

Note from the Editor's Desk

The following issue is a double issue completing the 2010 series of *Ideas in History*. The issue is divided into two parts: a themed issue, edited by Victoria Höög and Max Liljefors on 'The Image in Science: Responses of the Humanities to Visualism in Science', and a general, open issue. For 2011, *Ideas in History* looks forward to a general project of internationalising the journal, and deepening its contact with the international community in intellectual history.

We look forward to the continued support of our readership and authors.

Ben Dorfman, Editor

Antonio Negri's Ontology of Empire and Multitude

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Abstract

Prior to publishing (with Michael Hardt) his political treatise entitled *Empire* (2000), followed by its sequels, which are actually more like 'complements', *Multitude* (2004) and *Commonwealth* (2009), Antonio Negri had elaborated what we might call an ontology, a theory of what there is, or in his case, of 'the real', in works on Spinoza, Marx, the concept of 'constituent power' (*pouvoir constituant*) and most recently, *kairos*. And as it turns out, not only does the ontology we encounter in these works underpin the empirical reflections on Empire, but less traditionally (that is, in a sense distinct from the usual relation between theory and practice), the idea of ontology *itself* becomes political. This paper tries to bring to light this dimension of Negri's thought – the hidden connections between the metaphysics of a seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher and the potentially emancipatory mechanisms of globalisation.¹

There is no such thing as a private ontology (Hardt and Negri 2009: 181)

Discussions of globalisation, resistance and how such concepts relate to philosophy and even the history of philosophy, with figures such as Spinoza, have frequently gravitated around the work of the Italian philosopher,

¹ Different versions of this paper have been presented at Nagoya City University, the Haitian association 'Curriculum Galilée-Montaigne' in Queens, New York, the Department of Philosophy at UT El Paso, and the 'Rencontres de Bellepierre', Théâtre du Grand Marché, Saint Denis, La Réunion, between 2006 and 2010. Thanks to Harun Abusoglu and Yoshihiko Ichida for their input and to the unnamed friends and audience members for comments.

political theorist and activist Antonio Negri, particularly with reference to the notions he put forth in his writings with Michael Hardt of ‘empire’ and ‘multitude’ and most recently ‘commonwealth’. In contrast, very little reference has been made to his interest in – we might even say *reinvention of* – the notion of ‘ontology’. For instance, in a recent review essay on a collection of essays on Negri’s theoretical work (Bates 2009), there is just one mention of ontology in twenty pages. This is ironic given that Negri has declared, even if jokingly, that ‘my dream in life is to have a chair in ontology’ (Negri 2002a: 96). Given that this is an unusual feature of a major contemporary thinker, and that it brings together discussions in political philosophy, continental thought and more technical components of the history of philosophy, it seems worthwhile to try and understand this combination.

In what follows I will revisit some of the key concepts such as Empire and multitude (§§ I–II). These tend to be discussed in relation to war, sovereignty, immigration, technology and other features of our contemporary ‘political anthropology’, but I will instead take an *ontological* focus (§ III), including asking what Negri means by ‘ontology’? In other words, I do not propose to return to Marxist fundamentals, to assess his scholarship on Spinoza, reading of Heidegger, constitutional theory, or international relations (for a discussion of Negri’s interpretation of some such philosophers, see Wolfe 2007a), but rather to ask why he insists on using the term ‘ontology’ frequently and in an idiosyncratic way. I do not propose to detect or reconstruct a ‘hidden ontology’, implicit in an empirical, political project like a theory hidden in a heap of practice. On the contrary, Negri asserts that *ontology itself is political*, and this connects back to Marxism (§§ IV–V). The ‘drama’ of Empire is described as ‘ontological’ because in the social, political, economic, military, or technological transformations of the world we find described in *Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth being itself is produced* (Hardt and Negri 2000: 47), which maps onto Negri’s broader ontological concerns.

The goal of Hardt and Negri in these works is then to highlight the presence within these transformations of a ‘production of subjectivity’ (a term of Félix Guattari’s which proves quite influential here) and, as a ‘power’ beneath the surface, of *pouvoir constituant* (cf. the German *Verfassungsmacht*) – this famous term taken from constitutional reflections during the French Revolution, which means the ‘power’ by which the people can call an As-

semblée Constituante, itself the body which will be habilitated to write a constitution, i.e., the document which then constitutes the ground of legitimacy for a state (Negri 1997). But as early as his 1981 work on Spinoza, Negri was constructing an inseparably juridical and metaphysical concept of power as potentiality, which the later constitutional reflections amplify – in fact, from his doctoral work in ‘Theory of the State’ onwards one finds a focus on the ‘material constitution’ as opposed to the ‘formal constitution’.

In what follows, I am not going to enter into debates about where Negri fits in the history of Communism, whether concepts such as ‘immaterial labour’ are a betrayal of some noble political project, or how a possibly messianic dimension in works such as *Empire* and *Multitude* (co-authored with Michael Hardt) render them somehow politically *caduc* or unusable. Rather, I aim to articulate a relation which is hinted at in a variety of these texts, but rarely studied at length: If Empire is ontologically productive, or the multitude is a form of rupture within ontology, or, lastly, the ‘common notions’ in our minds connect in Negri’s view to a kind of renewal of Communism, there is a mutually interpretive relation between ontology and politics as these are usually understood. It is this relation I want to understand.

