

Reading Gilbert Simondon

Transindividuality, technical activity and reification

Jun Fujita Hirose At the end of the 1980s, the thought of Gilbert Simondon – a French philosopher (1924–1989) almost entirely ignored until then – was given a new lease of life on the French philosophical scene. The year of his death, 1989, saw both the republication of Simondon's secondary doctoral thesis, *The Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*,¹ and the first publication of the second part of his principal thesis, with the title *Psychic and Collective Individuation*.² So far as the first part of his principal doctoral thesis is concerned, part of which was published in 1964, it was republished in 1995 as *The Individual and Its Physico-Biological Genesis*.³ In 1992, the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris organized a large conference on Simondon's work, signalling the definitive rediscovery of the richness of his thought. Lectures from this conference were published with the title *Gilbert Simondon: A Thought of Individuation and Technology*.⁴ In 1993 the first monograph on Simondon's thought was published, *Simondon and the Philosophy of Technical Culture* by Gilbert Hottois.⁵ Then, in 1999, Muriel Combes published a work of introduction to his thought, *Simondon: Individual and Collective*, in the prestigious PUF series *Philosophies*.⁶ The last work on Simondon's thought to date is a collection of articles edited by Jacques Roux and published in 2002 with the title *Gilbert Simondon: A Working Thought*.⁷

The current reappraisal of Simondon's thought has, largely, occurred in relation to the continuing study in France of the work of Gilles Deleuze. Or at least, all the commentators from within this tradition know, without exception, that Simondon was a philosopher 'very dear to Gilles Deleuze', as you regularly repeat whenever you speak of Simondon in your writings. Indeed, in 1966 Deleuze published a review of *The Individual and Its Physico-Biological Genesis*.⁸ This article seems to be much more than a mere review; it is, rather, a text in which one can find an extremely dense exposition of the concept of 'different/ciation' that would – three years later – become the core concept of *Difference and Repetition*.⁹ From 1969, the year *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense* were published,¹⁰ Simondon would engage with Deleuze's work, in more or less explicit ways. In part, the rediscovery of Simondon's thought, like that of the French sociologist Gabriel

Paolo Virno was born in Naples in 1952. From 1968 to its dissolution in 1973 he was an activist in Potere Operaio, a political group founded by some of those members of the workerist journal Quaderni Rossi who did not join the Communist Party of Italy. He was an active participant in il movimento of the 1970s but was not linked to any specific group. In 1979 Virno was arrested in the so-called 'April 7th judgement', along with Antonio Negri and others. (For more on this period, see 'Do You Remember Revolution?' in Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, eds, *Radical Thought in Italy*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996.) He would remain in 'preventative detention' for three years accused of being a member of a terrorist group that the prosecution referred to simply as 'O' (Organizzazione). All the charges were dropped. Since 1994, Virno has taught at the University of Urbino, the University of Montreal and the University of Calabria. Virno has edited the journals *Metropoli*, *Luogo comune*, and *DeriveApprodi*. He is currently an editor of *Forme di vita*. Among his numerous publications are: *Convenzione e materialismo* (1986), *Mondanità* (1994), *Il ricordo del presente* (1999), *Quando il verbo si fa carne* (2003), *A Grammar of the Multitude* (2004) and, most recently, *Motto di spirito e azione innovativa* (2005). This interview originally appeared in the online edition of *Multitudes* 18, October 2004.

Tarde (1843–1904), which is considered as dear to Deleuze and Félix Guattari as that of Simondon, appears to follow from the discovery of his influence on Deleuze.

Having said that, your own contribution to this reconsideration of Simondon's thought, appears linked to the following two complementary aspects: (i) the focus on the – particularly political – importance of *Psychic and Collective Individuation*, a book of Simondon's that has always received scant attention due to his being frequently considered a 'thinker of technology'; and (ii) your attempt to make your concept of 'post-Fordist multitude' more precise by bringing together Simondon's *Psychic and Collective Individuation* with Marx's thought. It is true that Muriel Combes, for example, dedicates a good part of her book to the elucidation of the great importance of *Psychic and Collective Individuation*, but she does this principally so as to document how Simondon's notion of 'transindividuality' foreshadows Deleuze's concept of the 'fold'. It is also true that Combes highlights the political power of Simondon's thought in relation to the contemporary, post-Fordist organization of work and to Marx's thought. But she does so primarily through *The Mode of Existence of Technological Objects*, so that her entire explanation is limited to the context of 'technological objects'.

