

Continuous crisis

Historical action and passion in Antonio Negri's *Insurgencies*

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The truism that history is written by (or, rather, on behalf of) conquerors is more respectable now than ever before among Sunday supplement intellectuals. The reason, where it goes beyond a simple resentful wish to damn historical analysis as 'irrelevant', seems to be that victors' history is easily opposed to that of *victims*, that ill-defined class in whose name moral authority can always be claimed. If it does nothing else, Antonio Negri's book-length tract on constituent power, first published in Italian in 1992 and more recently translated into English as *Insurgencies*, wrecks this convenient opposition. Its Italian title translates as *Constituent Power: Essay on the Alternatives within Modernity*. In the shadow of this concept, Negri outlines a modern social and political counter-tradition which, though defeated again and again, never attains the saintly glow of victimhood, for it has never acknowledged its project to be finished with. From Machiavelli's citizen militia to the LA rioters of 1992, these historical agents refuse to become patients represented by the politics of empathy.¹

The debate around Negri's more recent book *Empire*, co-written in English with Duke University academic Michael Hardt, makes a rereading of *Insurgencies* a useful exercise at present. The latter is also part of the body of 'later work' widely criticized within the post-autonomist tradition, but it focuses more on a critique of state-form in relation to value-form than on the presumed link between 'immaterial labour' and proto-communist 'multitude', which is arguably the weakest element of *Empire*, as well as Negri's earlier collaboration with Hardt, *Labor of Dionysus* (1994).

Critics of *Empire* (and of Negri's other recent writing) argue that in isolation from 'the movement' he has fallen prey to an unjustified optimism and born-again technological objectivism with no empirical basis in social reality since the 1970s. For *Aufheben* (no. 10, 2002) the indeterminacy of 'multitude' as subject abandons 'the notion of the proletariat as the

universal class capable of grasping and transcending capital as a totality'. This dereliction is linked to the ex-autonomist 'white overalls' recuperative mediating practice in street confrontations. In *Radical Philosophy* 103 John Kraniauskas regards the 'hybrid constitution' presented in *Empire* as both the immanent form of global sovereignty and the only possible terrain for revolutionary praxis 'socially abstract and temporally homogeneous'. 'To reduce a concern for other times to "nostalgia"', he warns, 'would be to re-impose the narrative of development – that is, the abstract time of imperial capital – in the guise of revolution' (p. 37). George Caffentzis of *Midnight Notes* comes closest to synthesizing these positions in the image of Negri ineffectually flinging 'theological curses' at an indifferent capitalist machine.² *Insurgencies* remains of interest in this context because, in separating Negri's reading of 'the alternatives within modernity' from its technologically deterministic conclusion in the triumph of 'multitude' and 'immaterial labour', it justifies asking whether his historical analysis may yet be of use to a more robust re-conception of 'postmodern' class antagonism.

Self-insufficiency

Negri's thought is wrongly seen in the Anglophone world as a paradigm of the Italian 'workerist' and 'autonomist' theory of the 1960s and 1970s, which described the changing subjective forms of living labour, emphasizing its relatively independent historical agency in contrast to the orthodox Marxist emphasis on 'objective' economic processes. These writers also theorized the extension of the exploitation and power of living labour beyond the factory walls into the (re)production of everyday life. Their work was grounded in a practice which linked wildcat strikes, absenteeism and industrial sabotage with housing occupations, free provision of services by utility and

transport workers, and ‘proletarian shopping’ – mass festive looting of supermarkets.

Yet although Negri’s writing of the last twenty years has diverged from this tradition, a residual continuity is unbroken. *Insurgencies* remains grounded in revolutionary praxis to the extent that it provides an ontological surface onto which the autonomist image of labour-subjectivity can be ‘mapped’. The problem is, what can this conceptual mapping contribute to the recomposition of an antagonistic subjectivity all but shattered by thirty years of successful capitalist counter-revolution?

The five central chapters of the book trace a continuity of social conflict through Machiavelli’s Italian city-states, then the English, French, American and, finally, Russian revolutions. In each of these episodes the ‘constituent power’ of immediately political labour engenders a crisis in the order and apparatus that captures, contains and exploits it (‘constituted power’). Each conflict is ‘resolved’ in an enforced compromise, a new mode of capture: power is constituted once again, class subjects are recomposed at a new level of tension. Revolutionary ‘victory’ generally means settling back into latent hostility after an interlude of open warfare, presumably with the subaltern side enjoying more strategic autonomy than before. This selective narrative of the modern period traces a tendency which traverses and gives sense to the Italian, English, American, French and Russian episodes. The ‘constituent principle’ itself is defined as ‘*continuity of crisis* between social productive strength and state legitimation’. In reality there can be no alternation

between emergency and normality, for there *is* no normality, only perpetual reinvention of crisis. Modernity appears as a series of attempts by haphazardly constituted powers to mediate the upheaval generated by the productive force on which their own expansion depends.