I

If Empire is ontologically productive, what is meant by Empire? Empire is a condition all of us are located within, all individuals, institutions and states. Empire has no ‘exteriority’ or outside. From the traditional standpoint of national sovereignty, the claim is particularly bold: ‘The political philosophy of modernity (and obviously the institutions with which it interacted) is over. The theory that goes from Marsilio to Hobbes and from Althusius to Schmitt is finished’ (Negri, in Negri and Zolo 2003; Negri 2008a: 12). Empire is meant to take account of a radical shift, a break, the emergence of something new. Like a good deal of Negri’s earlier work – on Spinoza, Marx and *pouvoir constituant*, hereafter ‘constituent power’, although it might be better to say ‘constituting power’ – there is a strong metaphysical claim here, that domination and resistance are located within a unified space. To put it another way, a form of domination will always produce a form of resistance. Or again, since there is no ‘outside’ there is no escape.

This does not mean inertia, the end of struggles, or the promotion of fashionably *déraciné* human intellects with their computers in a new cosmopolitanism (I have in mind here an essay written some years ago – I think in the *New Yorker* but could not find it – by David Rieff, Susan Sontag’s son, in which he described being in a lounge somewhere in Tokyo with his laptop sipping a cocktail, and having the epiphany that this was the new form of world democracy and *entente*). Negri prefers to emphasise the ‘exodus’ of mass immigration and the need to do away with borders.

Rather, it is a new form of struggle between ‘monarchic authority’ as represented by the United States (now and not for ever: ‘the coming Empire is not American and the United States is not its centre’²), but also international institutions, versus its twin term, the multitude, to which we shall return shortly. Imperialist authority today seeks to assert the rule of law, a ‘global order’, in order to defend the global economy. International law means nothing in the face of the *lex mercatoria* (a term Negri uses which originally referred to the set of trading principles used by merchants throughout Europe in the Middle Ages, literally signifying ‘merchant law’ and of course ultimately evolving, through custom and practice and via the enforcement of merchant courts along trade routes, into what today we might call ‘the law of the market’). Also, as the Gulf War showed, the United States can act, not only for the sake of its own national interest while ‘obeying’ global right, but in the name of global right (Hardt and Negri 2000: 180). NGOs, particularly of the humanitarian sort, are wholly part of Empire as well, its ‘velvet glove’, so to speak; they are participants – if sometimes unwittingly – in ‘just wars’, which are increasingly waged, no longer defensively, but ‘proactively’ (ibid.: 36, 312–13). As for terrorism, it is not part of the ‘exodus’ or resistance to order, but rather a struggle for control of that order. Namely, Al Qaeda is described, not as a form of revolt against American dominance (like that of the multitude), but as a struggle for control of that dominance; it is a ‘revolt of mercenaries’ (Hardt and Negri 2004: 48).

² Hardt and Negri (2000: 384, my emphasis). The U.S. is only temporarily in a position to exercise ‘sovereignty’; both strategically, politically and economically it is vulnerable to all kinds of events occurring in ‘Empire’, from September 11 to Chinese needs in natural resources, or currency fluctuations. As for American ‘exceptionalism’, see Hardt and Negri (2004: 8–9).

So the first claim is the following: *Empire is not to be confused with imperialism*. The sovereignty of nation-states has declined; not sovereignty itself. It has taken a global form, which Hardt and Negri call Empire. No nation-state can 'form the centre of an imperialist project' today (Hardt and Negri 2000: xiv); no nation can be the world leader in the way that defined nineteenth-century European imperialism.

Further, the proletariat itself has evolved. Local struggles which in the past were transfigured into internationalism have now become 'social movements'. Riots in Seoul, Paris or Los Angeles appear not to communicate with each other the way worker revolts did a century earlier; but, so Hardt and Negri claim, now any local 'upsurge' attacks the 'imperial constitution' itself (Hardt and Negri 2000: 53f., 56–7). Interestingly, the diffuse, networked, tentacular, acentred character of Empire means that there is no priority to attack it in any particular geographical region (a social movement does not have to be in Davos, Washington or Tokyo); on the contrary, 'the virtual centre of Empire can be attacked from any point' (ibid.: 59).

The first terrain of struggle is, from this point of view, the universal right to move, work and learn on the whole global surface. The revolution that we see is then not only within Empire but also through *Empire*. It is not something that fights against a Winter Palace (it's only the anti-imperialists who want to bomb the White House) but is spread against all the central and peripheral structures of power, to empty them and subtract productive capacity from capital. (Negri, in Negri and Zolo 2003; Negri 2008a: 27)

The second claim could be presented in question and answer form: if international law and institutions such as the UN cannot be considered as independent of Empire, where could we find a ground of legitimacy from which to contest the imposition of authority, whether of a state or, more amorphously, the *lex mercatoria* itself? Radically enough, the Negrian reply is: In the constituent power of the multitude itself.

