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Publicness of the Intellect

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Common places and "general intellect"

In order to have a better understanding of the contemporary notion of multitude, it will be useful to reflect more profoundly upon which essential resources might be the ones we can count on for protection from the dangerousness of the world. I propose to identify these resources by means of an Aristotelian concept, a linguistic concept (or, better yet, one pertaining to the art of rhetoric): the "common places," the *topoi koinoi*.

When we speak today of "common places," we mean, for the most part, stereotypical expressions, by now devoid of any meaning, banalities, lifeless metaphors ("morning is golden-mouthed"), trite linguistic conventions. Certainly this was not the original meaning of the expression "common places." For Aristotle (*Rhetoric*, I, 2, 1358a) the *topoi koinoi* are the most generally valid logical and linguistic forms Of all of our discourse (let us even say, the skeletal structure of it); they allow for the existence of every individual expression we use and they give structure to these expressions as well. Such "places" are *common* because no one can do without them (from the refined orator to the drunkard who mumbles words hard to understand, from the business person to the politician). Aristotle points out three of these "places": the

connection between more and less, the opposition of opposites, and the category of reciprocity ("If I am her brother, she is my sister").

These categories, like every true skeletal structure, never appear as such. They are the woof of the "life of the mind," but they are an *inconspicuous* woof. What is it, then, that can actually be seen in the forms of our dis course? The "special places," as Aristotle calls them (*topoi idioi*). These are ways of saying something - metaphors, witticisms, allocutions, etc. - which are appropriate in one or another sphere of associative life. "Special places" are ways of saying/thinking something which end up being appropriate at a local political party headquarters, or in church, or in a university classroom, or among sports fans of a certain team. And so on. Whether it be the life of the city or its ethos (shared customs), these are articulated by means of "special places" which are different from one another and often incompatible. A certain expression might function in one situation and not in another; a certain type of argumentation might succeed in convincing one audience, but not another, etc.

The transformation with which we must come to terms can be summarized in this way: in today's world, the "special places" of discourse and of argumentation are perishing and dissolving, while immediate visibility is being gained by the "common places," or by generic logical-linguistic forms which establish the pattern for all forms of discourse. This means that in order to get a sense of orientation in the world and to protect ourselves from its dangers, we can not rely on those forms of thought, of reasoning, or of discourse which have their niche in one particular context or another. The clan of sports fans, the religious community, the branch of a political party, the workplace: all of these "places" obviously continue to exist, but none of them is sufficiently

characterized or characterizing as to be able to offer us a wind rose, or a standard of orientation, a trustworthy compass, a unity of specific customs, of specific ways of saying/ thinking things. Everywhere, and in every situation, we speak/ think in the same way, on the basis of logical-linguistic constructs which are as fundamental as they are broadly general. An ethical-rhetorical topography is disappearing. The "common places" (these inadequate principles of the "life of the mind") arc moving to the forefront: the connection between more and less, the opposition of opposites, the relationship of reciprocity, etc. These "common places," and these alone, are what exist in terms of offering us a standard of orientation, and thus, some sort of refuge from the direction in which the world is going.

Being no longer inconspicuous, but rather having been flung into the forefront, the "common places" are the apotropaic resource of the contemporary multitude. They appear on the surface, like a toolbox containing things which are immediately useful. What else are they, these "common places," if not the fundamental core of the "life of the mind," the epicenter of that linguistic (in the strictest sense of the word) animal which is the human animal?

Thus, we could say that the "life of the mind" becomes, in itself, *public*. We turn to the most general categories in order to equip ourselves for the most varied specific situations, no longer having at our disposal any "special" or sectorial ethical-communicative codes. The feeling of not-feeling-at-home and the preeminence of the "common places" go hand in hand. The intellect as such, the pure intellect, becomes the concrete compass wherever the substantial communities fail, and we are always exposed to the world in its totality. The intellect, even in its most rarefied functions, is presented as something *common* and conspicuous. The "common places" are no longer an unnoticed background, they are

no longer concealed by the springing forth of "special places." The "life of the mind" is the One which lies beneath the mode of being of the multitude. Let me repeat, and I must insist upon this: the movement to the forefront on the part of the intellect as such, the fact that the most general and abstract linguistic structures are becoming instruments for orienting one's own conduct-this situation, in my opinion, is one of the conditions which define the contemporary multitude.

