Interview with Paolo Virno
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Interview with Paolo Virno

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RESPONSES TRANSLATED BY ALESSIA RICCIARDI

Branden W. Joseph: You are currently a university professor of communications. Perhaps it would be worth outlining a little of your personal and intellectual trajectory. How do you understand the relation between your academic work and your work with Autonomia?

Paolo Virno: The decisive experience of my youth was the revolutionary struggle in a developed capitalist country. I insist: *developed.* A country, that is, in which physical survival was guaranteed, consumption relatively high, with by that time widespread scholastic instruction. I did not participate in an uprising against misery or dictatorship but in a radical conflict aiming at abolishing that modern form of barbarism: wage labor. We were not "third-worldist" but "Americanist." Fighting at Fiat of Turin, we were thinking of Detroit, not Cuba or Algiers. Only where capitalist development has reached its height is there a question of the anticapitalist revolution. This setup has allowed us to read Marx without "Marxism"—to read Marx, putting him in direct contact with the most radical social fights and on the other hand intertwining the reading of him with the great authors of bourgeois modernity (Weber, Keynes, Nietzsche, Heidegger, etc.). I participated in the group Potere Operaio (among whose directors was also Toni Negri), contributing as much as I could to organize fierce strikes at Fiat and the occupation of unrented houses in Rome. In 1979 I was arrested in the trial of Autonomia Operaia—three years of preventive jail, one of house arrest, finally (in 1987), full exoneration in the appeals process.

I have always occupied myself with philosophy, and I have always written about it. I was hard pressed to work on a nonreductionist, broadly conceived materialism capable of explaining rationally all that a "linguistic animal" (which is to say, a human being) does, thinks, desires. The first book was published in 1986 and is entitled *Convenzione e materialismo* [*Convention and Materialism*]; the latest in 2003 is entitled *Quando il verbo si fa carne. Linguaggio e natura umana* [*When the Verb Becomes Flesh: Language and Human Nature*]. At the end of the 1980s, I was engaged with others in tracing the fundamental traits of "post-Fordism": the intellectual labor of the masses, flexibility, and so on. From 1990 to 1993, I contributed to the journal *Luogo Comune,* afterward to the journal *Derive Approdi.*

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When it comes to my job at the university . . . well, I have been doing it only for six or seven years. And I am still a professor on a temporary contract. Until the age of forty-five, though I was writing books of philosophy, I worked at the most disparate sorts of jobs in the culture industry: cartoon scriptwriter, journalist, editor for publishing houses, and so on. University has been a casual choice, not a vocation or a destiny. It represented the possibility of earning a better salary and having more time left for writing. Having published different books, I could give it a try. I won a competition. My life has not changed. And it goes well this way.

BWJ: The 1960s and 1970s have been characterized as the period of social and political experimentation on which current theory reflects. If so, how would you characterize the most important distinctions between the experiments in Europe and those in the United States? It seems that the situation in Italy remained radical and experimental for a longer period than in the United States, which entered what you have called "counterrevolution" by the midpoint of the later decade.

PV: During the 1960s and 1970s in the USA, the counterculture had a lot of influence and a large tendency to *secession,* which is to say to constructing fragments of an alternative society. And, naturally, there was the political emergence of the different "minorities." The great working struggles of the 1960s had minor visibility, at least here in Europe; at any rate, they did not have the ability to unify the ensemble of the movements. Today, taking a retrospective look, it seems to me that the 1960s and 1970s in the USA was the epoch in which the modern *multitude* affirmed itself: no longer a unitary people but a plurality of heterogeneous subjects, proud of their specificity, resisting a univocal synthesis.

In Italy, on the other hand, from the beginning of the 1960s to the end of the 1970s everything revolved around the struggles of new, unskilled, mobile workers who detested their job and the factory. The struggles of these workers, external to the unions, were the connective fabric of all conflicts. Even feminism (at least at first), even doctors, the precarious professors at the university, and the Sardininan shepherds all had as a point of reference "the great disorder" in the factories. What mattered was not a working identity with its values and traditions but instead the hatred of the working condition, the intention to suppress commodity labor-power.