Pierre Macherey pointed out an important novel feature of this claim (Macherey 2004): democracy ceases to be an institutional form of organisation of sovereignty, and becomes – very much in keeping with Negri's dislike of 'crystallisation', of 'constituted power' – a 'constituent power'

which acts, declaring that ‘another world is possible’. Negri puts this rather amusingly in a recent interview: ‘I am not a Leninist, I am simply a Machiavellian’ (Negri, in Negri and Zolo 2003).

And immanently enough, since there is no ‘outside’ of Empire, or of power, or of struggles (Hardt and Negri accept the thesis of the ‘end of history’ with the proviso that it is the end of Hegelian history and the beginning of perpetual conflicts, now that ‘every imperial war is a civil war, a police action, from Los Angeles and Granada to Mogadishu and Sarajevo’ [Hardt and Negri 2000: 189]) the multitude produces ever new forms of resistance, as manifest notably in transformations of labour towards ‘immateriality’.

This denial of an ‘outside’ of power sounds unmistakably Foucauldian, and indeed it is credited as such by Hardt and Negri. Negri has written often about his debt to Foucault, sometimes with criticisms, and it seems worthwhile to quote a statement he made defending just such a concept of power. He does not name the critic but the charge strongly resembles those made by Habermas and his disciple Nancy Fraser under the heading of ‘Foucault’s crypto-normativity’ in the early 1980s (Fraser 1981: e.g. 279; Habermas 1987: 282, 284).

[I]f we refer to Foucault, I cannot see how we can think that his notion of power excludes antagonism. On the contrary, his conception has never been circular, and in his analysis the determinations of power have never been trapped in a game of neutralisation ... In Foucault, there are always material determinations, concrete meanings: there is no development that is levelled onto an equilibrium, so there is no idealist schema of historical development ... *The production of subjectivity in particular, however produced and determined by power, always develops resistances that open up through uncontrollable dispositifs. Struggles really determine being, they constitute it, and they are always open.* (Negri 2002b: 45–6; Negri 2008a: 123, my emphasis)

This description of Foucault – full of antagonisms and material determinations – unmistakably belongs to what Negri elsewhere calls ‘keeping Foucault and Marx together’ (Negri and Zolo 2003; Negri 2008a: 13). And if we were concerned with a full treatment of Negri on Foucault we would

have to focus on the vexed theme of 'biopolitics' (see Hardt and Negri 2000: 22–24, 88–89; Hardt and Negri 2004: 94–95). But I wish to emphasise, differently, the theme that 'struggles determine being': This is something quite unique to Negri. What the concept of Empire has contributed to this idea is a kind of immanence of struggles and power.

II

Given that definition of Empire, what then characterises the multitude? Conceptually, 'multitude' is supposed to replace the concept of class but at the same time be a 'class concept' (Negri 2002b: § 2, 37; Hardt and Negri 2004: 103; Negri 2008a: 115). The problem here is that class is supposed to be not only a universal but a universalising concept. But as Paolo Virno puts it when interviewed by Maurizio Lazzarato (Virno 2002), 'multitude' is not supposed to replace 'working class' as if this meant people in blue overalls, like in a souvenir photo. Rather, it embraces such a concept. What it is meant to replace is the category of 'people', *le peuple*. And this is what the movements of Seattle, Genoa, Porto Alegre are supposed to demonstrate: That when 'the working class ceases to be a people and becomes a multitude', one of the crucial changes takes place in 'forms of organisation and of conflict' (ibid., and see more recently Hardt and Negri 2004: 99f.). Unlike Hegelian Marxist class struggle, 'capillary' struggles here are described as open, indeterminate, and a-teleological (Negri, in Negri and Zolo 2003; Negri 2008a: 21).

Traditional Marxism is not only Hegelian but it is caught up in a model of the relation between substance and properties or better, essence and relations which is a form of 'concept containment' or 'essentialism'. That is, despite the well-known dimension of 'social relations', Marxism – according to a criticism found in Foucault, Negri, Deleuze-Guattari, etc. – denies the possibility of real exteriority, of external relations. In rationalist and idealist fashion, relations are understood as a difference between essence and appearance (or phenomenon). In this sense, the individual is merely epiphenomenal: his or her existence is only *wirklich* inasmuch as it belongs to the 'ensemble of social relations' (recall the well-known Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach: 'das menschliches Wesen ... in seiner Wirklichkeit ist das

Ensemble der gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse'). This amounts to an essentialist denial of singularity. As Lukács says in *History and Class Consciousness*, Marxism must clearly grasp the difference between the empirical existence of facts, and their 'internal structural nucleus', that is, their essence.³

