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Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the General Intellect?

Some Remarks on Organisation

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> The tendency is in no way a necessary and ineluctable law governing reality. The tendency is a general scheme; it takes as its starting point the analysis of the elements that will come to compose a given historical reality. On the grounds of this analysis, it develops a method, an orientation, a direction for mass political action. (...) Reason is prepared to accept the risks of such an adventure: in fact, the truth of the tendency lies in its practical verification. (...) The objective was always to translate theoretical predictions into politics and practice – and fundamentally to pose, on this level, the problem of organisation. (...) Therefore, if we are going to be accused of something, let it be not of economicism but of a genuine problem, our delay in finding a new solution to the problem of organisation. We would accept the charge and devote ourselves to resolve it, inside and through the movement. (Negri, 2003: 98)
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> All of this poses the enormous problem of the legitimation of political activity, forces one to confront the composition of the class on a daily basis and to read the programme only in the behaviours of the class, not in one's own statutes (...) (Bologna, 1978: 28)

The most mysterious element in the narrative and methodology of class composition is the last one – recomposition. Initially, the main focus of *operaista* agitation was wage struggles in the big factories where the *operaisti* had managed to develop a social base. In the Keynesian compact, to turn the wage into an independent variable whose only measure was the relative political force of the mass worker was a key strategic moment in the affirmation of a subjective 'selfishness' that pushed the system to its limits. With the end of the welfare State arrangement and productive restructuring, the point of recomposition seems to become more and more abstract: -- first the party-building fixation of Potere Operaio's last days, then, in Negri's work, abstract labour ('Crisis of the planner-State') and the socialised worker ('Proletarians and the State'). Less about what is already there, a concrete demand or rallying point, and more about what needs to be constructed (the party) or an abstract concept from which a direction can be logically derived – and which, following the *operaista* teleology of a growing socialisation of the proletariat, will become more and more all-encompassing.

The problem with these abstract points of recomposition is that conceptual development and logical rigour can at best give indications as to where to move. They do not solve, or even pose, problems of organisation. Whereas any talk of composition is at least half objective, and can be absorbed in a Marxist discourse, the mystery of (re)composition is probably best understood in Spinozist terms – that is, as that striving of the *conatus* to select the things it enters in relation with so as to enhance its power of acting; as the arrangement of encounters that produce more *potentia* (Spinoza, 1992)[1]. As such, it can only be determined experimentally; it is only after entering a relation, managing to produce a 'composition' (in the Spinozist sense, or that of a certain Spinoza as read by Deleuze), that one can tell what it can mean. Again, "organisation is spontaneity reflecting on itself".

To speak of (re)composition in terms of the enhancement of the power to act finds an echo in Paolo Virno's (2004a) analysis of the 'global movement':

> The global movement, from Seattle forward, appears as a battery that functions halfway: it accumulates energy without pause, but it does not know how where to discharge it. It is faced with an amazing accumulation, which has no correlate, at the moment, in adequate investments. It is like being in front a new technological apparatus, potent and refined, but ignoring the instructions for its use.[2]

In true (post-) operaista fashion, and in a similar move to that of Bologna in relation to the 1977 movement, Virno warns against any interpretation that posits the present movement as either external or marginal to the relations of production. If post-Fordism puts life to work, what the 'global movement' manifests is at once a rootedness in this condition and an 'ethical charge' that poses questions concerning the '"good life"', reclaiming and defending some 'very general principles concerning the "human condition"':

> freedom of speech, co-participation in the common good that is knowledge, peace, protection of the environment, justice and solidarity, aspiration to a public sphere in which the singularity and irrepeatability of each singular existence would be valued. (Virno, 2004a; slightly modified).

In Europe, but also elsewhere to some extent, the immaterial labour thesis has been employed in an effort to 'reterritorialise' the movement. This reterriorialisation has many meanings. It is at once a move away from posing problems in global or 'general human' terms (which is partially a cause for the move away from mobilisations against the summits of global institutions); and the rejection of a residual third-worldism, where 'real' problems and 'real' struggle always appear as what happens away from 'here'. In this sense, it is also a return to a first-person politics, which appeals not to a broad ethical concern with the state of the world, but to immediate needs and desires that do not pose a separation between the 'activist' and the 'normal people' she fights for and appeals to. As a consequence, this reterritorialisation also means a return to the immediate territory, and the production and social reproduction that unfolds in it.[3] In Europe this process has found its two main focal points around the issues of precarity and migration, and it has obviously been able to draw a lot of insights and inspiration from (post-) operaismo in the process.

