoustiques II*, col legno 2020, 13'06''-16'06''. See Nono 2010, 2010, p. 37.

workers (Lenin 1946: 168-85). In this sense, the political content of *La Fabbrica illuminata* can be understood as a frontal criticism of the party line. This anti-Leninist trait can also be found in *Al Gran Sole carico d'amore* (1975), which evokes the heroines of the Paris Commune. In the discussions of the 1960s, the Paris Commune is the paradigmatic historical symbol of a non-hierarchically organised, council-communist form of proletarian revolution. At the same time, however, it is also an example of a seizure of power by the proletariat that was doomed to failure from the outset. The melodramatic pathos that seems to prevail in *Al Gran Sole* is in fact repeatedly counteracted by Nono's music. The quotation from Lenin in the third scene is characteristic of this³. In it, Lenin emphasises the diffuse spontaneity of the Commune, which amid the war seizes power over the French capital without preparation nor method. What superficially appears to be Nono quoting a communist authority turns out, on closer inspection, to be a criticism of Lenin: the chorus sings Lenin's description, completely incongruent with the content, in the monotonous tone of a party bureaucrat who passes off the interpretation of history as a command. This parody is followed by one of those transitional sections that Nono calls "reflections": an instrumental interlude that advances in tightly set microtonality and convoluted rhythms between triple and double *piano* until the timpani echoes, shadowy, a workers' song entitled: "Non siamo piu la commune di Parigi", we are not the Paris Commune anymore. This contrast puts a clear question mark behind the artificial certainty with which Lenin commands the audience to recognise the historical significance of the Paris Commune. In the political reality of the labour struggle, the question whether the Commune is still suitable as a model, or whether this model will plunge the student and worker revolts back into defeat, is completely open. It is this quiet music of reflection that clarifies the political content of the work by unsettling the apparent clarity of the political slogans, obscuring the agitation songs and thus defending the openness of the revolutionary situation.

These sketchy remarks may suffice to indicate the direction in which I would locate the specifically political content of Nono's so vociferously militant works. Nono's music speaks a different language than the party slogans. Even the explicitly committed works of the 1960s and 1970s interpret the proletarian revolution as an unfinished process of constantly

³ Cf. Nono 1974, Tempo 1, Scene 3, in particular pp. 63-74 / bars 345-50. The passage corresponds to 4'16"-6'57" on the recording by the Staatsoper Stuttgart, SWR/Teldec/Warner Classics 2001.

renewed self-criticism. As such a process, the workers' movement transcends the strategic rationality of class struggle and realises those moments of collective determination of action which alone, according to Hannah Arendt, deserve the emphatic concept of politics.

In this emphasis on revolutionary doubt, one might see an ultimately bourgeois core in Nono's political thought, which, by the way, is explicit in Hannah Arendt's thought: bourgeois, insofar as politics is still conceived according to the liberal model of an agreement between independent individuals. And when Nono's late works dispense with the sound masses and drumbeats of *Intolleranza* and *Al Gran Sole*, this move may appear to be a retreat into bourgeois inwardness. But in the emphasis on openness and self-criticism, which pervades Nono's entire oeuvre, one can also recognise the kernel of truth in bourgeois liberalism, which, according to Marx, the proletarian revolution strives to realise. The prehistory in which we live will only turn into the history of humanity by becoming a human-made history. Arendt's concept of politics designates nothing other than the process in which people become the authors of their own history. It is this idea around which Nono's works revolve and which they articulate again and again in the most diverse ways: politics as the transcendence of the political.

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