In such a vision there cannot be any theory of the 'production of the new,' since the underlying ontology of Marxism encloses the possibility of novelty in a pre-given relation (capital and labour are the subsuming forces of invention or, in Guattarian language, of the production of subjectivity). In this sense, politics is already inseparably bound up with ontology. 'Movements' from feminism to identity politics to 'Seattle' all escape or cannot be grasped in the essentialist model. They are the multitude, and it is in order to express them that such a concept is articulated. 'The people is always represented as a unity, whilst the multitude is not representable, because it is monstrous vis-à-vis the teleological and transcendental rationalisms of modernity' (Negri 2002b: § 3, 39, Negri 2008a: 87). The concept of 'people' is linked to that of the nation, and tends towards the crystallisation of a 'general will'; Negri dislikes such crystallisation, as the extensive analyses of constitutional theory in *Le pouvoir constituant* make clear – but also his 'extra-parliamentary' political practice in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s.⁴ Hence, the emphasis on 'multitude' as something not only heterogeneous but non-figeable.

Once we define the name of the multitude against the concept of the people, bearing in mind that the multitude is a whole of singularities, we must translate that name in the perspective of the body and clarify the *dispositif* of a multitude of bodies. When we consider bodies, we not only perceive that we are faced with a multitude of bodies, but we also understand that each body is a multitude. Intersecting the multitude, crossing multitude with multitude, bodies become blended, mongrel, hybrid, transformed; they are like sea waves, in perennial movement and reciprocal transformation. The

3 For this summary of Marxism I am indebted to Morfino ([2003] 2006) and Lazzarato ([2005] 2010).

4 At the risk of associating *Empire* with a more Romantic version of its argument, the authors approvingly quote Genet declaring that 'The day when the Palestinians are institutionalised, I will no longer be at their side. The day the Palestinians become a nation like the other nations, I will no longer be there' (interview, in *Œuvres complètes*, Gallimard, VI: 282, quoted in Hardt and Negri 2000: 109). This Romanticism also crops up in the 'affective' dimension which I discuss in closing.

metaphysics of individuality (and/or of personhood) constitute a dreadful mystification of the multitude of bodies. *There is no possibility for a body to be alone.* It could not even be imagined. When man is defined as individual, when he is considered as autonomous source of rights and property, he is made alone. (Negri 2002b: § 3, 42, Negri 2008a: 120, my emphasis)

That a body is never alone, or can never be alone, is a rather Spinozist claim in the sense that a body is always composed of other bodies, always stands in relation to other bodies, and literally or metaphorically is always 'thinking' of other bodies. Aside from the 'hybrid', 'artificialist' dimension to which I shall return below, and the relational dimension which irresistibly reminds one of Althusser's 'A communist is never alone' ('Un communiste n'est jamais seul', Althusser 1973: 78), this should give some idea of the ontological 'foundations' of the concept of multitude.

Politically, the concept of multitude is closely – but also opaquely – wound up with the anti-globalisation movement: in a nutshell, 'multitude' is to the 'Seattle' movement as 'people' or 'working class' is to union-based labour conflicts. But rather than merely asserting post-modern or post-colonial critiques of the 'centre', the 'Same', or the 'West', Hardt and Negri are more interested in responding theoretically to the transformations expressed by 'social movements'. 'In our present imperial world, the liberatory potential of the postmodernist and postcolonial discourses . . . only resonates with the situation of an élite population that enjoys certain rights, a certain level of wealth, and a certain position in the global hierarchy' (Hardt and Negri 2000: 156). The concept of multitude is meant to 'connect' the intellectual to the processes of human (economic, labouring) transformation underway in the world.

Empire and multitude are bound up with one another; but the crucial difference is that the former seeks to facilitate the globalisation, notably, of the market, as a 'closed system', whereas the latter stands for globalisation as an 'open system'.⁵ But the 'knot' of relations between the concept of multitude and the anti-globalisation movement contains major misunderstandings (the well-documented success of *Empire* in that movement

⁵ I thank Yoshihiko Ichida for this remark.

at times resembled boulevard theatre in which wives, husbands and other undesirable or hidden people rush around a stage without seeing other). Of Negri's two key tenets on the matter, both conflict with the sentiments of many anti-globalisation militants, not to mention 'organic intellectuals' who attempted to appropriate the movement such as ATTAC: in his view, (a) the nation is a bad thing and (b) globalisation is a good thing.

(a) Negri never tires of saying that his main enemy is the nation-state, and as such he is suspicious of reactions to globalisation which defend the nation (the chief offender for him at the time was Jean-Pierre Chevènement in France, who achieved a kind of paradigmatic status; Hardt and Negri 2000: 44–5, 96f.; Negri 2002b). So what kind of globalisation is he for? He refers positively to Rosa Luxemburg both for her sense of the transformations of the working class with which she challenged the 2nd International, and for her suspicions of the 'emerging nationalism' of the workers' movement of her time; she saw that from a truly democratic standpoint, 'nation' really meant 'dictatorship'. For Hardt and Negri – crediting not only Luxemburg but also the Abbé Siéyès – 'nation' means nothing more than a 'hypostasis of the Rousseauian 'general will' and what manufacturing ideology conceived as the 'community of needs' (that is, the capitalist regulation of the market)' (Hardt and Negri 2000: 96). And a full chapter (chapter 5) of Negri's important theoretical work on *pouvoir constituant*, strangely translated as *Insurgencies*, is devoted to Siéyès and the French Revolution overall.