A short while ago I spoke of the "public intellect." But the expression "public intellect" contradicts a long tradition according to which thought would be understood as a secluded and solitary activity, one which separates us from our peers, an interior action, devoid of visual manifestations, outside of the handling of human affairs. It seems that only one thinker takes exception to this long tradition according to which the "life of the mind" is resistant to publicness; in several pages of Marx we see the intellect being presented as something exterior and collective, as a public good. In the "Fragment on Machines" of the *Grundrisse*, (Notebook VII) Marx speaks of a *general intellect*: he uses these words in English to give emphasis to the expression, as though he wanted to place them in italics. The notion of "general intellect" can derive from several sources: perhaps it is a polemical response to the "general will" of Rousseau (the intellect, not the will, according to Marx, is that which joins together those who bring about production); or perhaps the "general intellect" is the materialistic renewal of the Aristotelian concept of *nous poietikos* (the productive, poietic intellect). But philology is not what matters here. What matters is the exterior, collective, social character which belongs to intellectual activity when this activity becomes, according to Marx, the true mainspring of the production of wealth.

With the exception of these pages in Marx, I repeat, tradition has attributed to the intellect those characteristics which illustrate its insensitivity to, and estrangement from, the public sphere. In one of the youthful writings of Aristotle, the *Protrepticus*, the life of the thinker is compared to the life of the stranger. Thinkers must live estranged from their community, must distance themselves from the buzzing activity of the multitude, must mute the sounds of the agora. With respect to public life, to the political-social community, thinkers and strangers alike do not feel themselves, in the strict sense of the expression, to be at home. This is a good point of departure for focusing on the condition of the contemporary multitude. But it is a good point of departure only if we agree to draw some other conclusions from the analogy between the stranger and the thinker.

Being a stranger, that is to say "not-feeling-at-home," is today a condition common to many, an inescapable and shared condition. So then, those who do not feel at home, in order to get a sense of orientation and to protect themselves, must turn to the "common places," or to the most general categories of the linguistic intellect; in this sense, strangers are always thinkers. As you see, I am inverting the direction of the analogy: it is not the thinkers who become strangers in the eyes of the community to which the thinkers belong, but the strangers, the multitude of those "with no home," who are absolutely obliged to attain the *status* of thinkers. Those "without a home" have no choice but to behave like thinkers: not in order for them to learn something about biology or advanced mathematics, but because they turn to the most essential categories of the abstract intellect in order to protect themselves from the blows of random chance, in order to take refuge from contingency and from the unforeseen.

In Aristotle, the thinker is the stranger, yes, but only provisionally: once he has finished writing the *Metaphysics*, he can return to the task of dealingwith common affairs. In the same way, even the strangers in the strict sense of the word, the Spartans who have come to Athens, are strangers for a specific amount of time: sooner or later, they will be able to return to their country. For the contemporary multitude, instead, the condition of "not feeling at home" is permanent and irreversible. The absence of a substantial community and of any connected "special places" makes it such that the life of the stranger, the not-feeling-at-home, the *bios xenikos*, are unavoidable and lasting experiences. The multitude of those "without a home" places its trust in the intellect, in the "common places:" in its own way, then, it is a multitude of thinkers (even if these thinkers have only an elementary school education and never read a book, not even under torture).

And now a secondary observation. Sometimes we speak about the *childishness* of contemporary metropolitan forms of behavior. We speak about it in a deprecatory tone. Once we have agreed that such deprecation is foolish, it would be worth it to ask ourselves if there is something of consistency (in short, a kernel of truth) in the connection between metropolitan life and childhood. Perhaps childhood is the ontogenetic matrix of every subsequent search for protection from the blows of the surrounding world; it exemplifies the necessity of conquering a constituent sense of indecision, an original uncertainty (indecision and uncertainty which at times give way to shame, a feeling unknown to the non-human "baby" which knows from the beginning how to behave). The human baby protects itself by means of *repetition* (the same fairy tale, one more time, or the same game, or the same gesture). Repetition is understood as a protective strategy in the face of the shock caused by new and unexpected experiences. So, the problem looks like