The official Italian labor movement (PCI and unions) has always mistrusted the working struggles in the USA and has never understood them. For a very good reason: because it attributed to the workers, even to the unqualified ones of Fordist factories, the task of defending the "general interest" (of

the country, of the economy, and so on). Thus, facing the "egotistical" insubordination of the Detroit workers, which was geared toward affirming their own material interests, our Left was scandalized. But young Italian workers in those years were in turn becoming "egotists," deciding to earn more and work less, without much chatter about the "general interest" and socialism. In this sense, the official Italian labor movement, not understanding the proletariat in the USA, could not even understand its own. The 1960s and 1970s laid the grounds for surpassing more than a century of divergence between the American radical movements and the European radical movements.

BWJ: Much of your work reflects upon a post-Fordist paradigm of immaterial labor. Yet, many Leftist intellectuals don't accept the analytical significance of post-Fordism. So-called post-Fordism, they say, actually depends on older industrial paradigms, now out of sight of the first world; immaterial labor can't be hegemonic in the same way that industrial labor was described by Marx. For you, however, post-Fordism is not only important but characterizable as an ethics, a pervasive way of life. Do arguments that rely on more traditional Marxist paradigms of industrial labor still hold any weight?

PV: I have never used the expression "immaterial labor"; to me it seems equivocal and theoretically inconsistent. Post-Fordism certainly cannot be reduced to a set of particular professional figures characterized by intellectual refinement or "creative" gifts. It is obvious that workers in the media, researchers, engineers, ecological operators, and so on, are and will be only a minority. By "post-Fordism," I mean instead a set of characteristics that are related to the *entire* contemporary workforce, including fruit pickers and the poorest of immigrants. Here are some of them: the ability to react in a timely manner to the continual innovations in techniques and organizational models, a remarkable "opportunism" in negotiating among the different possibilities offered by the job market, familiarity with what is possible and unforeseeable, that minimal entrepreneurial attitude that makes it possible to decide what is the "right thing" to do within a nonlinear productive fluctuation, a certain familiarity with the web of communications and information. As one can see, these are generically human gifts, not the result of "specialization." What I hold true is that post-Fordism mobilizes all the faculties that characterize our species: language, abstract thinking, disposition toward learning, plasticity, the habit of not having solid habits. When I speak of a "mass intellectuality," I am certainly not referring to biologists, artists, mathematicians, and so on, but to the human intellect in general, to the fact

that it has been put to work as never before.

If we look carefully, post-Fordism takes advantage of abilities learned before and independently of entrance into the workplace: abilities brought forth by the uncertainty of metropolitan life, by uprootedness, by the perceptual shocks of technological mutations, even by video games and the use of cellular phones. All this is at the base of post-Fordist "flexibility." These experiences outside the workplace become afterward, in the production system known as "just in time," authentic and proper professional requirements. Great European thought, from Nietzsche to Heidegger, described the "nihilism" that characterizes the forms of life outside the stringent rationality of the productive process: instability, disenchantment, anonymity, and so on. Well, with post-Fordism, the nihilistic mentality enters into production, constitutes in fact one of its precious ingredients. To work profitably in offices and factories, what is necessary today is a great familiarity with the situation and the fragility of every state of things.

BWJ: I'm interested in the Italian reception of the Frankfurt School. The work of Walter Benjamin, foremost, but also of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, seems to play a more central role in Italian thought than, say, in France, where its reception was selective. At the same time, particularly in your work, the insights of the Frankfurt School are often inverted, as when you argue that the creative communicative abilities Horkheimer and Adorno regarded in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* as "un-influential remnants" of an exploited cultural sphere were, in fact, "loaded with future possibilities."[1] I am curious, first, as to how the Frankfurt School was received by the Italian Left? And, second, what is the status of their insights—which were forged from a perspective of monopoly capitalism—if we are now within a period of global post-Fordism?

