

From the end of national Lefts to subversive movements for Europe

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When we speak of the globalization of markets we also speak of a limitation imposed on the sovereignty of nation-states. In Western Europe, the essential error of national left-wing movements and parties [*des gauches nationales*] has been their failure to understand that globalization is an irreversible phenomenon.

Up until the fall of the Soviet Union, the US leadership succeeded in combining – with prudence, but also with manifest consistency – the national specificities of countries belonging to the Western alliances (and NATO, above all) with the continuity of classical imperialism, marshalling them together against ‘real socialism’. Ever since 1989, with the fall of the Soviet bloc, the ‘hard power’ of the United States has been replaced little by little by the ‘soft power’ of the markets: the freedom of commerce and money have subordinated the old instruments of power (the military and the international police), and financial power and the authoritarian management of public opinion have determined the field in which the new liberal actions that support market policies will be undertaken from now on. Neoliberalism has organized itself powerfully on the global level: today it manipulates the current economic and social crisis to its own advantage and can quite probably look forward to a radiant future... A democratic and peaceful transformation of the political foundations [*assises*] of neoliberalism is unimaginable on the global level – at least so long as no revolutionary ruptures take place.

Running parallel to all this, since 1989, the rout of the political forces of the Left has been profound. Not only have the dogmatic forces on the Left, in the name of a supposed fidelity to archaic ideological forms, renounced any understanding of the class struggle as it exists in a world profoundly transformed by globalization and the mutation of the mode of production, but a new current of socialist thought and action, attempting to take the novelty of the situation into account, has risked overt alliances with neoliberalism.

The process of unification of the European continent, and the institutions in which the debate on the European constitution has unfolded, have demonstrated in an exemplary way the Left’s hollowness and political impotence – both in Tony Blair’s ‘third way’ version (whose orientations have rapidly come to be identified with the explicit will to politically structure Europe in a neoliberal fashion), and in the form opposed to it; that is, those groups that, behind their refusal of the unity and development of the European institutions, have hidden their inability to construct an alternative to neoliberalism. To do so, the latter would have had to be willing to put the nation-state, international public law and the administrative system of capitalist modernity in question. Taken as a whole, the failure of these forces has been gigantic.

If we wish to revive the debate, then we must ask what theoretical and political conditions might allow us to reopen a perspective of struggle on the realistic terrain of subversively constructing a unified Europe.

Contradictions

In what does financial and/or biopolitical capitalism consist? It consists in the subsumption of society – or, more precisely, of life itself – under the domination of capital. How do the markets exert control over the structure of society? I cannot, of course, linger on this point: I will limit myself to saying that this power operates through the increasingly important use of monetary control, whose aim is the accumulation of financial returns or rents [*de la rente financière*]. The latter reorganizes the productive and reproductive relations according to schema for deepening and intensifying the apparatuses of exploitation – sometimes to the extent of becoming a genuinely new form of primitive accumulation, to use Marx’s terms. The financial markets, which seek maximal valorization, on the one hand privilege the industries of ‘the production of man for man’, which is to say welfare, metropolitan

productive services, and information services; and, on the other, they privilege resource extraction and energy industries, agribusiness, and everything that, broadly speaking, deals with nature.

A first definition of the ‘commons’ [*le commun*], which various movements are seeking today, could paradoxically consist in this: the communist reversal of the full extent of capitalist appropriation. What strikes me as interesting is the study of the contradictions that have emerged on the – often somewhat chaotic – terrain on which the neoliberals have mounted their attack, contradictions that the movements have thrown into relief. Such contradictions are difficult to overcome, and power has tended to handle them through a form of governance removed from all normativity, through a government of exception [*un gouvernement d’exception*] set up over the long term and aiming to recast society in its entirety. The contradictions in question can be identified as follows.

1. A first contradiction concerns *production*, and consists in the fact that financial capitalism represents the most abstract and detached form of power, and yet it is paradoxically this very form of capitalism that, in an utterly material fashion, invests life in its entirety. The ‘reification’ of life and the ‘alienation’ of subjects are imposed upon the cognitive labour force with a productive control that seems to have become, as a financial power, absolutely *transcendent*. The cognitive labour force, which is obliged to produce surplus value precisely to the extent that it is cognitive, immaterial, creative, and not immediately consumable, is in reality productive *in itself, in an autonomous fashion*. Financial transcendence versus productive autonomy: this is the first contradiction.