this: is it not true that the experience of the baby is transferred into adult experience, into the prevalent forms of behavior at the center of the great urban aggregates (described by Simmel, Benjamin, and so many others)? The childhood experience of repetition is prolonged even into adulthood, since it constitutes the principal form of safe haven in the absence of solidly established customs, of substantial communities, of a developed and complete *ethos*. In traditional societies (or, if you like, in the experience of the "people"), the repetition which is so dear to babies gave way to more complex and articulated forms of protection: to *ethos*; that is to say, to the usages and customs, to the habits which constitute the base of the substantial communities. Now, in the age of the multitude, this substitution no longer occurs. Repetition, far from being replaced, persists. It was Walter Benjamin who got the point. He dedicated a great deal of attention to childhood, to childish games, to the love which a baby has for repetition; and together with this, he identified the sphere in which new forms of perception are created with the technical reproducibility of a work of art (Benjamin, *Illuminations*). So then, there is some thing to believe in the idea that there is a connection between these two facets of thought. Within the possibility of technical reproduction, the child's request for "one more time" comes back again, strengthened; or we might say that the need for repetition as a form of refuge surfaces again. The publicness of the mind, the conspicuousness of "common places," the *general intellect* - these are also manifested as forms of the reassuring nature of repetition. It is true: today's multitude has something childish in it: but this something is as serious as can be.

Publicness without a public sphere

We have said that the multitude is defined by the feeling of not-feeling-athome, just as it was defined by the consequent familiarity with "common places," with the abstract intellect. We need to add, now, that the dialectic dread-safe haven is rooted precisely in this familiarity with the abstract intellect. The public and shared character of the "life of the mind" is colored with ambivalence: it is also, in and of itself, the host to negative possibilities, to formidable figures. The public intellect is the unifying base from which there can spring forth either forms of ghastly protection or forms of protection capable of achieving a real sense of comfort (according to the degree in which, as we have said, they safeguard us from the former forms of protection). The public intellect which the multitude draws upon is the point of departure for opposing developments. When the fundamental abilities of the human being (thought, language, self-reflection, the capacity for learning) come to the forefront, the situation can take on a disquieting and oppressive appearance; or it can even give way to a non-public public sphere, to a *non-governmental* public sphere, far from the myths and rituals of sovereignty.

My thesis, in extremely concise form, is this: if the publicness of the intellect does not yield to the realm of a public sphere, of a political space in which the many can tend to common affairs, then it produces terrifying effects. *A publicness without a public sphere*: here is the negative side - the evil, if you wish - of the experience of the multitude. Freud in the essay "The Uncanny" (Freud, *Collected Papers*) shows how the extrinsic power of thought can take on anguishing features. He says that people who are ill, for whom thoughts have an exterior, practical and immediately operative power, fear becoming conditioned and overwhelmed by others. It is the same situation, moreover, which is brought about in a spiritualist seance in which the participants are bound together

in a fused relationship which seems to nullify every trace of individual identity. So then, the belief in the "omnipotence of thought," studied by Freud, and the extreme situation of the spiritualist seance exemplify clearly what *publicness without a public sphere* can become; what *general intellect* can become when it is not articulated within a political space.

The *general intellect*, or public intellect, if it does not become a *republic*, a public sphere, a political community, drastically increases forms of submission. To make the point clear, let us think about contemporary production. The *sharing* of linguistic and cognitive habits is the constituent element of the post-Fordist process of labor. All the workers enter into production in as much as they are speaking-thinking. This has nothing to do, mind you, with "professionality" or with the ancient concept of "skill" or "craftsmanship": to speak/to think are generic habits of the human animal, the opposite of any sort of specialization. This preliminary *sharing* in one way characterizes the "many," seen as being "many," the multitude; in another way, it is itself the base of today's production. *Sharing*, in so far as it is a technical requirement, is opposed to the *division* of labor - it contradicts that division and causes it to crumble. Of course this does not mean that work loads are no longer subdivided, parceled out, etc.; rather, it means that the segmentation of duties no longer answers to objective "technical" criteria, but is, instead, explicitly arbitrary, reversible, changeable. As far as capital is concerned, what really counts is the original sharing of linguistic-cognitive talents, since it is this sharing which guarantees readiness, adaptability, etc., in reacting to innovation. So, it is evident that this sharing of generic cognitive and linguistic talents within the process of real production does not become a public sphere, does not become a political community or a constitutional principle. So then, what happens?

The publicness of the intellect, that is to say the sharing of the intellect, in one sense causes every rigid division of labor to fall flat on its back; in another sense, however, it fosters *personal dependence*. *General intellect*, the end of the division of labor, personal dependency: the three facets are interrelated. The publicness of the intellect, when it does not take place in a public sphere, translates into an *unchecked proliferation of hierarchies* as groundless as they are thriving. The dependency is *personal* in two senses of the word: in the world of labor one depends on this person or on that person, not on rules endowed with anonymous coercive power; moreover, it is the whole person who is subdued, the person's basic communicative and cognitive habits.