PV: I earned my degree with a thesis on Adorno, on the relationship that his work establishes between criticism of knowledge and criticism of political economy. When it comes to Benjamin, he is and remains for me a decisive point of reference. I believe that his "On the Concept of History" is the fundamental text for a discussion of a specifically human temporality. One of my books, *Il ricordo del presente. Saggio sul tempo storico* [*The Memory of the Present: An Essay on Historical Time*], attempts to advance on the path forged by Benjamin. But Benjamin distinguishes himself from Adorno, and even more so from the other members of the Frankfurt School, because he tries to disentangle the question of emancipation even in what Brecht defined as the "bad new," for example, in technical reproduction or in the emotional poverty of the metropolitan experience. Adorno and the others, on the other hand,

condemned the "bad new" as a whole. That is why their discourse on the culture industry, though certainly acute and suggestive, does not catch the essential; which is to say, the fact that the productive methods of the culture industry, more than imitating Fordist homogeneity, anticipate the flexible position of post-Fordism, the use that the latter makes of the communicative performance and even improvisation. The Italian reception of the Frankfurt School has never been such a great thing. The accent was placed on the critique of consumer society or (with reference to Marcuse) on the supposed integration of the working class. The accent was placed, in the end, on utterly wrong things, leaving aside the critique of the "thought aimed at identity" developed by Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*. The call of the Frankfurt School, in Italy, has often represented an alibi to refuse to act and to put off indefintely the risks of praxis.

I maintain that today what is possible and should be written is a contemporary version of Benjamin's essay on technical reproduction, assuming one has the background from which it is possible to appreciate all that is singular and unrepeatable in every human existence. If reproduction once suppressed the aura linked to the uniqueness of the work, today it is necessary to think the link between the technical reproduction of every aspect of experience and the emergence of a uniqueness *without aura*. Moreover, in the epoch of the intellectual work of the masses, it seems to me important to reread (and, certainly, to develop) the analysis of Alfred Sohn-Rethel, an outsider of the Frankfurt School (to whom, however, Adorno owes a great debt), in the book *Intellectual and Manual Labour*.[2]

BWJ: You have described "general intellect" as an externalized, communal interrelation of thought and language patterns. This, you've observed, can lead in two directions: toward a new form of public sphere, born out of the "growing time of nonwork," or toward a "publicness without a public sphere," a more total form of oppression. Is this second, more nefarious possibility related to what Gilles Deleuze described as *control society*—"direct social engineering, leaving no gap at all between itself and the social sphere . . . social engineering in its purest form," a realm in which the very forms of "speech and communication have been corrupted?"[3]

PV: I agree. The Deleuzian concept of a "society of control" aptly describes the situation in which the "general intellect" of which Marx speaks (knowledge, science, communication) has become, yes, the new principal productive force, but does not yet represent a political resource, which is to say, the foundation of a new public sphere.

It is not difficult to identify the forms of resistance within and to the "society

of control." After Seattle, Genoa, and Porto Alegre, we have seen the emergence of a "new social and productive species," *mass intellectuality,* which is to say, that multitude of men and women who, using thought and language as tool and raw material, form the authentic pillar of the wealth of nations. Migrants, precarious workers of every kind, border-laborers between employment and unemployment, seasonal employees at McDonald's, customer support representatives on chat lines, researchers and information experts: all these people are, in their full value, the "general intellect" of which Marx speaks. That general intellect (knowledge, the subjective spirit of initiative, invention-power) that is at once the main productive force of post-Fordist capitalism and the material basis for bringing an end to commodity society and to the state as a sinister "monopoly of political decisions." At the end of the nineteenth century, typographers, tanners, textile workers—in sum, the members of the numerous trade associations—discovered what united them: being, all, abstract expenditure of psychophysic energy, *labor in general.* Today, a multitude of "social individuals"—who grow prouder of their unrepeatable singularity the more they correlate to each other in a dense web of cooperative interaction—recognize themselves as the general intellect of society. The "general intellect"—"the thinking that desires and the desire that thinks," to employ Aristotle's beautiful expression—shows its political face with the reasonable demand of a universal basic income and with the refusal of any copyright on products of that common resource that is the human mind.

