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## Public Sphere, labour, multitude: Strategies of resistance in Empire

Seminar organised by Officine Precarie in Pisa with Toni Negri and Paolo Virno. Coordinator: Marco Bascetta.[5th February 2003].

Antonio Negri:

I am perplexed when I confront the issue of the common. Every time I start to follow this theme -I don't know why- it flees in all directions because it is so pregnant with modern and ancient ideological suggestions...In fact, any attempt to distinguish it from the private, or the state, or the public in the French sense, is almost impossible, at least for me, for how my head works. Hence, I don't claim to provide a conclusive definition and I have reservations with regard to definitions of strategy.

The common is something that escapes any Marxian positive definition of what is produced. For me, and I am a Marxist and stay a Marxist, the common is abstract labour: i.e. that ensemble of products and energies of work that gets appropriated by capital and thus becomes common. Basically, it is the result of the law of value. It is capitalism that creates the common. In Marx there isn't a conception of the common that is a pre-capitalist common (yes, there are the commons, but they are not productive). If we want to reduce and bring the common within a modern conception we must accept this definition of the common as abstract labour, accumulated, consolidated. But abstract, accumulated, consolidated labour is never merely a quantity, an economic quantity, but it is an ensemble of relations that are relations of exploitation; or rather: hierarchical relations, schemes of division of labour, organisation and social diffusion of functions of command, reproductive hypotheses, consumption capacities etc.

Evidently, we have to start thinking this abstract, common, as something that is the common of exploitation. The question on the common -and here I start getting confused you see cause it is always the same word that gets used- is how to take the common away from exploitation? So long as we speak of the common we always speak of the common of exploitation. We all are commonly exploited. The common as something that is unexploited has been proposed a thousand times by all utopias, like for instance, regarding global goods such as air, water etc. No. Air and water are not there anymore, there are air and water that increasingly are exploited, absorbed, colonised, made to produce, turned into profit and that only in this way become common. The great capitalist expansion is that which goes to get forests, appropriates air and biological transformations become produced by the rainforest. This is globalisation: what makes common that rainforest that for me would have never been common.

Then the problem becomes to liberate the common from exploitation? What does this mean? First of all, we have to grant capital that it has, through abstract labour, put us in this happy -so to speak, obviously- situation where we are able to speak about the common. There is no common before capital. There is no common before capitalist history imposed it. Then, I must go and see how this common works, which largely corresponds to public space, to the history of public space, because there is a modern production of public space that is disciplinary production, i.e. a production of public space organised by the capacity of expressing power on individuals, of commonly putting individuals to work, of imposing a common measure on their labour, a measure so common that all capital (Marx's and capitalism in general) is based on an abstract temporal measure that constitutes the common [comunanza] of labour. The postmodern production in our world characterised by the investment of life by capital, becomes the mode of an extension of control not only simply on individuals but also on populations. When we talk of **multitude**, we do so in the face of this common colonisation of life.

Why do we start talking of the **multitude** and we pose the problem of the common, at this point, I think, still confusingly? There has been for instance an experiment, of the tradition of classical operaismo, which was that of attempting a subjectivation of abstract labour. Practically, one of the fundamental elements of this dynamics of the common, of the common exploitation of the common, had become the working class: the working class was this attempt to subjectify a series of common structures within capitalist abstraction, within capitalist relations of exploitation. We used to call it the capitalist relation, the general relation that sees on the one hand the capitalist's [padrone] subjectivity, of the entrepreneur, of capital as such; whilst on the other hand the working class, that of which one did not recognise the concrete specificity, but only looked at its capacity of posing itself within a wage relation, i.e. a quantitative relation, a capacity to divide this productive common. The wage was the ability to take a portion of this common product. Evidently, all this maintained that conception of the common, the working class had as its fundamental goal that of 'managing' (gestire) that common. Socialism had become represented as the management of this common according to the needs of the working class, not very differently from how capital did it, which proposed that this common was used for the

reproduction of the system.

I can't understand the **public/private** distinction from within this scheme, this situation, because I don't think that **public** or private can identify alternatives at this point to that capitalist common that is the only one we have. The concept of the **multitude** can only emerge when the key foundation of this process (i.e. the exploitation of labour and its maximal abstraction) becomes something else: when labour starts being regarded, by the subjects that are at stake, involved in this process, in this continuous exchange of exploitation, as something that can no longer enter the relation, this relation of exploitation. When labour starts being regarded as something that can no longer be directly exploited.

What is this labour that is no longer directly exploited? Unexploited labour is creative labour, immaterial, concrete labour that is expressed as such.

But you might say: exploitation is still there! Of course it is, but exploitation is exploitation of the ensemble of this creation, it is exploitation that has broken the common and no longer recognises the common as a substance that is divided, produced by labour, by abstract labour, and that is divided between capitalist and worker, and structures command and exploitation. Today capital can no longer exploit the worker; it can only exploit cooperation amongst workers, amongst labourers. Today capital has no longer that internal function for which it became the soul of common labour, which produced that abstraction within which progress was made. Today capital is parasitical because it is no longer inside; it is outside of the creative capacity of the **multitude**.