The special case of 'subaltern nationalism', in which the nation is employed as a tool of resistance against a dominant power, is not considered an ultimate source of legitimacy by Hardt and Negri (2000: 106), even if it 'served important progressive functions' (ibid.: 132). 'February never leads to October', but rather to bourgeoisie and participation in the world market. Further, the false premise of national anti-globalism is that the global entails homogenisation and the imposition of a unified identity, whereas the local preserves heterogeneity and difference. Instead, the concept of Empire's twin, that of multitude, asserts that the global is a producer of difference (ibid.: 44, 103). Of course, the irony, which Hardt and Negri do not fail to detect in their later book, *Multitude*, is that the American program of 'nation building' is itself a demonstration in post-modern, anti-essentialist reconstruction of an entity which initially had a 'natural' historical genesis.

But organic nationalism is the wrong response to the artificial hypocrisy of nation-building.

(b) Globalisation is both inevitable – we are already within Empire – and ‘on the side of resistance’, under the name (for instance) of ‘exodus’.

The multitude must be able to decide if, when and where it moves. It must have the right also to stay still and enjoy one place rather than being forced to be constantly on the move. *The general right to control its own movement is the multitude's ultimate demand for global citizenship.* This demand is radical insofar as it challenges the fundamental apparatus of imperial control over the production and life of the multitude. (Hardt and Negri 2000: 400)

Negri expressed this vividly at the time of the war in ex-Yugoslavia, with the NATO bombings; while the Left tore itself apart over the legitimacy of such ‘humanitarian intervention’, he elegantly sidestepped that ‘debate’ and, in opinion pieces published in the press, declared that regardless of right or wrong, the Kosovars were now *in the Empire* and as such should have the right of movement throughout it.

This reaches back to beloved figures in the history of the workers’ movement, the Wobblies (IWW, Industrial Workers of the World), whose activities were ‘an immanent pilgrimage, creating a new society in the shell of the old, without establishing fixed and stable structures of rule’ (Hardt and Negri 2000: 207). Insisting on positivity where others might just see poverty, *Staatslosigkeit*, and displacement, Hardt and Negri affirm that ‘mobility and mass worker nomadism always express a refusal and a search for liberation’ (ibid.: 212). Capitalism preaches the free open market and maintains populations behind walls and borders.

The thesis of Empire is unlike, and even opposed to, the concepts of imperialism and anti-imperialism. The multitude is not like ‘the people’, not because it or they lack blue overalls – they do not – but because the concept matches Empire in its fluidity and multiplicity. It is not just a matter of ‘being like a fish in water’ or a guerrillero facing an enemy practicing traditional, ‘linear’ warfare; the multitude’s sole defining trait is its capacity for hybridisation and metamorphosis, and its sole properties are its ‘intellect’ and its ‘affect’. Here we come to properly ontological terrain. If Empire

was already characterised by the immanence of struggles, the concept of multitude stresses the involvement of our cognitive and affective capacities (abilities, potentials) in such struggles. As the ontologically focused texts are less well known than those I have discussed so far I shall provide more extensive quotations in the following section.

III

Ontology normally means something like a theory, implicit or explicit, of what is real, of which entities are granted reality. One thinker's ontology might include mathematical entities; another's might reject the ultimate reality of such entities but include desires and wishes. On that basis, it would appear that politics, whether it is the reflection on the nature of the just state, grass-roots activism, or the attempt to satisfy the desire of the greatest number of people, is derivative in relation to an ontological 'posit' or 'ground'; the politics one will have will depend on one's ontology. But Negri very quickly seeks to reserve this standard, common-sensical acceptance of the relation between these two terms.

When we say that political theory must deal with ontology, we mean first of all that politics cannot be constructed from the outside. Politics is given immediately; it is a field of pure immanence. Empire forms on this superficial horizon where our bodies and minds are embedded. . . . The neutralisation of the transcendental imagination is thus the first sense in which the political in the imperial domain is ontological. Empire constitutes the ontological fabric in which all power relations are woven together. (Hardt and Negri 2000: 354)

Because of the world of transformation in which we live, body, mind, intellect and machines commingle, and we cannot help, *mutatis mutandis*, but participate in the 'constitution of the real'. This is also part of Negri's metaphysical derivation of 'constituent power'. Plenty of other thinkers in the democratic tradition(s) speak of humans as citizens or even as beings endowed with rights; it is a far more radical matter to claim that we are involved, 'without mediation', in the real itself. No Kantian subjectivity, no

'weak thought' (the *pensiero debole* of Vattimo and others in the 1980s), no deconstruction. We are within Empire and cannot escape it, but our bodies and minds are its substance as well.