We are left with the thorniest of problems: how to organize a plurality of "social individuals" that, at the moment, seems fragmented, constitutionally exposed to blackmail—in short, unorganizable? Mass intellectuality finds it hard to reverse its own productive power into political power. The first question on the agenda is that of the *forms of struggle.* Whoever believes that identifying the modalities of struggle (such as the strike, sabotage, and so on) is only a technical problem, a simple corollary of a political program, is stupid. On the contrary, the discussion of forms of struggle is the most intricate, real benchmark of any political theory with a certain spirit. Entrepreneurialism, shared knowledge, the ability to relate and interact: these "professional gifts" of the post-Fordist multitude must become terrible instruments of pressure. The basic claims—in short, the "what we want"—depend entirely on "how we can act" to modify the relations of force within *this* social organization of time and space. Everything depends, that is, on the broad-minded invention of the new "picketings" and new "internal protests" that might be equal to the predominant flexibility and to the model of accumulation based on the general intellect.

BWJ: If communication itself, as well as affects and modes of being, are now parts of immaterial labor, what happens to notions of the autonomy or semi-autonomy of either individuals or of realms of culture, such as art?
PV: Today what has always been true has become evident: the individual (with his or her autonomy) is a point of eventful arrival, not an incontrovertible point of departure. He or she is the point of arrival of a complex process of individuation, the individuation of universal productive forces, anonymous structures, preindividual modes of being. The autonomy of the individual is, if you want, the result of the political struggle, the stakes of the class conflict in post-Fordism.

For what concerns cultures and art . . . they are an integral part of human praxis. If you like, they are the place in which praxis reflects on itself and results in self-representation. But human praxis as a whole is included, today, in the productive process. Because of this, contemporary production has, sometimes, cultural-aesthetic aspects. To ask what might be the destiny of art and culture in general means to ask what form human praxis can take beyond the epoch of wage labor. Culture and art have become productive resources. But, exactly like the "general intellect," they can transform themselves into political resources for the multitude.

BWJ: In *A Grammar of the Multitude* you discuss the notion of "virtuosity" through the example of the pianist Glenn Gould, who eschewed public performance and adopted the role of a laborer producing recordings. A counterexample might be John Cage, who, despite having made a good many recordings, consistently denigrated them as *no more than* commodities, seeking to replace them with ongoing performative processes. My question is: from the perspective of a political "virtuosity," what happens to the more traditional notions of reification? Is it that all communication becomes reified, structured like a commodity? Or is it that the form of the commodity no longer holds as such even in the economic realm?
PV: It is true; John Cage is the reversed image of Glenn Gould. Whereas Gould detests the exposure to other people's eyes and wants to produce "works," Cage desires instead to switch to that activity without work that is performance. Taken together, they aptly illustrate the difference between the sphere of production (*poiesis,* the Greeks called it) and the sphere of public action (praxis).

When it comes to *reification,* I propose to go back to the original meaning of the word. *Res* in Latin does not mean only "thing," but also "fact," "event," "visible reaction," "action." In light of this broad meaning, "reification" could mean that one or another of these faculties of the human mind manifests

itself in the world of phenomena, becomes conspicuous, offers itself to be seen in the public sphere. In this sense, "reification" seems to me a good thing. It is a remedy for the "myth of interiority." I would oppose "reification" to "alienation"; the latter is privation, dispossession. A suitable reification (that is, the fact that "the life of the mind" becomes fact or perceivable actions) could be a means of fighting post-Fordist alienation. All contemporary comunication is a battleground between a suitable reification and a dreadful alienation.

BWJ: You have described, forcefully, the means by which new modes of thought and behavior, even "a new common sense," were forged by the neoconservative reaction of the 1980s and 1990s.[4] Now that we are faced, on the one hand with a very real possibility of terrorist attacks—9/11 in New York and more recently those in Spain and Russia—and, on the other, with overzealous state security measures, do you see a particularly intense period of restructuring mentalities, habits, and behaviors? Are we entering a new cycle of oppositional experimentation, after what you called the "long intermezzo" of conterrevolution?