This narrative of revolt as constructive social agency culminates in Marx’s account of the industrial proletariat. ‘Capitalist reality’ is the only ‘totality of modernity’ *from which* constituent power can be liberated. In his account of the genesis of the capitalist state Marx ‘confronts the riddle of the originary, constitutive violence of the social and political order’. The violent appropriation of labour – the meaning of ‘accumulation’ – is naturalized as law at its point of greatest intensity. Right is ‘the immediate superstructure of violence and its refinement’: the rising bourgeoisie needs the coercive power of the state ‘to regulate wages, to lengthen the working day, and to keep the worker himself at his normal level of dependence’. Thus law (or constituted power) appears as ‘a sort of average level of violence that overdetermines every social relationship’. This process not only produces commodities and surplus value but reproduces *the capital relation itself*, the functions of capitalist and worker as such.

Yet in order to achieve the momentum needed for expansion, capitalism depends on cooperative production. Generalized labour cooperation was first organized by capital through the discipline of the factory code. However, this concentration of authority and its separation from the workers themselves tends to reveal



the latent antagonism between their cooperation and the enterprise's command. 'By making the power of command and thus also the juridical sphere increasingly independent ... capitalism destroys the relationship [between associative labour and command], determines its conditions of rupture, and prepares the liberation of cooperation from its antagonist link to capitalism.'

Constituent labour's struggle for self-subtraction from constituted command implies an increasing convergence of 'the social' and 'the political'. The political, which the classical age had configured through social orders, and modernity saw in terms of representation, is wholly absorbed into the dynamic of cooperative production. For Negri the materialism and the 'creative strength' of Marx's thought lie in his insistence that the abolition of 'the political' as an idealized separate category would 'make it live as a category of social interaction'.

In the light of this discovery the experience of the USSR cannot be regarded as the historical anomaly, the essentially meaningless nightmare to which post-Cold War narratives (whether triumphalist or melancholic) would reduce it. For it was in Russia that the full subsumption of the political under the social was first played out in painful reality. In fact the process has yet to be pushed as far elsewhere, as the survival of Western parliamentary 'democracy' as a self-sufficient and trivial spectacle, detached from global administrative apparatus and productive machinery, goes to show. Within the USSR the 'reformist practice of capital'³ confronted the constituent power of the soviets (for as long as the latter survived) without *the distorting mediation of a separate 'political' sphere*. Capital 'draws precious teachings' from the *form* of the soviets' institutionalization. The soviet is integrated in the state 'as participation in the organization of production, as support of the ideology of labour, as instrument of planning'.⁴ Western capitalism has long since staked its survival on a similar incorporation, materially rather than politically recuperating the 'worker variable' by involving worker subjectivity in the organization of labour itself, always according to 'capitalist finalities of production'.⁵ New Deal/Keynesian planning secured this compromise: in exchange for higher wages and recognition of labour as social protagonist, workers' 'representatives' in trade unions and social-democratic parties delivered rising productivity and acceptance of the horizon of capitalist expropriation. A new phase of incorporation arrives with 'postindustrial' society, in which workers employed in 'immaterial labour' are granted an unprecedented degree of individual

and collective control of the productive process, in exchange for an unreserved investment of (individual and collective) subjectivity in the business of accumulation, a commitment amounting to a 24-hour working day. Negri and other post-autonomists have repeatedly argued that capital was forced to adopt this latest strategy by sustained proletarian pressure too strong for the social-democratic settlement to contain. Eventually there was no longer any room for 'communism within the strictures of capitalist planning',⁶ no use for the mediation of 'civil society':⁷ the only possibilities left are subsumption without remainder of social life in the capital relation, or irreversible rupture of constituent from constituted power, detachment of all activity from the time-measure that prepares it for exchange.

Negri beyond Negri

Yet in spite of all this, Negri declares in his final chapter that we are 'beyond Marx'. This is an unsettling gesture, since it is Marx who finds in proletarian labour an adequate embodiment of constituent power and creator of 'the general social conditions through which it can be expressed'.⁸ The claim that Marx's theory of the working class as historical carrier of constituent power 'has now reached its historical limit' has understandably led to the rejection of Negri's recent work within 'the movement' from which, as an intellectual celebrity in Parisian exile, he was cut off. However, the implications of such statements may not be as simple as they seem; in fact they may allow the author's analysis to be applied beyond the limits of his presumed intention.