That is why it makes war to perfect its control. War is a fundamental and destructive element that represents its parasitical nature. It is the element that wants to build the capitalist common, that wants to rebuild the body of capital, the people, the global people, the democratic people Bush tells us about, in this attempt to reinteriorise the common; whereas labour as activity constitutes the **multitude**, a **multitude** of singularities that is creative. As you can see, the common brings terrible confusion, cause I cannot really define it.

On the other hand, if I started talking about the common as basis, I could even do it. Undoubtedly it is almost impossible to define creative labour today without starting from the common, and the active common of labour, i.e. the common that is construed by the cooperation of creative singularities. It is almost impossible to do it, it is obvious that today all institutional economists keep saying: it is external economies, economies of transactions, all this accumulation of intelligence, cultural exchange that constitutes the basis of production of value. But this basis of the production of value is not there unless it goes through the capacity of singularities to make it live each time as provision of living labour.

The analysis of cooperation is something that confirms what I said before. Cooperation itself is part of that creativity of singular labour. It is no longer something that is imposed from outside. We are no longer in that phase of capitalist accumulation that also has a function of construction of the workers' labour capacity to be put into production. Singularities of and in the **multitude** have assumed cooperation as quality of their labour. Cooperation -and the common- as activity is anterior to capitalist accumulation. Hence we have a common that is a foundation of the economy, only in so far as it is seen as this element of cohesion of the production of singularity within the **multitude**. Examples of this could be networks and all the consequences of a definition of the common as the phenomenology of the web. Strategies: ... [silence]

Paolo Virno:

Marx mentions the common twice: in the Early Writings: as *esistenza generica* [tr.: perhaps Italian translation of common species-being], where generic means at the level, up to the standards of the human species. In the Grundrisse, in the section on the general intellect, he matures his former notion into that of the social individual. Social individual sounds like an oxymoron, but must be seen as the presupposed common that makes also singularities possible. If the **multitude** is the ensemble of individuated singularities, it can only be conceived if they have behind them a common.

About generic existence: one might say that there is something common, independently of history, evoking human nature. I agree with Toni that you can't evoke an originary scenario to determine the notion of the common, but one must consider the game between the 'since always' [da sempre] and the right now [proprio ora]. The right now of capitalism, of postfordist capitalism that has as baricentre the exploitation of many human faculties as such, a historic product, as a right now, it configures something that has always been. The contingency of capitalism is the organising of an image and a mode of using the capacities of generic existence, of configuring it somehow. I think too that all is played at the level of cooperation. I agree with Toni. The category of cooperation comes before, and is the condition that renders possible a definition of the productive individual input, it is not their sum, but something that overdetermines them as well as being their basic terrain. It is not the general average. Cooperation moves at a level that is no longer inter-individual but trans-individual. Let me explain.

This term has been used by Kojève, Simondon, Balibar, but this doesn't matter, it's been used many times but I use it in my own way anyway. The inter-individual is a self-conscious subject that interacts (as with inter-national). The trans-individual identifies an intermediary zone, between different I's, that is on this side [aldilà] of any fixation of the individual. A zone between the I and the not-I. It is not referable to any precisable individual. It precedes the definition of individuals.

Trans-individual cooperation with respect of inter-individual cooperation is nothing but linguistic praxis. Linguistic praxis exists in the between individuals, before and independently of their fixation, it is the presupposition whereby we then distinguish social and personal, interior and exterior, whilst before this there is this sphere of nobody's and everybody's. Postfordist productive cooperation has this trans-individual character and it is this dimension that introduces us to a reflection on the common, and on the generic existence of the social individual today.

It is very difficult for me to separate the notion of the common from the notion of the **public** at least if we intend **public** in this radical trans-individual mode. Essentially common was always considered the life of the mind. Pure thought, knowledge, is something that is difficult to ascribe to one or the other; it is an experience of the species as such. What is the characteristic of the life of the mind as common life? Historically, in order to use this common element that is the life of the mind, you had to get away from life with others, the thinker used to get away from the square, from **public** life, from politics. The difference produced by trans-individual cooperation and the experience of capitalism is that the life of the mind has become exterior and manifest [appariscente]. This self-publicising of the life of the mind, the fact that the mind goes **public** in the square, in Porto Alegre, in social forums, in production-even if in reversed and terrible ways- entails that the life of the mind no longer requires a self isolating gesture: it is the common, an immanent form of the common. The life of the mind is one and the same as what in the classical world was the care for common affairs.

This is a condition for thinking non-state politics. Last consideration: we should look with enthusiasm to the drastic impoverishment, in culture and in each of us, of inner life: the inner life, the misery of conscience, the misery of the self-centred I, the rigid barrier between the so called external and the even more mythological internal is at the philosophical level the womb of transcendental illusions where the living subject never draws on [attinge] his mode of being, never reaches himself, always has presuppositions that he can't dispose of. We should celebrate today this misery of inner life, in the sense that all that counts in human relations, as cooperation shows, is totally outside of the I, has immediately this completely exterior quality to it. What is common can never be interior, otherwise one ends up opposing to commodity fetishism a precapitalist situation whereby human relations were not mediated by relations between things, but there were relations of subordination of corporal and religious character.

We need to think of a situation where human relations manifest themselves as exterior things. We need to think about the things of relations, that is something other than their transformation into relations between things. What is common is exterior, what is common the I outside of the I, it is trans-individual, the right-now (of capitalism and of expropriation of capitalism) of what has always been.

Transcription and translation by Arianna Bove