So far as I am aware, you have written on Simondon's thought three times: first, in *A Grammar of the Multitude*;¹¹ then in the Postface to the Italian edition of *Psychic and Collective Individuation*, taken up again in *When the Word Becomes Flesh: Language and Human Nature*;¹² and, finally, in an article with the title 'The Angels and the General Intellect: Individuation in Duns Scotus and Gilbert Simondon' in the French journal *Multitudes*.¹³ It is interesting that in each of these publications you speak of *Psychic and Collective Individuation*. So, for my first set of questions: how did you first come across Simondon's thought and why do you always write about *Psychic and Collective Individuation*?

Paolo Virno The 'principle of individuation' has always been a fundamental theme for me. Asking what renders an individual singular has always seemed a decisive question for me because, by posing it, one is forced to suppose that the individual is a point of arrival of a complex process and not an already given starting point. The notion of a 'principle of individuation' enables one to think what is unique and unrepeatable (the singularity) in strict relation with what is common and shared by all. In a book I wrote many years ago, *Convention and Materialism*,¹⁴ there was a chapter entitled 'Principium individuationis'. This is how I encountered Simondon. How could I let a thinker for whom (physical, psychic and collective) individuation was an *idée fixe* escape me? I was struck by two theses in particular. First, that a preindividual quota of reality persists in every subject alongside the individualized component. This means that the very idea of 'subject' should be understood as a permanent mixture of the Common and the Singular. The second noteworthy thesis of Simondon's concerns the collective: the latter neither compresses nor debases the individual; it is the space within which individuation is refined and strengthened. For Simondon, the preindividual quota of reality that every subject contains can be individuated in turn but only in the relation between many individuals, only in the collective, only in socio-political cooperation. In collective practice, the preindividual is transformed into the transindividual. And it is the category of the transindividual that is the category which, at the level of post-Fordist globalization, can designate a public sphere that is no longer linked to the state – that is, a non-representational democracy. These theses are absolutely new. They overturn many rooted philosophical and political superstitions.

However, I have not completely overlooked Simondon's other writings. I studied his book on technology carefully. In 2003, I dedicated a university seminar to it, which has not yet been published (and perhaps never will be). I believe that Simondon's thinking on technology helps to make a clean sweep of a good number of nineteenth-century theories that oscillate between catastrophist and liberatory understandings of technology. Simondon situated technology in relation to humanity and the world in a new way, alongside aesthetic, religious,

political and other experiences. But I think that perhaps the central point is that technology is transindividual for Simondon. That is, it expresses what does not reach the point of individuation in the mind of the individual. The machine gives an external appearance to what is collective, to what is species-specific in human thought. Unable to find an adequate equivalent in the representations of individualized consciousness, preindividual reality is projected externally as a universally usable complex of signs and objectified logical schema. For Simondon, it would be a capital error to consider technology a simple support for labour. The two terms are asymmetrical and heterogeneous: technology is transindividual and labour is interindividual. That is to say that labour connects individuated individuals, whereas technology gives a voice to what is common or, more precisely, to what is preindividual in subjects. Marx had already shed light on the latent conflict between technology and labour; it is enough to recall the celebrated pages in which he ascribes technology to the ‘general intellect’ – that is, to thought as a public (or transindividual) resource that has the merit of reducing unqualified waged labour, working for a boss, to a ‘miserable residue’.

JFH What I find particularly interesting in your reading of Simondon is precisely this transformation of the question of ‘technology’ into that of the ‘general intellect’ (Simondon never spoke of the general intellect). It is true that in the conclusion to his book on technology, *The Mode of Existence of Technological Objects*, Simondon radically distinguished ‘technical activity’ from ‘labour’¹⁵ and that he discovers in labour the ‘principal cause of alienation’,¹⁶ in so far as ‘labour’ – or, rather, ‘the division of labour’ – puts workers in relation only in so far as they are ‘constituted individuals’ and, as a consequence of this ‘inter-individual’ relation, alienates workers from the ‘constitution of a ... transindividual relation’. That is, it alienates workers from any collective individuation starting from the ‘charge of preindividual reality’ (*apeiron*) borne by each worker – or, better still, shared by all workers – that each worker could, not so much as ‘constituted individual’ but as ‘subject’ (‘vaster than the individual’) ‘express him or herself in the technical object’ or, more precisely, in the ‘continuous genesis of the technical object’. It is in this sense that Simondon says: ‘to reduce alienation, ... labour must become technical activity’.