It is not clear whether Negri is arguing that the proletariat per se is finished as a bearer of constituent power, or whether the 'historical limit' is that of Marx's particular formulation, which specified the waged industrial working class as privileged revolutionary subject. The former option might appeal to 'common sense', but it presents certain problems. To say that the proletariat is no longer an adequate bearer of constituent power would imply a preference for some other subject, but no such alternative is proposed in the book. 'Constituent power' certainly cannot be made to stand as a subject 'in itself', taking the place of any more specific figure. As the Italian, English, French and Russian episodes demonstrate, 'constituent power' is a function, a property which throughout history particular collectives have attained, embodied, then relinquished in allowing their hegemony to take constitutional form. Therefore for the term to name a real subject is impossible; to call the bearer of constituent power itself 'constituent power' is absurd.



The refusal to name a new constituent subject for a world ‘beyond Marx’ leaves only one way for Negri’s argument to be made to cohere. Since the 1960s, capital has fended off the threat posed by waged industrial workers’ subversion of the Keynesian settlement by simultaneously undermining those workers’ economic power and their composition as a collective subject. However, the defeat and dissolution of one group of workers does not mean either the final triumph of capitalism, or that anyone other than the proletariat (in Bordiga’s sense of a class ‘without reserve’), with no accumulated labour to fall back on (only the capacity to *act* as producer and destroyer) can be relied on to overthrow it. An adequate theory of the transformation of production, the spread of an immanent, intimate form of exploitation, is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for the emergence of a proletarian constituent power capable of achieving autonomy. Negri’s identification of this subject with the ‘immaterial labour’ of information workers in ‘advanced’ countries (also exalted by less subtle post-*autonomia* cyber-converts such as Maurizio Lazzarato and Franco Berardi)⁹ has been criticized from a variety of perspectives. Disappointingly, the same evangelical strain is barely moderated when it reappears in *Empire*. The usefulness of *Insurgencies*, on the other hand, may lie in the fact that, instead of rehearsing this argument once

more, it provides criteria with which the contours of a constituent ‘post-industrial’ proletariat could be traced, leaving open the possibility that the reader may perceive a figure very different from the one the author may have had in mind.

Rather than offering a positive definition of a constituent subject, the book sets out a series of problems to be addressed in deriving the idea of such a subject from social practice. Unfortunately, as his critics observe, when Negri’s analysis passes from the constituent subject’s history to its present potential, he adopts an insipid vocabulary easily assimilable to the capitalist utopia of the ‘horizontal’ workforce. The radical ‘multitude’ opposes ‘diversity’ to ‘uniformity’, ‘equality’ to ‘privilege’ and ‘cooperation’ to ‘command’. If these platitudes escape their reactionary connotations it is only because they follow from an unequivocal opposition of productive activity (or ‘self-valorization’) to alienated measure; in other words, an absolute refusal to subject labour to the quantification which makes it exchangeable, of which the ‘post-Fordist’, ‘horizontal’ model is nothing but the most refined historical form. In *Empire* Negri and Hardt argue that the real subsumption of the social in capital is already ‘beyond measure’; however, this indicates not that communism has already ‘potentially’ arrived, but that the temporal quantification of labour has reached its ultimate degree of abstraction and point of permanent crisis. This situation could be described as measure’s *being in force without content*, following Giorgio Agamben’s use of these terms to conceptualize the form of law in a permanent state of sovereign exception.¹⁰

The same section invokes an irreducible antagonism between any constituent subject and the juridical state apparatus which normalizes and guarantees accumulation. This might seem obvious, but ungainly abstractions are used for a very concrete reason. Insistence on ‘procedure/process against the deductive mechanism of substantial right’ *as such* amounts to an attempt to extend the confrontation beyond the self-parodic remnants of national legislative ‘politics’ (whose withering is misidentified by glib theorists of ‘globalization’ with a simple decline of ‘the state’) to the supranational ‘administrative’ bodies whose sovereign decisions function on a de facto constitutional plane. (The binding supra-political nature of WTO rulings, euro stability pact obligations and EU commission directives are perhaps the best-known examples of this phenomenon; the Hague Convention aims to deepen this virtual ‘state of exception’ to an unprecedented degree).