But is at this point that we must part ways with some of the more substantial theses of post-operaista thought today, while remaining faithful to its orginal thrust of looking to the already existing forms of political organisation in order to find ways forward – that is, following the basic idea behind the concept of class composition, viz. that to certain arrangements in the organisation of production (technical composition) there must correspond certain patterns of political behaviour that prefigure the immanent responses to these arrangements (political composition) whose intensification and connection can generate a new cycle of struggles.

So at this juncture we find the problem delimited, on one side, by the widely identified, at present, situation of an impasse reached by those forms and subjectivities of resistance that were constitutive of the event named 'global movement'; and, on the other, by the questions concerning the enquiry into the internal mechanisms and interconnections of today's planetary class composition. This is the point where questions of organisation again open up, and this is where abstract talk of tendencies – as in an alleged hegemony of immaterial labour – can offer very limited light; at worst, in fact, it can represent a return to the objectivism and teleology that have always haunted (post-) *operaista* discourse, as the twin ghosts of Hegel and orthodox Marxism that one could never fully exorcise. [4]

It is clear that much has changed since *Quaderni Rossi*'s founding injunction to look for the 'real class' in a 'real factory'– for just one example of no small importance, in the end or loss of relative weight of 'factory gate' agitation (particularly in extensively de-industrialised regions of the global North, but also in the global South). That means not only a transformation in potential social base (one the *operaisti* experienced between

the 1969 strikes and the movement of 1977), but in the very means of constituting political subjectivities. Fordism clearly created lots of possibilities for political intervention by concentrating huge masses of workers in a single place and disposing them along the assembly line in a way that allowed a relatively small number of strategically located workers to grind a whole factory to a halt; the welfare State offered some degree of security to those who engaged in political activity.

A form of intervention in a productive situation characterised by decentralisation, territorial diffusion, flexibility, mobility, informality and a plethora of forms of labour with much greater variation in organisation and status even among similar forms (e.g., nurse in hospital and flexible care worker) is yet to be invented. Some tentative steps, theoretical and practical, are being taken in this area – under names such as solidarity unionism, biosindicalism, metropolitan co-research;[5] in organisations and campaigns around housing (the assemblies in Spain), transport (Movimento Passe Livre in Brazil, Planka Nu in Sweden), precarious work and life conditions (the Oficinas de Derechos Sociales in Spain, Coordination des Intermittents du Spectacle in France, the Euromayday Network, Justice for Janitors and the Industrial Workers of the World).[6] In what follows, I will try to sketch a few general lines along which such experiments are already developing, or could come to develop.

1 – On the territory

First of all, as stated above, they represent a return to the territory. On top of all the meanings already ascribed to this movement, this return also represents in relation to classic 'factory gate' agitation a decentring of the workplace. In some cases, the work place is secondary or irrelevant – Passe Livre finds most of its social base among students, and is nationally organised in a federated structure, with local, city and state committees; the movement for affordable housing and against property speculation in Spain is organised around city assemblies. Even in those cases where workplace organising is still the main focus, it is integrated into a larger framework of community organising. For instance, it is part and parcel of the Justice for Janitors model that workplace activism be complemented by constant mapping of the social networks in which workers are inserted, so that the organising process develops laterally towards migrant communities, neighbourhood organisations, religious groups etc. This has proved one of the greatest strengths of this model.

This territoriality leads to a second element: under conditions of productive diffusion and 'life made productive', an analysis of class composition that serves practical ends must tend towards cartography. In other words, it becomes less about finding a general abstract model, or even a hegemonic subject, and more about identifying the concrete articulations of different forms of labour, gender, legal status, and subjectivities, flows of people, commodities, services and communication that produce the territory. Broad categories like 'precarity', while useful, can only be put to work through this passage. Justice for Janitors, for instance, uses mapping as a permanent tool for identifying social networks within and outside the workplace, identifying their main nodes (as potential leaders and activists and as potential targets for anti-union measures), following the movement of workers between different workplaces and into their communities (and thus identifying new possibilities for organising), even capturing variations in attitudes and moods towards the campaign.[7] Cartography is at once a constantly renewable source of knowledge and a motor of organising itself: like co-research, it is not just a tool for amassing knowledge for knowledge's sake, but a process of production of subjectivity – for example, creating new relations, or making leaders responsible for mapping their workplaces themselves.[8]

2 – Building and dwelling

A further meaning of this return to the territory takes us to our third point. In his analysis of the 'global movement', Virno (2004a) furthers a promising idea that he does not develop:

> The symbolic-mediatic dimension has been, at the same time, a set of favorable occasions and limits. On the one hand, it has guaranteed the accumulation of energy, on the other it has impeded its application, or deferred it to infinity. Every activist is conscious of this: the global movement has not managed to even impact (*incidir*) – I understand impact (*incidir*) with the image of a corrosive acid – the present capitalist accumulation. The movement has not placed into play a combination of forms of struggle capable of converting the conditions of precarious, intermittent, atypical work into a politically subversive power (*potencia*). (...) The question should be: from where does the difficulty arise? Why have the rate of profit and the functioning of constituted powers not been significantly affected after three years of disorder? Why this paradoxical 'double bind', on the basis of which the symbolic-communicative is an authentic propulsive spring and, at the same time, a source of paralysis?