Yet it seems to me that, at least in *The Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, Simondon limits himself to the treatment of the question of material production by the ‘machine’ or the ‘technical object’. So, when he speaks of the ‘charge of preindividual reality’ (*apeiron*, ‘nature’, etc.) that each worker–subject bears within himself, he is dealing exclusively with the ‘knowledge of the technical object’. Consequently, Simondon concludes by saying that ‘the firm, the set of technical objects and people, must be organized on the basis of its essential function, that is, in accordance with its technical functioning.’ Whereas, when you speak of that same ‘charge of preindividual reality’ by placing it in relation to the concept of ‘general intellect’ that you draw from the ‘Fragment on Machines’ in Marx’s *Grundrisse*, you do not limit yourself to the treatment of the knowledge of the machine but extend it to the ‘intellect in general’, which is shared by the entire human *Gattungswesen* in so far as it is ‘thinking-speaking’. That is what enables you, first of all, to treat of the question of immaterial production (immaterial and cognitive labour), which does not depend on any material machine as principal means of production and, moreover, allows you to turn the concept of ‘transindividuality’ into a decisive weapon for your ‘analysis of contemporary forms of life’. Now then, in *A Grammar of the Multitude* you point out that Marx’s formulation of the very concept of ‘general intellect’ is unsatisfactory, in so far as he ‘conceives the “general intellect” as objectified scientific capability, as a system of machines’ – that is, in Simondon’s terms, as ‘technical object’. In this sense, what would you say of the thesis explained in the ‘Conclusion’ of *The Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*? Is it not precisely this deficit, common to Marx’s *Grundrisse* and Simondon’s book on technology, that leads you to reread Marx’s *Capital* (specifically the pages on the concept of ‘labour-power’ as the ‘sum of physical and intellectual aptitudes existing in the body’) alongside *Psychic and Collective Individuation*?

PV You're right. We can only follow Simondon part of the way. At a certain point it is necessary to take leave of him and proceed alone (just as we must depart from many other 'friendly' thinkers). We do so with gratitude for his help but without nostalgia or regrets. True, Simondon elucidates the transindividual character of technology and the transindividual character of the collective, but he does not grasp (and how could he?) the point at which these different forms of transindividuality become tightly linked or, rather, are welded together (thereby becoming something different from what they were separately). The point of fusion is contemporary living labour, 'mass intellectuality' and 'cognitive labour', or whatever we want to call it. Contemporary living labour is both socio-political collective and general intellect. Labour-power has become invention-power; not because labour involves the functioning of the machine but because it develops technology beyond the machine, through the cooperation of living subjects based upon thought, language and imagination. The difficulty for us is to conceive adequately the two aspects of the general intellect. On the one hand, it is the basis of social production located beyond the vile epoch of wage labour. On the other hand, it lies at the basis of political institutions that take leave of the state with its centralized administrative apparatus, its compulsion for obedience, and so on. One can distinguish the technological-transindividual and collective-transindividual from these two standpoints. Although one must add that what we are left with is a third thing, different from the two roots from which it springs. I am sometimes tempted to call this, at once, 'technological' and 'political' transindividual communism. But so as not to trouble anyone, I will simply say that it is the common place of human praxis. To get back to Simondon, he is certainly naïve when he speaks of politics. On those occasions he appears to operate beneath his means. There are more political ideas in his writings when he doesn't focus on politics, such as in the passages on 'collective individuation' and on technological invention.

Post-Fordist alienation

JFH It seems to me that this notion of the 'general intellect' as a 'technology beyond machines' is – at one and the same time – the crucial concept that you draw from Marx's and Simondon's writings and that goes beyond them, since for them the model of 'labour' was always 'modern' in the sense of the term Charlie Chaplin gave it. So, the 'general intellect', understood in your sense, not only has 'two sides', technical and political, but also what you frequently call an 'ambivalence' (for example, you speak of it in the interview with the Colectivo Situaciones: 'La Condición ambivalente', which can also be found in the Japanese translation of *A Grammar of the Multitude*).¹⁷ 'Contemporary living labour', based upon the 'general intellect', is precisely 'labour' – that is, productive of surplus labour (perhaps one could say that 'contemporary living labour', in which a pure 'invention-power' can be mobilized, would be more productive than 'modern' labour). When one speaks of 'contemporary living labour', it seems to me that Simondon's distinction between 'technology' and 'labour' cannot be retained, because, in this case, the transindividuality that is dear to 'technology' can be resituated in the heart of 'labour' itself: transindividual labour (indeed, it is in this precise sense that you note, in 'Thesis 7' of the fourth chapter of *A Grammar of the Multitude*, the lack of foundation to Jürgen Habermas's position, in which 'labour' is understood to be pure 'instrumental action' and is contrasted to 'communicative action').