To the extent that production is essentially founded on ‘social cooperation’ (in whatever domain: information services, care-giving, etc.), the valorization of capital does not simply run up against a massive ‘variable capital’, but against the resistance and autonomy of a proletariat that today represents in itself a part of ‘fixed capital’. Indeed, the new social quality of production and its cognitive characteristics have transformed workers into ‘machinic subjects’ possessing a ‘relative’ but permanent capacity to autonomously organize the social resources of their own labour. The contradiction here cannot fail to strike us as obvious.

2. The second contradiction concerns *property*. Private property (as it is defined from a juridical point of view) tends to be made subject more and more to the form of *rent*. Today, rent is essentially generated through processes of monetary circulation that take place in the service of financial capital and/or real

estate capital, or even from processes of valorization that take place in industrial services.

But when (private) goods appear in the form of services, when capitalist production essentially valorizes itself through services, private property tends to nuance or qualify the traits that traditionally served to characterize it as an ‘act of possession’, and private property appears as a product of the social cooperation that constitutes services and renders them productive. For the bosses, the problem becomes one of endowing private property with this fundamental function (in the organization of society) that capitalism needs. If property is progressively socialized, how is it to be made subject to private control?

Capitalists respond to this question with characteristic hypocrisy: this is something for the public authorities to take care of. But in post-industrial societies, the public mediation of class relations becomes increasingly difficult – this is, indeed, what the crisis demonstrates so clearly. Sovereignty has certainly been privatized (patrimonialized, we could say, by financial capitalism), but the paradox is that, in an absolutely simultaneous fashion, private property dissolves in so far as it presents itself more and more as the use of a service, and no longer as the possession of a good. The ‘public sovereign’ no longer has to grapple with corporations, unions or collective labour organizations [*instances*] (which, let us note in passing, represented themselves as private subjects), but with the cooperation and social circulation of subjectivities in a permanent state of composition and recomposition, in both material and cognitive production. In sum: it runs up against what we call the ‘commons’.

What we understand by the ‘commons’, here, involves recognition of the fact that production takes place in an increasingly cooperative fashion today. This cooperation is indeed directly controlled by financial capital, but it is also immediately enacted by new figures of the cognitive labour force, which is to say by the same social powers that were once called the ‘working class’. And once again I must insist: when we speak of the cognitive labour force, we are indeed speaking of a new quality of production, a new face for the processes of valorization, and a new organization of labour, which has been emerging since 1968; but we are also speaking of certain, increasingly central, aspects of material production itself – where, despite appearances, cooperative labour, and indeed the introduction of immaterial, computational or linguistic elements are becoming more and more widespread these days.

There is thus a progressive ‘private patrimonialization’ of public goods that destroys the institution of

public property while both exploiting and reinforcing the ideology of private property. From this combination springs the now endless spiral [*dérive*] of attempts to manage the public through procedures of exception, the sliding of this exceptionality into corruption, and the destruction of the commons by the powers of exception.

The 'public sovereign' now exists only in a paradoxical fashion, and tends to efface itself before a 'commons' that, nevertheless, emerges in the processes of social production and cooperation that represent the heart of valorization. This commons is precisely what is directly captured by the financial powers and the global market: *hic Rhodus, hic salta*.

3. The third contradiction concerns bio-capital in so far as it enters into relation with the *bodies of the workers*. Here, the confrontation, the antagonism, appears in an absolutely clear fashion, to the extent that capital (in its post-industrial phase, in the age in which cognitive production has become hegemonic) directly puts human bodies into production, bodies that are no longer just commodified labour, but that are transformed into holders of productive knowledge and machinic operators.

Now, in the new processes of production, these bodies, precisely because they are increasingly specialized, have acquired a relative autonomy. In the same stroke, the resistance and struggles of the machinic labour force respond paradoxically to the capitalist demand for the exploitation of the production of man for man, which is to say for the living-machine 'man'. It is precisely this mutation that financial capital exploits, and that it seeks to govern.