It can be said that the 'global movement', if understood as something more than the sum of its parts (that is, more than its organised elements, which more often than not still have the Nation-State as their addressee), was a symbolic production of spectacular events such as Seattle and their relay through various means of communication that in turn created new flows of communication and coordination.[9] The connection that Virno seems to stop short of making between the "ethical charge" of this movement and the '"double bind"' is that the other of the 'symbolic-communicative' activism of those days was the *public*: in a market of information and affects relayed by mass and peer-to-peer media, activists vied for attention with mass-produced, mass-advertised products, lifestyles, and sometimes the reframing and repackaging of the very information and affect produced by them. With limited control over the ways in which these get framed and relayed, symbolic-communicative activism sends them out into the ether in the hope that someone out there will listen to, be informed/affected by, and act on it. That is, despite all the heady talk about this being 'a revolution without spectators', the failure to root struggles in immediate needs and desires meant that it ended up being neither.

The summit protest model can and has been criticised on many accounts, particularly for being unsustainable: a focus on large mobilisations every other year means an enormous investment of resources (physical, emotional, of time, money etc.) is consumed into organising something which is by definition not an end in itself; the losses in terms of burn-out, trauma, police repression and media demonisation tend to make groups weaker rather than stronger after the event has passed; passing from the guerrilla model of small-scale actions to the all-out warfare model of mass actions, where the all-out warfare is necessarily limited to just a few days, means attracting a degree of attention and repression that groups do not have the conditions to deal with. A parallel criticism would argue that this unsustainability is a reflection of a deeper confusion between working towards staging a show of force and working on developing the force itself – of falling prey to a spectacular logic where the creating an expression of dissent that can then be circulated as information and affect comes to be perceived as the only way of (re)producing dissent.

In an environment saturated with information, the insistence of statements and affects – their capacity to go on producing effects – is determined by their materiality, repeatability, capacity to spread, and the public's management of its own attention (and life).[10] It is in fact perfectly possible that 'common people' agree with the points made by 'activists': the fact that the majority of the population in the UK and US opposes the war has not translated itself into active opposition or widespread civil disobedience; the fact that most people believe in the threat of climate change produced by the present mode of production seems to make them put more, not less, trust (or just hope) in the capacity of governments and business to find a solution to it. However, and moreover,

> Control is expressed in Western countries not only through modulating brains, but also through forming bodies (in prisons, schools and hospitals) and through life management ('workfare'). We would be doing our capitalist societies a favor, if we think that everything happens through the continuous variation of subjects and objects, through modulating brains and by means of the occupation of memory and attention by signs, images and statements. The control society integrates the 'old' disciplinary dispositive. In non-Western societies, where disciplinary institutions and 'workfare' are weaker and less developed, control immediately means the logic of war, even in times of 'peace' (see Brazil). (Lazzarato, 2003)

It is not just that 'older' forms of political practice, such as workplace and community organising, develop relations that tend to be stronger (because built on ties of affect, trust, shared time etc.) and thus more insistent – although this is true, and the third element of my argument.[11] Organisation itself needs to move towards a reconfiguring of the various ways in which subjectivity is produced by and for capital. In this process, it must move beyond being 'political' organisation (in the strict sense of that which creates campaigns, groups, etc.), and become social creation: it must – and these are the fourth and fifth points – not be afraid of its power to create institutions, and its entrepreneurial capacity. It is curious that for all the celebration of the inexhaustible self-organising powers of the 'multitude' today, they seem to be always celebrated in potential and not in act; whatever concrete things we are capable of deserve the same (critical) love that is devoted to our power of creating them.