That said, I would like to return to the question that Simondon poses in the conclusion to *The Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, namely to that of alienation. If the interindividuality of labour was the 'first cause of alienation' in 'modern' production, and if transindividuality – or, in Habermas's terms, 'communicative action' – is 'put to work' in post-Fordist production, what can be said about alienation in the post-Fordist context, not only from the Simondonian standpoint, namely that of the 'interindividuality' of the division of labour, but also from the Marxist point of view, namely from that of the 'ownership of

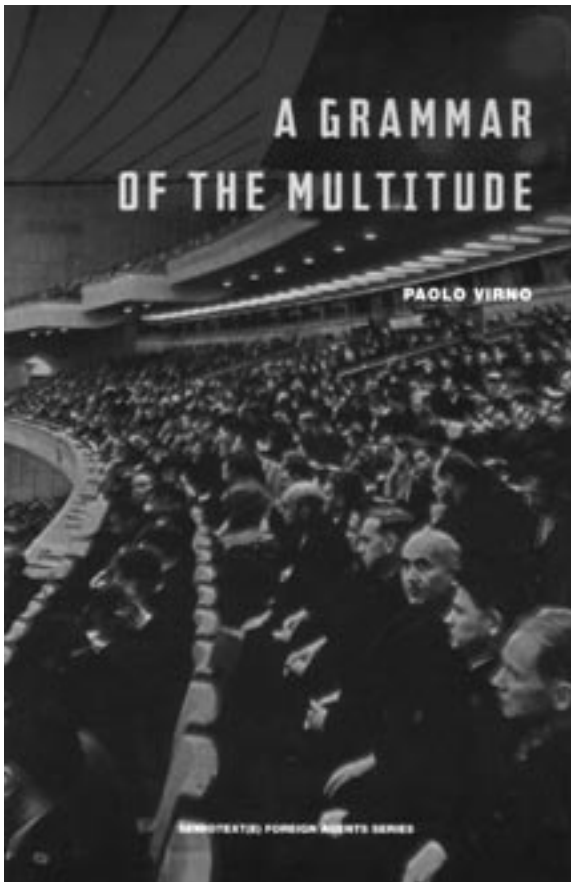
the means of production’? It seems to me that it becomes very difficult – if not impossible – to speak of ‘alienation’ with respect to post-Fordist production, because in this case the means of production are nothing but the ‘general intellect’ itself, which is always shared by the workers. Which leads me to my next question: do you believe that posing the question of ‘alienation’, from the Marxist and the Simondonian standpoint, remains possible within the post-Fordist context? If yes, how? If not, why? The ‘ambivalence’ of the ‘general intellect’ is not limited to its technical aspect; it also concerns its political aspect. Of course, the ‘collective-transindividual’, based upon the ‘general intellect’, puts the political-parliamentary system of the state in crisis, but this could lead both to ‘non-representational democracy’ and to the ‘hypertrophic growth of the administrative apparatuses’, as you point out in the second chapter of *A Grammar of the Multitude*. Within the current international conjuncture, specifically with regards to Iraq, the ‘preeminence of the decree with respect to the law’ comes to the fore – not only in relation to the administration of the US state but also to that of Japan, Italy, and so on. In this context, it is very interesting that today people ask themselves if there is legitimacy to such a decree or to such a sovereignty that issues such decrees. This is interesting because it seems to me that in the case of the ‘collective-transindividual’, which according to Simondon is no longer based upon the ‘contract’ that is necessary to all ‘interindividual’ relations, it is no longer a form of sovereign legitimacy. And it is this same impossibility of becoming legitimate that, ironically, allows state administrations to make decrees (without legitimating themselves).

PV You have raised many interesting and complex questions. Perhaps too many. I am afraid that I shall only be able to reply to some of them. First, you are absolutely correct about the ‘ambivalence’ with regard to post-Fordist labour. In some ways, this labour has absorbed the transindividuality of technology: the labour of the individual is not added to that of other individuals so as to give place to interindividual cooperation. On the contrary, an individual’s labour presents itself as a particular manifestation of transindividual cooperation given a priori. Furthermore, post-Fordist labour has absorbed into itself the transindividuality of the collective as well; so much so that many productive operations seem like political actions, in that they demand the presence of others, and must contend with the possible and the unexpected. For all these reasons, it appears that labour expands infinitely, to the point of comprehending that which, in the terms of political economy, is not labour: passions, affects, language games, and so on. This is the reason for the critique of Habermas, of his contraposition of ‘instrumental action’ and ‘communicative action’. But one must be careful, for if everything is labour, one could say that nothing is. That is to say, labour loses its specificity. The line of demarcation that separated it from all other experiences becomes cloudy and indistinct. In a way, labour is today truly productive (of surplus value and profit) only if it coincides with the human abilities that previously explicated themselves in non-labour. Here is the ambivalence: everything is labour but it is this very fact that explodes the concept of ‘labour’ itself. One should instead speak of transindividual activity by contrasting this term to that of labour – while specifying, of course, that capitalism is strong today precisely because it is able to compress transindividual activity into the straitjacket of labour. The ambivalence and uncertainty of judgement finds its material basis in this compression.