Indeed, as soon as the worker reappropriates a part of 'fixed capital' and presents herself (1) in a variable, often chaotic fashion, as an actor cooperating within the processes of valorization, as a 'precarious subject', *while also presenting herself* (2) as an 'autonomous subject' in the processes of capital's valorization – at this very moment, a total inversion of the function of labour with respect to capital is brought about. The worker is no longer just the instrument that capital utilizes to conquer nature, which is to say, in banal terms, to produce commodities. This is because, in cognitive and cooperative labour, the worker, having henceforth incorporated her instrument of production into herself and, from an anthropological point of view, having metamorphosed, reconquers 'use value', acts in a '*machinic*' fashion, autonomous and oppositional with respect to capital – with an autonomy and opposition that tend to become increasingly complete. It is between this objective tendency and the practical

apparatuses that constitute this *machinic worker* that a new form of class struggle takes place – a form that we will henceforth qualify as *biopolitical*.

In the development of capital these three contradictions or paradoxes that I have tried to bring to light remain open. They are contradictions, moreover, which have been further accentuated by the current crisis. Consequently, the stronger the resistance, the more ferocious the restoration of power (by the state, as an organ of capital) and the more decisive the use of violence will be. Every resistance is thus condemned as the illegal exercise of a counter-power, every demonstration of rebellion is considered to be nothing but a moment of devastation or pillage. Furthermore – and this is an additional mystification – even when the violence they inflict reaches its peak, capital and its state must nevertheless present themselves as necessary and neutral powers. Today, the peak of violence is consequently presented as the work of instruments or organs characterized as mere 'techniques'. We are to remember what Margaret Thatcher already proclaimed: 'There is no alternative.'

Money

If such is the political constitution of the present, in the neoliberal project of stabilization and its crisis, it is clear that the movements of resistance cannot but express their indignation, their refusal, their rebellion. Thus emerges the desire to construct new institutions that might correspond to the social power of cooperative production. Let us thus return to the terrains on which the contradictions I have attempted to formulate a moment ago are at work.

1. What is at stake in confronting the paradox of production is a return to an old point of the communist programme – that of the 'self-valorization' of the workers and the proletariat – while progressively reappropriating, with increasing clarity, the fixed capital employed in the processes of social production, precisely against the multiplication of operations of valorization–capture–privatization that are set in motion by financial capital. What is meant by the reappropriation of fixed capital is the construction of the 'commons' – a commons organized against the capitalist appropriation of life, a commons understood as a development of civic and political 'uses' or customs [*usages*], and as a capacity for democratic and autonomous management 'from below'. The reconquest of knowledge and revenue is the objective that, before all else, qualifies the cognitive proletariat. This objective is political from the outset, in exactly the same way as the struggle against the reduction of relative

difficult to eliminate, it is nevertheless possible to demolish its capacity to be an instrument for structuring the social division of labour and the accumulation of employers' power, against the interests of the real producers. We must contest the independence of the European Central Bank: the ECB should be subjugated to the need 'to produce man for and by man', and made to submit to a strategic project of redefining the social biopolitical equilibria. The problem is not so much one of distinguishing 'savings banks' from 'investment banks' as it is one of directing savings and investments towards the equilibria that would guarantee the production of man for man. Such is the battle that is being waged by the most seasoned [*mûrs*] political movements. It consists – without hesitations or acts of ideological repentance – in contesting and sabotaging the monetary governance of biopower; that is, in introducing, whenever possible, protests and ruptures expressed in a radically democratic fashion, from below. We must begin by asking what a 'common currency' could be, and develop the hypothesis that it should guarantee social reproduction, the quantity of income needed by each citizen, and support for the forms of cooperation that make up the very structure of the division of labour of the productive multitude.

3. Let us return now to the last of the 'paradoxes', the one that ties together bio-capital and workers' bodies. This contradiction cannot be dissolved without eliminating the capitalist. The capitalist cannot avoid exploiting the worker so long as he wants to obtain a profit, and, without living labour, neither production nor wealth can hold good.