Notice that ontology thus understood is not the ontology we always encounter in the philosophy textbooks. Of course, the latter is not usually described as political in any case. But interests are always at work there as well: it's not just Negri's 'constitutive ontology' which has magically pulled politics out of its hat. (Constitutive ontology plays a key role as a technical term in Negri 1982 and Negri 1997, but is not easy to define. In works such as *Empire* we find the explicit statement that 'ontology is not an abstract science. It involves the conceptual recognition of the production and reproduction of being and thus the recognition that political reality is constituted by the movement of desire and the practical realisation of labour as value' [Hardt and Negri 2000: 362, and already Negri 1982: 154; Wolfe 2007a].) Rather, 'politics resides at the centre of metaphysics' (Hardt and Negri 2000: 83). Whether in the form of repression or of resistance, the two are inseparable. As expressed in the above quotation, something like 'the movement of desire' *makes* the structure of reality change (recall the earlier image that 'struggles determine being', or the idea that, e.g., in the French Revolution "real rights" emerge from a new ontological horizon that is defined by the productivity of labor', Hardt and Negri 2009: 12); but conversely, ontology could serve as 'a transcendent apparatus that could impose order on the multitude', preventing it 'from organising itself spontaneously and expressing its creativity autonomously' (ibid.). A Cartesian metaphysics of the body could deny this possibility, as could a Kantian doctrine of personhood. Think of the 'spectre' of Spinozism and how hard not just Hegel, but especially Fichte, Kant, and even the 'founders' of German metaphysics, worked at eliminating it from philosophy!⁶ Surely it could not just have been a matter of technical philosophical concerns?

Now, if our 'essence' consists in not having one, other than a *capax mutationum*, a capacity to undergo mutations, we are in philosophical territory familiar to some from Althusser and Foucault: that of 'humanism after the death of Man'. Or to put it in more familiar terms: we are in anti-humanist

6 In a brief and intriguing article, Pierre-François Moreau describes the emergence of 'metaphysics' as a new genre with Crusius and Wolff at the turn of the eighteenth century, out of a desire to repress the danger of Spinozism (Moreau 2002).

territory. Except that Negri (here writing with Hardt) shrewdly points out that the denial of a human essence in favour of our own intellectual capacity to make and remake ourselves, is both a key trait of (Renaissance) humanism and of (twentieth-century) anti-humanism. The latter

need not conflict with the revolutionary spirit of Renaissance humanism ... from Cusanus to Marsilius. In fact, it follows directly on Renaissance humanism's secularizing project, or more precisely, its discovery of the plane of immanence. Both projects are founded on an attack on transcendence. There is a strict continuity between the religious thought that accords a power above nature to God and the modern 'secular' thought that accords that same power above nature to Man. The transcendence of God is simply transferred to Man. Like God before it, this Man that stands separate from and above nature has no place in a philosophy of immanence. Like God, too, this transcendent figure of Man leads quickly to the imposition of social hierarchy and domination. (Hardt and Negri 2000: 91)

To the question, inspired by Foucault, 'What is humanism after the death of Man? Or rather, what is an antihumanist (or posthuman) humanism?' (ibid.), Hardt and Negri answer by stressing that Althusser and Foucault's anti-humanist project of the 1960s

can be linked effectively to a battle that Spinoza fought three hundred years earlier. Spinoza denounced any understanding of humanity as an *imperium in imperio*. In other words, he refused to accord any laws to human nature that were different from the laws of nature as a whole. Donna Haraway carries on Spinoza's project in our day as she insists on breaking down the barriers we pose among the human, the animal and the machine. If we are to conceive Man as separate from nature, then Man does not exist. This recognition is precisely the death of Man. (Hardt and Negri 2000: 91)

But neither the Renaissance humanists nor the Althusser-Foucault anti-humanists would have conceived of the final step Hardt and Negri take, in which they are inspired, but only distantly, by Haraway's notion of the

cyborg. That is, we are also *posthuman*: what Spinoza saw as a matter of absolute metaphysical fact has also become true as a matter of contingent, socio-historical circumstance, from organ transplants and cosmetic surgery to pre-natal diagnosis and, of course, the efforts of some artists like Stelarc and Orlan to display a full integration of body and technology (Wolfe 2007b). Part of which such developments indicate, or express, is our ability to identify with *non-biological* extensions of our body, thus supporting the 'artificialist' perspective, in which body and prosthesis, indeed, body and tool, *merge*. Humanism 'after the death of Man' is then 'the continuous constituent project to create and re-create ourselves and our world' (Hardt and Negri 2000: 92).⁷ The analogue of this politically is that 'the death of God that many Europeans began to perceive was really a sign of the expiration of their own planetary centrality' (Hardt and Negri 2000: 375). The death of Man is not just a metaphysical event – a shift in definitions of who we are at an abstract level – but also a historico-political event.