The question of alienation requires a more strictly philosophical consideration. I believe that we need to distinguish between ‘reification’ and ‘alienation’, considering the former good, indeed the only thing that can act as an antidote to ‘alienation’. ‘Reification’ is what I call the process through which preindividual reality becomes an external ‘thing’, a *res* that appears, a manifest phenomenon, a set of public institutions. By ‘alienation’ I understand the situation in which the preindividual remains an internal component of the subject but one that the subject is unable to command. The preindividual reality that remains implicit, like a presupposition that conditions us but that we are unable to grasp, is alienated. In that sense I would say that post-Fordist ‘alienation’ consists in the fact that the preindividual,

although it is the actual basis of social production, does not become *res publica*, political organism, non-representational democracy. So, far from implying one another, the concepts of alienation and reification are polar opposites. Reification is the only remedy to alienating dispossession. And vice versa: ways of existence, thought and being that are insufficiently reified are alienated.

JFH Therefore you redefine ‘reification’ (*Verdinglichung*) as the transformation of preindividual reality into the transindividual *res*. This extremely radical redefinition of the notion of ‘reification’ forms the central theme of your book *When the Word Becomes Flesh*, to the point that this title signals nothing other than the ‘reification’ of which you speak: the becoming-flesh of the word – that is, the becoming-*res* of preindividual nature that is shared by all subjects. In the chapter ‘In Praise of Reification’,¹⁸ you suggest that one should distinguish ‘reification’ not only from ‘alienation’ but from ‘fetishism’ as well. You believe that reification can be as much an ‘antidote’ to ‘fetishism’ as to ‘alienation’. In



order to explain this distinction between ‘reification’ and ‘fetishism’ you introduce another very interesting concept, that of ‘things of the relation’, in contrast to the Marxist one of the ‘relationship between things’. You argue that in ‘reification’ ‘the relations between people ... are incarnated in the things of the relation’, whereas in ‘fetishism’, as Marx says in *Capital*, the relation between people is transformed into ‘a relation between things’; and this means that ‘reification invests the relation itself, whereas fetishism operates on the correlated terms’ – that is, on the already constituted individuals. One could also say that ‘reification’ is transindividual, whereas ‘fetishism’ is interindividual. From here you draw two conceptual lineages: on the one hand, transindividuality – technical activity – reification, and, on the other hand, interindividuality – labour – fetishism.

Now, I would like to return to the question of “‘post-Fordist’ alienation’. You have just defined this as ‘the fact that preindividual reality does not become *res publica*’. If that is so, if post-Fordist capitalism subsumes ‘transindividual activity’ into itself – that is, transforms preindividual reality into transindividual *res* – it seems to me that this means that there cannot be alienation in capitalist post-Fordism to the extent that

everything is reified, thereby becoming transindividual *res*. In that sense, your expression “‘post-Fordist’ alienation’ would be a contradiction in terms. That is, there is a contradiction between the noun ‘alienation’ and the adjective ‘post-Fordist’. But, if there is nothing contradictory in this expression, then you will need to clarify for us the distinction between ‘transindividual’ and ‘public’. How would you define the ‘public’ in relation to the ‘trans-individual’? In addition, this question also appears to be linked to your thesis concerning ‘personal dependence’ as the negative aspect of the experience of the multitude – that is, of the post-Fordist multitude. You view the ‘extreme of “alienation”’ precisely in this ‘personal dependence’, to the extent that the relationship between men is, here, ‘transparent because not mediated by things’. But it seems to me that one could ask oneself: does ‘personal dependence’ involve a transindividual *res* even if it is unable to constitute a ‘public *res*’? With respect to the question of ‘personal dependence’ you speak of ‘publicity without public sphere’. I believe that you could reformulate this concept of yours in Simondon’s terms: as transindividuality without public sphere. What would you say?