PV: It seems to me that we have entered a new seventeenth century. What I mean by this is an epoch of terrible uprisings in which all the categories of public life are newly redefined. In 1600, in the heart of the civil and religious wars, while passing through the revolts of the peasants and artisans, with the impetuous flourishing of the first capitalist economy, the political lexicon in force until yesterday was coined. Terms such as *sovereignity, the central state, legitimate/legal, the social pact,* and so on, received, at that time, the meaning that seems obvious to us today. Well, perhaps a long period has begun, surely a tragic one, in which the compasses and the key political concepts are changing. What matters is to understand if in the "new seventeenth century" the last word will belong to Leviathan or to Exodus.

BWJ: Commentators on the recent protests in New York (against the Republican National Convention) expressed frustration at not being able to determine, at times, what the protest groups "represented." It seems, however, that many activities could be understood in terms of a collective refusal of the behaviors and limitations the city wanted to impose: thus, carnival in the face of fear, mobility in the face of restrictions of movement. But how does one get from active behavior to political effect?

PV: The global movement ever since Seattle resembles a half-functioning voltaic battery: it accumulates energy without rest but does not know how and where to discharge it. We face a marvelous hoarding to which no

adequate investments correspond at this time. Or do we face a new technological apparatus, powerful and refined, for which we, however, ignore the instructions? The symbolic-media dimension has been at once a propitious occasion and a limit. On the one hand, it has guaranteed the accumulation of energy; on the other, it has hindered or deferred to infinity its application. Every activist is aware of this: the global movement does not yet manage to have an effect—I mean, to have an effect with the grace of corrosive acid—on the current capitalist accumulation. From where is the difficulty born? Because neither the profit margin nor the functioning of constitutive powers have been disturbed more than a tiny bit by the new global movement? To what is this paradoxical "double bind" due on which basis the symbolic-communicative sphere is both an authentic springboard and the source of paralysis?

The impasse that seizes the global movement comes from its inherent implication in the modes of production. Not from its estrangement or marginality, as some people think. The movement is the conflictual interface of the post-Fordist working process. It is precisely because, rather than in spite, of this fact that it presents itself on the public scene as an ethical movement. Let me explain. Contemporary capitalist production mobilizes to its advantage all the attitudes characterizing our species, putting to work *life* as such. Now, if it is true that post-Fordist production appropriates "life"—that is to say, the totality of specifically human faculties—it is fairly obvious that insubordination against it is going to rest on the same basic datum of fact. To life involved in flexible production is opposed the instance of a "good life." And the search for a good life is indeed the theme of ethics.

Here is at once the difficulty and the extraordinarily interesting challenge. The primacy of ethics is the direct result of the material relations of production. But at first glance this primacy seems to get away from what, all the same, has provoked it. An ethical movement finds it hard to interfere with the way in which surplus value is formed today. The workforce that is at the heart of globalized post-Fordism—precarious, flexible border-workers between employment and unemployment—defends some very general principles related to the "human condition": freedom of language, sharing of that common good that is knowledge, peace, the safeguarding of the natural environment, justice and solidarity, aspiration to a public sphere in which might be valorized the uniqueness and unrepeatability of every single existence. The ethical instance, while taking root in the social working day, flies over it at a great height without altering the relations of force that operate at its interior.

Whoever mistrusts the movement's ethical attack, rebuking it for disregarding the class struggle against exploitation is wrong. But for symmetrical

reasons, they are also wrong who, pleased by this ethical attack, believe that the latter might put aside categories such as "exploitation" and "the class struggle." In both cases, one lets slip the decisive point: the polemical link between the instance of the "good life" (embodied by Genoa and Porto Alegre) and life put to work (the fulcrum of the post-Fordist enterprise).

Notes

1. Paolo Virno, *Grammatica della moltitudine. Per una analisi delle forme di vita contemporanee* (Rome: Derive Approdi, 2003). Published in English as *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life,* trans. Isabella Bertoletti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 59.

2. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit. Zur Theorie der gesellschaftlichen Synthesis* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970). Published in English as *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology,* trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1978).

3. Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972–1990,* trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 74, 175.

4. Paolo Virno, "Do You Remember Counterrevolution?" in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics,* ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 241.