Notice that this 'post-human', artificialist dimension of Negri's thought is different in two original ways from what we tend to think of as 'post-modernism' (or post-colonialism, as mentioned above): first, it does not abdicate political responsibility – ontology as constitutive and our subjectivity as 'produced' does not mean inertia but rather action – and second, it insists on its connection to Renaissance humanism:

When postmodernists propose their opposition to a modernity and an Enlightenment that exalt the universality of reason only to sustain white male European supremacy, it should be clear that they are really attacking the second tradition of our schema (and unfortunately ignoring or eclipsing the first). (Hardt and Negri 2000: 140)

Because as we saw above, Renaissance humanism and Spinoza are part of a tradition in which Althusser and Foucault also participate; it overlaps to a great extent with what Negri earlier called 'anti-modernity' (Negri 1991, 1995), which I elaborate on in section V.

⁷ They note later on that 'hybridity itself is an empty gesture', and that 'Donna Haraway's fable', although more effective than deconstructionism, 'is a fable and nothing more' (Hardt and Negri 2000: 216, 218). What matters are transformations at the *constitutive* level, not just 'self-fashioning'. This resonates well with the analyses of biotechnology in Rose (2007).

Of course, from Renaissance humanism Negri takes only a few, very small steps to the world of cyborgs, prostheses and ‘immaterial labour’, in which ‘the brain is the tool’ (Negri 2000: § 16b; Negri 2005: 177), as I discuss immediately below. This is because of a common theme of ‘maker’s knowledge’ (both that we know what we make, i.e. construct, but also that we know the world because we have actively taken a role in shaping it, in transforming it), of the primacy of the intellect, and the lack of a human essence – from Renaissance humanism as analysed above to later forms of the ‘man-machine’ (Hardt and Negri 2000: 72; Negri 2005: 173). Why should our status as cyborgs, or – which amounts to the same thing – the denial of any distinction between nature and artifice have a *political* dimension? Because, as we shall see, just as Negri always speaks of subjectivity as something *produced*, similarly, he also speaks of metamorphosis (or ‘heterogenesis’) as a process in which we need to be actors. Negri is not trying to author an exotic brand of cognitive science, but to insist that our cognitive (mental, cerebral, affective) activity is itself political.

IV

That ontology is something political, and inasmuch as it is ‘constitutive’ that it participates in a ceaseless process, not just of remaking the real but also ourselves, since we lack any unchanging, metaphysical essence but are instead all cyborgs, clones and socially networked brains waiting to happen is for Negri a key Marxist tenet. These processes of transformation and self-transformation also, or in fact foundationally, concern the world of labour and technology. To the older ‘operaist’ theme of workers’ self-determination Negri and Hardt add a metaphysical dimension concerning how the nature of minds – our desires, our ‘affects’, our conceptual constructs – actively interacts with the conditions of production:

The scientific, affective, and linguistic forces of the multitude aggressively transform the conditions of social production. This consists ... in a revision of the production of cooperative subjectivity, in an act, that is, of merging and hybridizing with the machines that the multitude has reappropriated and reinvented. ... This is a new form of

exodus, an exodus toward (or with) the machine – a machinic exodus. (Hardt and Negri 2000: 367, discussing Marx's so-called 'Fragment on Machines', Marx 1976: 554–55)

The multitude now has the capacity to take control of the new tools and became an operator of transformation. Not only because of a broad, politico-metaphysical claim about Empire and multitude as coextensive, but more concretely, because of transformations at the level of technology and labour itself. Put rather broadly,

the tool ... has entirely changed. We no longer need tools in order to transform nature ... or to establish a relation with the historical world ..., we only need language. Language is the tool. Better yet, the brain is the tool, inasmuch as it is common (Negri 2000: § 16b; Negri 2005: 177).

The brain is 'common' inasmuch as it is constituted by, and inseparable from, the network of relations to which we belong (Negri often refers to Spinoza's 'common notions' in this context; for some elaboration see Morfino 2003, 2006). Given this commonness, there is no longer a separation between brain and tool as two distinct entities. One could think of this 'common brain' also as the 'social brain', in the Spinozist and Vygotskian sense of the product in real cerebral architecture of the transformations induced by social life with its symbolic, representational, affective dimensions (Wolfe 2010b).

As for labour itself, what this implies is that technological innovations such as computers transform the production and circulation of commodities, including language, so they become completely integrated in capital: *society itself*, its communicative and cooperative dimension, is capital as such.⁸ This is what is meant by 'immaterial labour', i.e., 'labour that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge or communication' (Hardt and Negri 2000: 290). Inseparable from these forms of labour and also communication is *affect*: for every 'computer' ex-

8 Negri doesn't deny the existence of exploitation, nor dismiss the existence of factory workers in *maquiladoras*; he thinks one must keep track of transformations in the world of labour and not merely seek to challenge 'globalisation' and 'flexibility' with the comforting, organic entity of the nation-state.

ample Negri and his collaborators give (for there are many collective research projects published in this area) they also give ‘affective’ examples...