PV To begin with I would like to clarify one thing regarding ‘fetishism’ or, rather, on the relationship – which needs to be completely rethought – between the concepts of ‘reification’, ‘alienation’ and ‘fetishism’ (which although famous are so vague as to be considered almost interchangeable). After this clarification, I shall try to respond to the more substantial points that you raise (although, dear Jun, you do not pose any ‘minor’ points...): that is, is it legitimate to speak of ‘post-Fordist alienation’. As I was saying, alienation means that an aspect of our life, of our thought, of our praxis assumes a strange form and becomes unavailable to us, exercising instead a dark power over us. Take this philosophical example: self-consciousness, Descartes’ ‘I think’ allows all forms of representation but cannot itself be represented. It escapes us. All reflection on the self-conscious I, precisely because it is based upon that same I, seems destined to travel back again without ever grasping its object. The image of an I prior to the I, of an I that presupposes itself, that is ungraspable, is alienated. Take now a political example: the preindividual reality that each of us carries with us – all within us that is *Homo sapiens*, that is our human nature – is alienated if it fails to find external, collective, socio-political expression. Fetishism is an attempt – a false, mistaken one – to respond to the alienation of our inner life, to the isolation of the individual subject. Fetishism means assigning to something – for example, to money – characteristics that belong to the human mind (sociality, capacity for abstraction and communication, etc.). Reification, on the other hand, is the correct and effective way of defeating alienation: in contrast to fetishism, it does not take a given thing, loading it with animistic values, but turns into a thing, *res*, what falsely presented itself as inner and ungraspable. So, to the alienated, reification opposes an I outside the I: self-consciousness, its formation and structure, are located in certain observable practices, in certain linguistic events, and in particular external facts. Furthermore, reification sets against preindividual alienation the fact that what unifies individual minds, the ‘between’ when we speak of the ‘relations between people’, has its own visible thinghood – that is, becomes a public institution. In conclusion, fetishism and reification are two distinct ways – no, two antithetical ways – of escaping alienation. The real contrast is between these two opposed ways of overcoming the poverty of inner life.

We now come to your question on ‘post-Fordist alienation’. You say: given that contemporary capitalism enjoys certain preindividual characteristics of human beings (sociality, linguistic faculty, capacity for cooperation, etc.) and, in doing so, gives it the consistency of a *res* – that is, of external facts – one would have to say that contemporary capitalism is not alienating but profits economically and politically from alienation. I think that you are partly right and partly wrong. Do you remember that phrase of Marx’s that goes something like: ‘Capitalist stock companies represent the overcoming of private property on the basis of private property itself’? By this Marx means that capitalism is only able to contend with the development of productive forces that surpass capitalism by way of forming stock companies. I propose that we apply this phrase to our discussion. One could then say: post-Fordism is the overcoming of alienation on the basis of alienation – that is, without being able to leave the latter behind. One must distinguish what is *true* from what is *in use*. The transindividual character of the relations of production are true; but the interindividual (and despotic) rules that govern them are in use. However, the common, shared, public character of material resources that are required in contemporary production turn into a proliferation of hierarchies that are as arbitrary as they are meticulous. Or, as you put it, they are converted into personal dependence. The contrast between what is true (transindividuality) and what is in use (alienation and fetishism) can be expressed in the formula you suggested at the end of your question: transindividuality without a public sphere. But transindividuality that does not become reified in a public sphere has too many of the features of preindividuality. Once again, it is *true* but not *in use*. It is in the space between these two adjectives that one encounters the open sea of political struggle.

Post-Fordist multitude

JFH In ‘Thesis 3’ of the fourth chapter of *A Grammar of the Multitude*, you postulate a necessary distinction between the ‘true’ and the ‘in use’. There you argue that, in the contemporary crisis of the society of labour – that is, in the epoch of post-Fordism – ‘Labour time is the unit of measurement *in use*, but no longer the *true* one unit of measurement.’ This thesis is connected directly to your discussion in ‘Thesis 5’ of the same chapter: ‘in the post-Fordist era, surplus-value is determined above all by the gap between production time which is not calculated as labor time and labor time in the true sense of the term.’ Bearing in mind both these theses, it could be said that if labour time is no longer true, the time of production is. If, on the other hand, the latter is not yet in use, labour time continues to be so. Here we find one of the fields of ‘political struggle’ of which you have just spoken: how can we put the time of production *in use*? Or, in other words, how can it be reified into a ‘*res publica*’? Some people propose to do so by means of a ‘basic income’ [*reddito di cittadinanza*] as a public institution that could put to use the time of production as the ‘unit of measure’. Others criticize this proposal, arguing that it is nothing but a social-democratic project to the extent that it is a more or less Keynesian institution of wealth redistribution. I don’t think you speak of it at all, at least not explicitly, but what do you think of this proposal of a ‘basic income’ in relation to your discussion of ‘reification’?