To develop the critique of these supra-national state-forms in their specific relation to capital is *Empire's* strongest aspiration. The analytical scope and flexibility demanded by such a project are established in *Insurgencies*, with the insistence on an *essential* relation between capitalist 'economics' (as ideology and practice) and the representational *form* of 'politics' (rather than any one of its historical appearances, such as national parliamentary 'democracy'). In Negri's reading of Emmanuel Sieyès's bourgeois revolutionary manifesto *The Third Estate*, 'the concept of political representation ... is essentially tied to the division of labour'. Mediation is the characteristic element of a 'laborious, unified and compact' commercial society. Sieyès attempts to naturalize these transactions, warding off 'usurpation' either by traditional social orders or the 'brute democracy' of non-negotiable labour, by claiming that only the divisions of representative government properly reflect those of 'mediated (social) competition'. In other words, the division of labour mediated by money is projected into the artificially separated 'representative' sphere.

The identity of 'economic' with 'political' representation is explored further in the chapter of *Insurgencies* on the American Constitution. Something of the depth of Negri's disenchantment, the rigour of his anti-idealism, is suggested by the positive concept of nonrepresentative counter-power he extracts from the thought of John Caldwell Calhoun, the political theorist of Confederate secession. Calhoun's case for

dissenting states' right to dissolve the Union opposes the notion (however hypocritically stated) that 'what is unjust for some is unjust for all' to the banker Alexander Hamilton's model of the Constitution as indefinitely binding business contract. The question is fundamentally temporal: in the transactional Constitution as in the abstraction and exchange of labour, one ideal 'moment' is the standard by which all lived time is to be valued. For Negri as for Calhoun, however, a subject's present power and interests cannot be subordinated to a former reality, that is, to the moment when authority was delegated or a contract (be it social or commercial) signed. Interest in a pact among constituent subjects is legitimated by *the ability to impede its functioning*, and the pact itself is legitimated by the consent of all subjects with this ability; hence a 'simple arithmetic majority' is no guarantee of right.¹¹ Where all subjects with a *material* 'power of veto' cannot agree (based not on 'principle' but on 'economic calculation of affinity', weighing the effects of the pact's possible dissolution against those of surrendering a particular advantage), 'the power of receding from the pact becomes ... reactualized – because constituent power ... appears at this point to be a negative power ... the power of resistance'.¹²

Negri calls Calhoun's position 'radically appropriative', in that a nonrepresentational concept of democracy dependent on antagonistic subjects' material power is preferred to the constitutionalists' contractual model, modelled on the ideal obligation that guarantees



commercial transactions. Paradoxically, the ‘communist’ author’s extended use of the racist ‘conservative’ Calhoun as an example maintains the argument in at least a virtual relation to class conflict. Especially in *Empire*, the concept of ‘exodus’ (borrowed from St Augustine, Spinoza, and Negri’s Italian contemporary Paolo Virno) could seem to imply a quietistic withdrawal from social confrontation, a desire to create little islands of ‘fairness’ within present conditions. The fate of Calhoun’s doctrine, however, bears witness to the fact that secession from a constituted order cannot be achieved peacefully. This insistence that ‘exodus’ means appropriation of social wealth by a determinate subject, and hence proposes the destruction of the constituted order from which that subject ‘secedes’, emphasizes the falsehood of the premisses in the recurring leftist debate between ‘anarchistic’ constructive withdrawal and socialists’ (and, more recently, NGO liberals’) institutional engagement.

The future turned upside down

The temporal component of the ‘constituent’ assemblage returns us to the idea of a ‘counter-tradition’ haunting the institutions of modernity. No one has gone further than James Harrington in conceptualizing this latency. His attempt to give social, material content to the English revolution was defeated by the gentry in successive alliances with the yeomanry and the industrial bourgeoisie. Yet he demonstrates that ‘constituent power can live beyond its own temporal defeat ... as latency that traverses a world ... where unjust social relations have triumphed ... a world that will be destroyed by the constituent power of the multitude’.¹³ The historical cases covered by the book show again and again how new institutional arrangements, instances of constituted power, are able to take over from the orders preceding them thanks to the constituent action of a multitude which must subsequently be contained in order to stabilize the new constitution. This containment is the ‘defeat’ of the constituent subject, yet the latter persists as ‘latency’ in a double sense: the recent social mutation, the new reality, is due entirely to its action, and it never stops seeking to break out of its confinement, to rise up again, refusing the new restriction of its freedom. (Hence the vigour with which ‘revolutionary’ governments, safely established as constituted power, act to hold down their ‘own’ constituent multitudes.)