3 – Sooner or later it will be too late

Speaking of entrepreneurial capacity implies attempting to verify in practice some of the most optimistic contentions of the immaterial labour thesis; if life and territory are becoming productive, this must reflect in an increased capacity of collaborative organisation of economic activity. While one must remain healthily sceptic as to how far such claims can go, it is true that such experiments as those practiced by solidarity economy are more possible today than before (due to developments in infra-structure, informatisation, a more skilled workforce etc.).[12] Collaborative net-work is a common feature of the 'global movement' – think of Indymedia –, but mostly in a temporary and *ad hoc* fashion. In particular in those fields of 'properly' immaterial labour where the suggestion of an increasing externality of the capitalist to the productive cycle seems closer to holding true, these are more than potentials to be tapped into: for creative immaterial workers, this is the political question *par excellence*.[13] It is not (only) a matter of producing political content, but of transforming the conditions under which it is produced. Many involved as producers in the fight against intellectual property rights today would argue this is clearly more important than any attempt at finding a mediation that could settle the score between those escaping copyright and those trying to enforce it; given the fact that the present technological conditions allow the possibility of escape to return indefinitely, producers are given free rein to act as the bad infinity that capital can never foreclose, while at the same time inventing new ways to earn a living.[14]

To speak of institutions also entails a return to longer-term projects. For the new movements that appeared in the last ten years, their rootedness in productive relations has had an ambivalent significance: greater mobility and time-flexibility has also meant that few projects and initiatives have survived long enough to produce permanent results. Needless to say, the temporality of organising and producing social innovation is very different from that of summit mobilisations.

While one can say that, for creative immaterial workers, the objective potential for collaborative self-organisation is coupled with a strong subjective incentive to stay in the game (the elusive promise of 'making it big', but also the lure of an interesting lifestyle even for those in the 'bottom rung'), at the most universal level it is of course the very elementary necessity to reproduce oneself that pushes people into selling

their labour: rent doth make capitalists of us all. It is easy to observe today in the context of that impasse of the 'global movement' that a failure to collectively invest in building concrete, sustainable alternatives has more often than not found its 'solution' in people having to find individual ways of earning a living. There one always finds the risk of the newly acquired job placing people in a position where not only they have to elbow 'comrades' (turned competitors) out of the way, but where they also are forced to become pimps of their social capital. There are careers to be made in academia and art, for instance, out of involvement in politics, which can largely involve privately appropriating collective processes in exchange for wages or cultural capital.[15]

This is not to say that because someone becomes a curator, academic etc. they will necessarily and immediately 'pass on to the other side'; there are many ways in which individuals can occupy such functions – for example, by chanelling flows of money into collective processes that produce political effects –; a whole political economy of 'counter-pimping'[16] is not only possible, but also necessary for the existence of transversal relations with institutions such as universities and the (corporate) media. If the alternative here would be to extol the virtues of those who have accepted menial jobs below their capacities so as not to 'sell out', then one would have to say that an ethics of sacrifice does not seem a desirable option either. Although, at the end of the day, it must be said that not even those jobs that in the past may have seemed very desirable look so much so nowadays; it suffices to look at the case of academia to see that, however luring the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow may still be, the structural trend is that it becomes more and more, and for more people, a mere carrot that functions as the incentive for academic flexworkers to accept a lifetime of rather bad (and worsening) conditions.[17]

It should be clear then that the question must be moved from the level of individual to collective solutions, where the levels of sustainability (individual and collective) and long-term political projects, entrepreneurship and instituent power come together in social innovation beyond the market logic. Capacity of collective negotiation, selling one's product and not one's labour, capacity not only to produce political effects, but to produce them on a different basis.[18]

Any talk of institutions cannot be unaware of their attendant dangers; and as much as they need to be capable of selectively connecting to and disconnecting from other institutions (trade unions, NGOs, governmental institutions), both on the molar and the molecular levels, the love and commitment devoted to them cannot be blind: one should never have an identity that cannot be left behind. The goal of a movement must always be to produce an excess of itself, new relations, unexpected encounters; fixed points can have both a positive and a negative role in this process. Like the Saint Francis referenced at the end of *Empire* (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 413), all one can hope for is the wisdom to distinguish between the two. The rationale here is simple: as soon as one rejects any form of teleology, one must be ready to accept that all of one's creations (oneself included) are part of a forward flow in which they may change or be left behind.[19] The dangers are great, but practical choices cannot be foreclosed by posing abstract oppositions of the 'reform or revolution' kind; an institution can only be defined by the effects it produces, and since these effects change in time both as an effect of instituent/institutional practice itself and the series of events around it that it produces and is produced by, so must questions remain open and variable in time. Perhaps here would be the place to couple a pessimism of the intellect with an optimism of the general intellect.

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[1] Cf. in particular P2-4, IV; P8, IV; P18-21, IV; P26, IV; P31. IV; P59, IV.

[2] One could infer from the text that he has mostly European movements in mind when speaking; 'global movement' is often used in Italy as a shorthand for the European mobilisations of the last ten years.

[3] Cf. Nunes (2004).