The contemporary gap between the ‘true’ and the ‘in use’ can also be found in your political alternative between Multitude and State (or People), or, more precisely, multitudinal transindividuality and state (or popular) interindividuality. Simondon believes that the state is interindividual because it is conceived as a group contract between constituted individuals. One could say, multitudinal [*multitudinaria*] transindividuality is true; whereas the interindividual state is in use. In this sense, what blocks the becoming-*res* of the ‘between’ – that is, what is alienating – is not only the interindividuality of wage labour but also that of the state. In the second chapter of *A Grammar* you note these two complementary aspects of the reifying process: ‘On the one hand, general intellect can only affirm itself as an autonomous public sphere, thus avoiding the “transfer” of its own potential into the absolute power of Administration, if it cuts the linkage that binds it to the production of commodities and wage labour. On the other hand, the subversion of capitalist relations of production henceforth develops only with the institution of a non-state public sphere, a political community that has as its hinge general intellect.’¹⁹ Two questions follow from this observation. First, could you expand upon the relationship between wage labour and the state? Second, could you explain to me concretely what you understand by ‘non-representational democracy’ as a ‘non-state run public sphere’? If possible, I would like you to shed some light on the relationship between the parliamentary system and the state administration with respect to the question of the blockage of preindividual ‘reification’.

PV I think you sum up perfectly the current area of political struggle: labour-time is no longer the *true* measure of social wealth but continues to be the measure *in use*. And whereas production time as a whole (which coincides with life itself: language, affects, etc.) is the *true* measure, it is not yet *in use*. Political conflict, the organizational processes, tactics, the forms of struggle (strikes, sabotage, disobedience, etc.): all of this must measure itself, step by step, against the problem of putting in use – making socially recognized – that which is already true. A single political act must be evaluated by this criterion: it is not wrong or right in itself but only in so far as it facilitates or obstructs the construction of a civilization located beyond the epoch of the state and wage labour. It is in this sense that I defend the basic income. The distribution of an income beyond labour is a step necessary to take to underline the fact that, today, one produces when one doesn’t work. One could say that the basic income is the salary due to transindividual cooperation and that paying transindividual cooperation is a way to make it in use (as well as true). Moreover, I don’t consider (from the conceptual standpoint, of course) a basic income to be the end; it is

instead the starting point. To be more explicit: a guaranteed income would, in principle, enable one to be less enslaved, less subject to blackmail, and more active. One must imagine the basic income as a trigger of social invention-power, as the basis for a finally less farcical 'self-entrepreneurship'. In the 1960s in Italy, Fordist workers in the large factories demanded 'wage increases uncoupled from productivity'. I believe that objective to be the direct precursor to the basic income. In both cases, it is a case of bringing the existence of labour-power to an end. In the 1960s, one pursued this objective by infinitely inflating its cost, so as to make it 'uneconomic'. Today, it is a case of bringing the existence of the labour-power commodity to an end by remunerating it even when it is considered, in interindividual terms, to be inactive.

I understand the objections according to which the basic income is a neo-Keynesian blackmail. But I think they are mistaken because, as I said, they are judging an abstract objective, without considering whether or not it favours making what is true, in use. In addition, it seems to be that the objective of a guaranteed income has a positive materialist flavour. Think of the three watchwords of the French Revolution: *Liberté, Egalité* and *Fraternité*. Their foundation is Christian-bourgeois: one is 'equal' before God as juridical subjects and in the exchange of commodities; one is 'free' because one's position is determined only by the objective economic mechanism (and not by a system of personal dependencies); and one is 'fraternal' inasmuch as one belongs to the same nation. Instead, one has the right to a basic income because one is an experiential body that wants to experience the joys of living in an epoch in which working for a boss has become an unjustifiable and parasitic social cost. Contemporary living labour can become the heir of the entire materialist tradition.