Which One for the Many?

The point of departure for our analysis was the opposition between the terms "people" and "multitude." From what we have discussed up to this point, it remains clear that the multitude does not rid itself of the *One*, of the universal, of the common/shared; rather, it redefines the One. The One of the multitude no longer has anything to do with the One constituted by the State, with the One towards which the people converge.

The people are the result of a centripetal movement: from atomized individuals, to the unity of the "body politic," to sovereignty. The extreme outcome of this centripetal movement is the One. The multitude, on the other hand, is the outcome of a centrifugal movement: from the One to the Many. But which One is it that serves as the starting point from which the many differentiate themselves and remain so? Certainly it can not be the State; it must have to do with some completely different form of

unity/universality. We can now consider once again a point to which we referred at the beginning of our analysis.

The unity which the multitude has behind itself is constituted by the "common places" of the mind, by the linguistic-cognitive faculties common to the species, by the *general intellect*. It has to do with a unity/universality which is visibly unlike that of the state. Let us be clear: the cognitive-linguistic habits of the species do not come to the forefront because someone decides to make them come to the forefront; they do so out of necessity, or because they constitute a form of protection in a society devoid of substantial communities (or of "special places").

The One of the multitude, then, is not the One of the people. The multitude does not converge into a *volonté générale* for one simple reason: because it already has access to a *general intellect*. The public intellect, however, which appears in the post-Ford world as a mere resource of production, can constitute a different "constitutional principle"; it can overshadow a *non-state public sphere*. The many, in as much as they are many, use the publicness of the intellect as their base or pedestal: for better or for worse.

Certainly there is a substantial difference between the contemporary multitude and the multitude which was studied by seventeenth century philosophers of political thought. At the dawning of the modern era, the many" coincided with the citizens of the communal republics prior to the birth of the great national States. Those "many" made use of the "right of resistance," of the *jus resistentiae*. That right, nonsensically, does not mean legitimate defense: it is something more subtle and complicated. The "right of resistance" consists of validating the prerogatives of an individual or of a local community, or of a corporation, in contrast to the central power structure, thus safeguarding forms of life which have

already been affirmed as free-standing forms, thus protecting practices *already* rooted in society. It means, then, defending something positive: it is a *conservative* violence (in the good and noble sense of the word.) Perhaps the *jus resistentiae* (or the right to protect something which is already in place and is worthy of continuing to exist) is what provides the strongest connection between the seventeenth century *multitudo* and the post-Ford multitude. Even for the latter "multitude," it is not a question of "seizing power," of constructing a new State or a new monopoly of political decision making; rather, it has to do with defending plural experiences, forms of non-representative democracy, of non-governmental usages and customs. As far as the rest is concerned, it is difficult not to see the differences between the two "multitudes": the contemporary multitude is fundamentally based upon the presumption of a One which is more, not less, universal than the State: public intellect, language, "common places" (just think, if you will, about the World-wide Web...). Furthermore, the contemporary multitude carries with it the history of capitalism and is closely bound to the needs of the labor class.

We must hold at bay the demon of the analogy, the short circuiting between the ancient and the very modern; we need to delineate in high relief the original historical traits of the contemporary multitude, while avoiding to define this multitude as simply a remake of something which once was. Let me give an example. It is typical of the post-Ford multitude to foment the collapse of political representation: not as an anarchic gesture, but as a means of calmly and realistically searching for new political forms. Of course Hobbes was already putting us on alert with reference to the tendency of the multitude to take on the forms of irregular political organisms: "in their nature but leagues, or sometimes mere concourse of people, without union to any

particular design, not by obligation of one to another" (Hobbes, *Leviathan*: 154). But it is obvious that non-representative democracy based upon the *general intellect* has an entirely different significance: it is in no way interstitial, marginal or residual; rather, it is the concrete appropriation and re-articulation of the knowledge/power unity which has congealed within the administrative modern machine of the States.