[4] In a recent engagement with post-operaista thought and the immaterial labour thesis in particular (Nunes 2007) I have tried to go deeper into the reasons why one should question the usefulness of speaking in terms of a tendency of hegemony of immaterial labour. In very schematic form, the argument consists in pointing out that, on the one hand, (post-)operaista thought is beset from the start with a structural oscillation between subjectivism and objectivism with, on the one hand, an emphasis on the self-organising powers of labour and the contingence of its moments of confrontation with capitalist rule and, on the other, a covert teleology pointing towards the increasing socialisation of labour brought about by capital's responses to moments of crisis. The hegemony of immaterial labour then plays, in contemporary debates, the role of endpoint of this teleological process, where the burden of agency is moved from labour to capitalist restructuring, so that capital appears to be working necessarily towards its own dissolution. The second half of the argument consists in showing how not only the overall emancipatory character of 'immaterial labour' is extrapolated from very limited cases that fall under the broad category, and then asking what speaking of 'hegemony' can mean in this case. I point out that it is impossible to imagine this hegemony as a positive levelling of all forms of labour, which then leaves open the possibility that one may be speaking of an organisational or political primacy of such forms of labour – both approaches that yield important insights, but also full of serious problems, particularly when one takes into consideration the disparities and interdependence of global class composition.

The present article consists in the second part in the enquiry that began with '"Forward how? Forward where": (post-) operaismo beyond the immaterial labour thesis'.

[5] Cf. respectively: Hamilton and Holdren (2007); Fumagalli (2005) and Ingrassia (2006); Conti et al. (2007).

[6] Cf. respectively: www.vdevivienda.net; http://www.mpl.org.br/; http://www.planka.nu/eng; http://www.precarity-map.net/wiki/index.php/Oficina_de_Derechos_Sociales._ODS; http://www.cip-idf.org/; http://www.euromayday.org/; http://www.seiu.org/property/janitors/; http://www.iww.org/.

[7] For more on the methodology employed on Justice for Janitors, cf. Alzaga and Nunes (2007).

[8] For very good introductions to the issue of the political practice of cartography, cf. Sguiglia and Toret (2006), Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias (2006).

[9] By calling 'global movement' an *event* I mean to stress the fact that rather than consisting in an actual movement in any traditional sense, it is in fact the historical co-incidence of three separate factors: a rapid intensification of struggles in the global North (mostly around the summit protest movement), a quick

succession of events (such as the Zapatista insurgency in 1994, the 'Battle of Seattle' in 1999, the Bolivian 'water wars' in 2000, the Argentinean crisis of 2001), and the increased capacity for movements to communicate and coordinate across the globe (which in turn made it easier for many struggles that had been taking place in the global South for a long time to be known); the three they increasingly produced the idea of a global circulation of struggles both in the sense that it produced 'more' struggle (got more people involved, provided a conjuncture in which more mobilisation was possible and, in a way, 'necessary' in order to act on that conjuncture) and provided itself with a complementary dimension, the imperative to communicate, network, coordinate.

[10] For Virno (2004: 88-93), the ambivalent existentials of idle talk and curiosity are attributes of the multitude.

[11] I use 'older' here with a good degree of irony; even though it is a form of 'class' organising, there is nothing old in the form of the Coordination des Intermittents du Spectacle, for example. Cf. Lazzarato (2004).

[12] Cf. Mance (2007).

[13] I understand creative immaterial workers as those who produce both the content and the form of the immaterial product, that is, those who (at least potentially) can freely determine the content and form of a product that can be freely shared by means of available technology. I have argued that this is the only form of immaterial labour to which the most radical claims concerning the general category of immaterial labour applies (cf. Nunes, 2007).

[14] This is of course only the *producer* side of the fight around intellectual property, where the fact that all the 'initiative' is all on the side of producers puts them in a privileged position; the same would not apply to questions concerning biopiracy and GMOs.

[15] On this point, it is illustrative to look at Arvidsson's (2007) study of the relations between cultural underground and advertising.

[16] While 'political economy of "counter-pimping"' is obviously a reference to Suely Rolnik's (2006) 'Geopolitics of pimping', the term 'counter-pimping' comes out of a conversation with Janna Graham and Valeria Graziano.

[17] Cf., for example, Bousquet, Parascondola and Scott (2003)

[18] On collective capacity of negotiation, cf. Sanchez Cedillo (2007); I take the phrase 'selling one's product, not one's labour' from Berlin-based 'venture communists' Telekommunisten. [www.telekommunisten.net]

[19] Here again I could refer to Movimento Passe Livre in Brazil, whose adoption of a highly structured federated form in 2005 seems so far to have helped, and not hindered, its development.