This is therefore the very terrain of politics. From the side of capital's power, it is the terrain of decisions that must be made about undecidables, with the kind of uncertainty that one always finds in the midst of a ford [*gué*], a crossing suspended between fascism and democracy. On the other hand, this terrain is constitutive of the ensemble of singular and powerful machine-bodies, in the practice of class struggle. For all of these bodies, to engage in politics means to constitute the multitude 'institutionally', which is to say in a way that wrenches the singularities from their solitude and situates them, installs them, in the *multitude* – in short: transforming the social experience of the multitude into a *political institution*.

This is the reason why the current movements demand, in an increasingly impetuous fashion, that we go beyond the constitutional model of modernity of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries – that is, the constitutional model that effaces every trace of

constituent power as soon as the revolutionary phase has come to an end.

In a more realistic fashion, we must, today, affirm the contrary: that constituent power cannot be enclosed within a reconstruction of the One of [constituted] power. One does not revolt in order to seize power but to maintain the openness of the process of counter-powers, and to defy the apparatuses of capture that the capitalist machine never ceases to invent. The experience of struggles has taught us that political representation always ends by entering into crisis: drawn inside the mechanism of sovereignty, distilled through the magical and fetid electoral alchemy that we know so well, it never manages to be worthy of the endlessly renewed truth and wealth of the social composition of the working class.

Since the spring of 2011, every movement has expressed its desire for a conflictual 'counter-democracy', which would be traversed by protests and demonstrations, by resistances and indignation – because we can no longer stomach 'normative' constitutionalism! These movements state their demand for biopolitical democratic constitutions that do not immediately transform themselves, by playing on legality and juridical formality, into mechanisms of oppression, but that can instead work through an investment of 'common money' [*argent commun*], so as to constantly rebalance social relations, and to place the poor in the place of the rich – creating, in sum, a new life, imagined by man in the service of man.

We must affirm this very clearly here: regardless of what every Nobel laureate in Economics says, a growth in productivity will only be achieved in a free and equal society, a society of the 'refusal of work' [*travail*] – if by 'work' we understand what it has up until now represented: servile labour, wage labour. We must free labour from the historical forms in which it has been enclosed.

Struggles

The more the crisis advances and the movements mature, the more one feels that something decisive is being produced in the consciousness of the workers. It is rather banal to declare that the twentieth century is over, especially when this phrase serves to efface the memory of the formidable experiences and experiments of workers' struggles and the attempts to construct a new society that traversed that century. The fact that these attempts have been a failure – not overnight but, precisely, over the course of a century – absolutely does not mean that their potential has been exhausted. Quite to the contrary, the 'old mole'

continues to burrow towards hope. Must we, then, recuperate the socialist experience? Yes, but on condition that we insert it into a new theory, and into a new strategy... This is what the new movements are doing today.

Let us now return our attention to what is being done by the movements that are fighting in and against the crisis. It is the only way that we will be able to undertake a study of the processes of subjectivization that are emerging in this context, and to try to understand which conditions permit, and which obstruct, a politics of the commons.

First off, the systematic recourse to constitutional reforms that are proposed on the European level certainly plays the role of an obstacle here. What interests the movements, by contrast, is to ask what political actions can be put to work to favour the processes of subjectivization that are adapted to a new subversive and communist project.

And so when we examine the movements, we can identify a first group of actions that might be grouped under a shared label: insolvency. These struggles against debt in favour of a citizen's income [*revenu de citoyenneté*] take up the old struggles over relative wages and become revolutionary struggles to the extent that they put the measurement of labour in question. On the same terrain, we find an entire series of experimentations and undertakings to construct a theory and practice of the 'precarious strike': it is a question of understanding which struggles are capable of 'hurting' the boss under the new conditions of social exploitation, setting out from the condition of precariousness that has been imposed on the workers. The struggles that conquer spaces, places, theatres, social centres and squats, and transform them into sites of organization, fully belong to this series, as do struggles that try to block the logistics of commodity-exchange, which has never been so central to the processes of social accumulation as it is today. The same goes for those struggles that impede the 'great projects of public interest' [*grands travaux d'intérêt public*], which have nothing public about them save for the enormous destructive force they wreak on civil and ecological equilibria, and which serve only to facilitate corruption and private gain.

But, even more exemplary, if it's possible, are the initiatives that succeed in reappropriating and/or mutualizing the management of the fundamental ties of welfare, education, housing policies, and so on. In this case, the struggle is over the workers' direct and/or indirect wage, by integrating into it not only monetary quantity but social quality as well.