When Negri asks whether ‘that concept of “latency” ... [is merely] the representation of a project that is not only defeated, but also definitively consumed’, the response can only be a complex one. In its ‘latent’

form constituent power at least retains the practical and ontological ‘open-endedness’ that distinguishes it from constitution, in which, by contrast, particular cases are deduced mechanically from a given law (in the capitalist world, that of value). But of course this openness is useless if the constituent subject cannot act to determine the disjunctive course of history. Therefore, the task for practice and theory is to discover how a constituent subject can act as historical protagonist without allowing its labour to accumulate, its power to be constituted as law.

Negri’s writing on Harrington contains one almost submerged indication of an area in which future work might discover an effective approach to this problem. The seventeenth-century revolutionary’s thought on ‘latency’, he observes, ‘marks a revival of Protestant ascesis in its most radical and even theologically founded dimension ... constituent power as a sacred movement of *renovatio*, as an ever open possibility of the revolutionary process’.¹⁴ To what does this ‘ascesis’ refer if not to the same thing which at the end of *Insurgencies* Negri mysteriously insists on calling ‘love of time’, proclaiming it to be the definitive quality of contemporary constituent power? Radical Calvinist ascesis defined the fallen condition as a privation of continuity. Or, more precisely, not of continuity itself but of its *accessibility*, its *objective availability* in the sense that objects of study are made available to the subject of techno-scientific knowledge. What remains when every such spatialized representation of continuity is renounced resembles ‘tendency’ in Henri Bergson’s sense: *continuity of transformation* (or, in Negri’s terminology, of ‘crisis’) itself. Motion, as Bergson showed, is *indivisible*, and what is continuously transformed is the very relation between subject and object.¹⁵ This understanding of process (or ‘procedure’, which Negri privileges over ‘measure’ in absolute terms) undermines the basis for any ‘scientific’ interpretation of past events and any attempt to quantify and ‘manage’ risk. ‘Ascetic’ love of time means forever being called upon to destroy and reinvent not only the objective world but one’s own subjective position as well. For all Negri’s anti-dialectical polemic and his affirmation that ‘we are beyond Marx’, the image of the proletariat as the class whose historical task is its own abolition cannot fail to resonate here.

Notes

1. *Insurgencies*, trans. Maurizia Boscagli, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999. *Il potere costituente: saggio sulle alternative del moderno* was written before the LA uprising took place. However, Negri’s

- awareness of the imminence of such a manifestation of counter-power is clear at the end of Chapter 4 (on the American revolution). For a strong interpretation of the 1992 events as class revolt, see *Aufheben* 1, Autumn 1992, or: http://lists.village.virginia.edu/~spoons/aut_html/Aufheben/auf11a.htm
2. Caffentzis provocatively links Negri's work to the recent fashion for 'end of work' theories among bourgeois liberal commentators. His article can be found at: <http://lists.village.virginia.edu/~spoons/global/Papers/caffentzis>.
 3. Unless the Trotskyist hypothesis of an originally pure workers' state which 'degenerated' at some later date is accepted, it must be assumed that capitalist practices were at least present if not dominant in the USSR from the outset. If this tendency only fully revealed itself with the reintroduction of Taylorism and one-man management, these moves were essential elements of the drive towards industrialization which had always been the Bolsheviks' priority.
 4. Negri, *Insurgencies*, p. 299.
 5. Ibid.
 6. Ibid.
 7. The term 'civil society' has recently been widely used with reference to NGOs and nonviolent 'protest' and lobbying groups. This designation unintentionally reveals the complicity of these subjects as mediators between state institutions and subaltern multitudes – the paradigm for this role is of course the trade union. Negri and Hardt show how, media epiphenomena notwithstanding, the function of precisely this 'civil society' is disappearing with the real subsumption of society in capital and the (transnational) state. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Labor of Dionysus*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1994.
 8. Negri, *Insurgencies*, p. 33.
 9. For a concise, recent statement of this recurring argument in Negri's work of the last twenty years, see Part 3 of *Labor of Dionysus*. Another of the numerous texts elaborating the concept of 'immaterial labour' is the essay 'Lavoro immateriale e soggettività', co-written with Lazzarato, in the first issue (*numero zero*) of the Italian journal *DeriveApprodi* (www.deriveapprodi.org), which also published Berardi's recent book *La Fabbrica dell'infelicità. New economy e movimento del cognitariat*.
 10. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1998, ch. 4.
 11. Negri, *Insurgencies*, p. 184.
 12. Ibid.
 13. Ibid., p. 135.
 14. Ibid., p. 134.
 15. These elements of Bergson's thought are explored with great delicacy in a forthcoming book by Gregory Dale Adamson.

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