You also want to know what I mean by the 'non-state-run public sphere' (or, and it comes to the same thing, 'non-representational democracy'). I would like to premiss my remarks by saying that while the post-Fordist multitude continues to appear in the guise of the People, until it is able to invent political forms adequate to its modes of being (of producing, communicating and inhabiting the world), authoritarian political experiments will continue to multiply. Think of Italy. Berlusconi and the New Right recognize that representative democracy is empty, lacks any real bases, and they substitute it with the Business Party.²⁰ In addition, in the absence of a new public sphere centred around the general intellect instead of the 'sovereign', the multitude itself can give off all sorts of poisons and destructive – even self-destructive – impulses. It can be in favour of war, it can be egotistic, cynical and corrupt. Having said that, I shall say what a non-state-run public sphere could be today. Social forums are certainly a good approximation. Differing capabilities converge in them: communicative, technical and professional capacities. Social forums exhibit a share of transindividual, productive cooperation and endeavour to convert it into political action. Sure, they can't do so yet. But they set a good precedent. The non-state-run public sphere must progressively absorb the knowledges/powers that are, today, concentrated in the state administration – not in the parliaments but in the administrations. To reappropriate these knowledges/powers it will probably be necessary to attempt local experiments. A single city, a single neighbourhood, can take steps towards the invention of new political forms – although they will need to do so in tight contact with productive global forces that they try to concentrate in a single place. If these experiments move ahead sufficiently, they can become reproducible politically. In short, the question is not that of 'taking state power' but to dissolve it, by revealing its likeness to a criminal gang: ferocious but marginal. I am aware that my attempt to specify the characteristics of the non-state-run public sphere is inadequate and clumsy. But so it should be. A subversive political theory must reveal an empty place that can be filled by practical action. Any political theory worthy of the name must await the unexpected.

Translated by Matteo Mandarini

Notes

1. *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, originally published by Aubier in 1958.
2. The principal thesis was entitled 'L'Individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information' (Individuation in the Light of the Concepts of Form and Information).
3. *L'Individu et sa genèse physico-biologique*, Millon, 1995.
4. Gilbert Simondon, *Une pensée de l'individuation et de la technique*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1994.
5. *Simondon et la philosophie de la culture technique*, Deboeck, 1993.
6. *Simondon: Individu et collectivité*, PUF, Paris, 1999.
7. Gilbert Simondon, *Une pensée opérative*, Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne.
8. This review can now be found in Gilles Deleuze, *L'Île déserte et autres textes*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 2002, pp. 120–24.
9. *Différence et répétition*, PUF, Paris, 1969.
10. *Logique du sens*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1969.
11. *Grammatica della moltitudine*, Rubbettino, 2001; *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Semiotex[e], New York, 2004.
12. *L'individuazione psichica e collettiva*, DeriveApprodi, Rome, 2001; *Quando il verbo si fa carne: Linguaggio e natura umana*, Bollati Boringhieri, 2003; 'Moltitudine e principio di individuazione'.
13. 'Les Anges et le general intellect. L'Individuation chez Duns Scot et Gilbert Simondon', *Multitudes* 18, Autumn 2004, http://multitudes.samizdat.net/article.php3?id_article=1572&var_recherche=Virno.
14. *Convenzione e materialismo*, Theoria, Rome 1986.
15. 'Technical activity is distinct from simple labour ..., in that technical activity not only involves the use of machines, but also a certain amount of attention to the technical functioning, maintenance, adjustment and improvement of the machine, attention which extends the activity of invention and construction.'
16. This, for Simondon, is secondary to the Marxist question of the 'ownership of the means of production', which he considers to be only 'one of the modalities of such alienation', namely 'economic alienation'.
17. A translation of this interview can be found at www.generation-online.org/fpvirno2.htm. [Trans.]
18. 'Elogio della reificazione'.
19. Jun Fujita Hirose is actually referring to a passage from 'Virtuosity and Revolution', in Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno, eds, *Radical Thought in Italy*, trans. Ed Emery, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996, p. 196. This was originally published in the journal *Luogo comune* 4, Spring 1993, and then reprinted in Paolo Virno, *Mondanità*, Manifestolibri, Rome, 1994. [Trans.]
20. 'Partito-azienda' or 'Business Party' is the term many on the Italian Left use to refer to Berlusconi's political party Forza Italia. That the value of Berlusconi's assets has risen hugely over the period of his government is not coincidental. [Trans.]

Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy

London's leading centre for postgraduate study and doctoral research in continental philosophy



"Our age is the genuine age of **criticism** to which everything must submit."
Immanuel Kant, 1781

MA Modern European Philosophy

Kant Hegel Nietzsche Heidegger
Recent French Philosophy: Deleuze

MA Aesthetics and Art Theory

Kant and the Aesthetic Tradition Modernist Aesthetics
Phenomenological Aesthetics Hegel's Aesthetics
Contemporary Art and Critical Writing

MA Philosophy and Contemporary Critical Theory

Concepts of Critique Hegel Nietzsche
From Critique to Constructivism: Deleuze and Guattari
Sovereignty and Insurgency: Agamben and Negri
Commodification and Subjectivation

Research Degrees

MA by research, MPhil, PhD

APPLY NOW FOR SEPTEMBER 2006

Continental philosophy in London

www.mdx.ac.uk/www/crmep/