When we speak of "multitude," we run up against a complex problem: we must confront a concept without a history, without a lexicon, whereas the concept of "people" is a completely codified concept for which we have appropriate words and nuances of every sort. This is obviously the way it is. I have already said that the "people" prevailed against the "multitude" in the political-philosophical thought of the seventeenth century: thus, the "people" have enjoyed the privilege of a suitable lexicon. With regard to the multitude, we are left, instead, with the absolute lack of codification, with the absence of a clear conceptual vocabulary. But this is a wonderful challenge for philosophers and sociologists, above all for doing research in the field. It involves working on concrete matters, examining them in detail, but, at the same time deriving theoretical categories from them. There is a dual movement here, from things to words, and from words to things: this requires the post-Ford multitude. And it is, I repeat, an exciting task.

It is quite clear that "people" and "multitude" are two categories which are more in line with political thought than with sociology; in fact, they signbetween themselves, alternate forms of political existence. But it is my opinion that the notion of the multitude is extraordinarily rich in terms of allowing us to understand, to assess the modes of being of post-Ford subordinate labor, to understand some of the forms of behavior of that labor which at first sight

seemed so enigmatic. As I will try to explain more completely in the second day of our symposium, this is precisely a category of political thought which, having been defeated in the theoretical debate of its time, now presents itself again as a most valuable instrument for the analysis of living labor in the post-Ford era. Let us say that the multitude is an amphibian category: on one hand it speaks to us of social production based on knowledge and language; on the other hand, it speaks of the crisis of the form-of-State. And perhaps there is a strong connection between these two things. Carl Schmitt is someone who has grasped the essential nature of the State and who is the major theoretician of the politics of the past century; in the Sixties, when he was already an old man, he wrote a very bitter (for him) statement, the sense of which is that as the multitude reappears, the people fade away: "The era of stateness [*Staatlichkeit*] is nearing its end [...]. The State as the model of political unity, the State as the holder of the most extraordinary of all monopolies, that is to say, of the monopoly of political decision-making [...] is being dethroned" (Schmitt. *Der Begriff* 10 [note: English translation from the German, by the translators]). One important addition, however, must be made: this monopoly of decision making can be truly taken away from the State only when it ceases for once and for all to be a monopoly, only when the multitude asserts its centrifugal character.

I would like to conclude this first day of our seminar by dispelling, as much as I can, a misunderstanding into which it is easy to fall. It might seem as though the multitude would mark the end of the labor class. In the universe of the "many," there is no longer room for the blue collar workers, all of them equal, who make up a unified body among them, a body which is not very sensitive to the kaleidoscope of the "difference" among them.

This is a foolish way of thinking, one which is dear to those who feel the need to oversimplify questions, to get high on words meant for effect (to produce electroshocks for monkeys, as a friend. of mine used to say). Neither in Marx, nor m the opinion of any serious person, is labor class equated with certain habits, with certain usages and customs, etc. The labor class is a theoretical concept, not a snap-shot photograph kept as a souvenir: it signifies the subject which produces relative and absolute surplus value. So then, the contemporary working class, the current subordinate labor-power and its cognitive-linguistic collaboration, bear the traits of the multitude, rather than of the people. However, this multitude no longer assumes the "popular" vocation to stateness [*statualità*] The notion of "multitude" does not overturn the concept of the working class, since this concept was not bound by definition to that of "people." Being "multitude" does not interfere at all with producing surplus value. Since the labor class no longer assumes the mode of being of the people, but rather, that of the multitude, many things change, of course: the mentality, the forms of organization and of conflict. Everything becomes complicated. How much easier it would be to say that there is a multitude now, that there is no more labor class ... But if we really want simplicity at all costs, all we have to do is drink up a bottle of red wine.

On the other hand, there are passages even in Marx in which the labor class loses the appearance of the "people" and acquires the features of the "multitude." Just one example: let us think about the pages of the last chapter of the first book of the *Capital*, where Marx analyzes the condition of the labor class in the United States (Volume 1, Chap. 33, "The modern theory of colonization"). There is, in that chapter, some great writing on the subject of the American West, on the exodus from the East, on the individual initiative of the "many." The European laborers, driven away from

their own countries by epidemics, famines and economic crises, go off to work on the East Coast of the United States. But let us note: they remain there for a few years, *only* for a few years. Then they desert the factory, moving West, towards free lands. Wage labor is seen as a transitory phase, rather than as a life sentence. Even if only for a twenty-year period, the wage laborers had the possibility of planting the seeds of disorder into the ironclad laws of the labor market: by renouncing their own initial condition, they brought about a relative shortage of manpower and thus a raise in salaries. Marx, in describing this situation, offers us a very vivid portrait of a labor class which is also a multitude.

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