The second terrain on which our struggles are situated is that of *deposition* [*celui des destitutions*]. It is a question of deposing the channels of capitalist command. Under neoliberalism, social and juridical chaos has come to be considered normal. To take this chaos upon ourselves, by transforming governance from a moment of litigation into a moment of counter-power: this is what every force in opposition to neoliberalism should be trying to do. We have seen, in Latin America, examples of revolutionary movements that, for a long time now, have been constructing, and ultimately dictating, the agenda of their governments. It will not be easy to repeat this experience in Europe but it must at least be attempted, without however believing that this capacity for rupture might be consolidated in the form of a stable mechanism of counter-power. The work of deposition [*l'effet destituant*], here, is still pre-eminent with respect to the constituent dimension.

Some will now object that these movements are useless, and perhaps even dangerous, since riots and turmoil do not create institutions. But these discourses are dishonest – when they are not openly provocative – if they implicitly claim that riots and turmoil *cannot* create institutions: once again, that this is not in fact happening today is simply because it is still the work of deposition that is propaedeutic and dominant. This does not mean that they are incapable of doing it.

These terrains of investigation and struggle have mainly been identified at the urban level, in the metropolises. Whereas, in the past, it fell upon the factory to centralize the organization of labour, today it is the metropolis that is saddled with this task: it is the metropolis that centralizes the networks of cooperative labour, whether cognitive or not, and that, through the contacts that it allows, heightens the degree of tension and fusion of production and struggle. So, on the metropolitan terrain, we find more and more sites of encounter, of militancy, and of the organization of material and immaterial labour, of labour and non-labour, of culture and of cultures (owing in particular to immigrants) in the process of becoming organized – in sum: sites where the struggle is organized, and where the products of the general intellect are reappropriated. Is it, then, possible to begin to construct institutions of self-government that might put forms of a 'new mutual-ity' to work, new forms of social protection [*tutelle*] to defend against the most violent effects of the crisis? In many cases, this is indeed what has happened. And, furthermore, alongside these elements of opening that we may define as 'intensive' (which is to say, turned towards the interior of the social fabric), we must also experiment with an 'expansive' apparatus, an extensive

opening: only the concatenation and articulation of the mobilizations of the various European countries can bring about a real and continuous effect on the crisis politics that we are experiencing today.

Finally, *communizations*. This is where the constituent initiatives come into play. In Italy, for example, the movements have tried to go in this direction. From the public to the commons: the path is one that affirms the right of access to the commons, that attempts to realize this desire for the commons that now haunts the workers' hearts. To communalize means to construct new institutions of the commons, and in particular the 'common currency' that would permit citizens to produce in conditions of full freedom, and with respect for solidarity.

After all of this, the alternative seems obvious. On one side, there is captured bio-value, value that capital has extracted from society as a whole, and there is also its monetary form, its structuration, understood entirely in terms of the exploitation of society. On the other side, the revolutionary attempt to free the potential [*puissance*] of labour power from capitalist domination, and to impose equality as a condition of freedom.

In positing all of these elements, and in particular those which concern currency, we have come back to

the question with which we began: what is to be done about Europe? Or rather: how should the movements act with respect to Europe? It seems absolutely clear to me that the European Union is necessary and irreversible. A political path that lacks continental dimensions in the midst of globalization is impossible. At times the movements themselves seem to be unaware of this. It is therefore necessary to construct new models of solidarity, new projects of connection, which could together assemble and negotiate the differences between various fragmented geographies – I am not just thinking of the old nation-states here, but the very different histories of the current movements. The urgency of the struggles demands it, especially when the theme of constituent power becomes central. To fulfil this agenda, we must therefore develop an ongoing investigation or programme of research, one that avoids the institutional European calendar and the electoral campaigns that are forever being offered to us. The crux of the discussion today no doubt consists in coming up with an action against the European Central Bank, in so far as in Europe today it is the ECB that incarnates, in its own way, the Winter Palace.

Translated by Olivia Lucca Fraser

Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy



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Knox Peden (University of Queensland)
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Andrew Benjamin (LGS, Kingston)
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