If ‘the brain as tool’ or ‘immaterial labour’ seem much too mysterious, recall that these concepts stem directly from Negri’s reading of Marx’s *Grundrisse*, which he presented initially at Althusser’s invitation, in lectures at the École Normale Supérieure in 1977–1978. Specifically, the concept he found there, which became a kind of ‘mantra’ of Italian autonomist Marxism, was ‘General Intellect’ (in notebooks VI–VII). Marx writes about what he calls the ‘general productive forces of the social brain’ (Marx 1973: 694). He suggests that, because of increasing use of automation and of developing networks of communication and transportation:

[T]he production process has ceased to be a labour process in the sense of a process dominated by labour as its governing unity. Labour appears rather as a conscious organ, scattered among the individual living workers at various points of the mechanical system; subsumed under the total process of the machinery itself, as itself only a link of the system, whose unity exists not in the living workers, but rather in the living (active) machinery, which confronts his individual, insignificant doings as a mighty organism. (Ibid.: 693)

A few pages later Marx remarks that

[N]ature builds no machines, no locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules etc. These are products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of the *human* will over nature, or of human participation in nature. They are *organs of the human brain, created by the human hand*; the power of knowledge, objectified. The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree social knowledge has become a *direct force of production*, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it. (Ibid.: 706)

What Marx is saying is that the real ‘operator’ or ‘agent’ of transformation, indeed the sole remaining actor in this process, the productive force

itself, is neither the machines by themselves nor the old-fashioned humanist 'autonomous rational animal', but rather the 'General Intellect', which resides both in humans and in intelligent machines (Marx 1973: 709, discussed in Virno 2001, 2003 and Wolfe 2010b). Comparisons have been made between this idea of 'General Intellect' and Teilhard de Chardin's 'noosphere' (Gere 2004), and indeed there is something uncomfortably spiritualistic about the idea, as if intellect were more real than a piece of flesh or silicone (in fact, this was the direction that Pierre Lévy ended up taking with his work on the virtual). However, in Negri, there is no 'noosphere' of pure mind, but rather the multitude as also the *linguistic* and *affective* cooperation of innumerable subjects; on the ontological plane, bodies in a universe of relations.

V

At this late stage, it seems we have heard more about international organisations, workers, and old-fashioned Marxism, than about the 'noble simplicity' of ontology. I can only indicate a few *pistes de recherche*.

We have understood, I think, that ontology for Negri is something very different from a discourse on Being and beings. He shares with the late Althusser an emphasis on a 'Lucretian' world of the *clinamen*, of atoms as a productive reduction of the real – which is also the production of the 'new' (Bourdin 2000). The same portions of Epicurus and Lucretius are read by these two thinkers who have much in common, yet Althusser chooses to emphasise the randomness, the sudden encounters, which ground existence in contingency, whereas Negri emphasises the moment of innovation, the production of the new, which will be a central feature of what he calls 'constitutive ontology': ontology tied to a process of constitution.

This 'constitutive ontology' is bound up with what he sometimes calls 'materialist teleology', 'dystopia', 'démésure'⁹ or, in his earlier works, 'anti-

9 He uses the French term in the original Italian texts; I believe it is taken from the late work of the 'renegade Heideggerian' Reiner Schürmann (Schürmann 1996, 2003). Attempting to normatively govern the world from foundational principles is one kind of *hubris* (which he also renders as *démésure*), but, perhaps in a more Negrian vein, our own tendency to react and make all such normative governance fail, is itself a moment of *démésure*.

modernity',¹⁰ 'anti-transcendence', 'projectuality', and 'constitutive temporality'. All of these terms are radical, creative, or to use his own language, constitutive terms. It has a deliberately utopian dimension, often connected to Machiavelli's *rivestito al principi* (return to principles), and is bolstered by an in-depth claim concerning an alternate or 'hidden' history of philosophy, Machiavelli-Spinoza-Marx, which we encountered in *Empire* as an alternate political history.¹¹ Here, too, the parallels with Althusser are suggestive and should be explored. But whereas the late Althusser seems to contemplate the 'welter' of atoms and expounds on the Heideggerian *es gibt*, Negri's most abstract terms are always conceptualisations of extreme, posthuman and multitudinous transformation: of action.

Yet this utopian dimension seems to connect Negri to at least two strange bedfellows – and I say this without any polemical intentions: Heidegger (for the temporal dimension, the 'dynamisation of space' which I have not been able to discuss here, but which is strongly present in the concept of *pouvoir constituant*) and Carl Schmitt (specifically for the inquiry into the concept of sovereignty, but also constitutions; generally for the idea that a 'productive ground' of political concepts exists which is not itself part of the rule of law, or institutions; Schmitt is dismissed a bit too casually in Hardt and Negri 2004: 351). There is a sense in which, without the dimension of ontological radicalism found in these authors, Negri's ontology would not be *constitutive* ontology; it would be a discourse on the real like many other such discourses. Something like this is doubtless intended in the rather sudden suggestion at the end of the Preface to *Commonwealth* that the authors' goal is to produce a 'Spinozist rewriting of *Being and Time*' (Hardt and Negri 2009: xiii–xiv), although this book also contains some barbs against Heidegger. This can also be seen in the way in which – sur-

10 Negri's 'Spinoza's Anti-Modernity' (Negri 1991, 1995), is a brilliant article which stands out from the mediocrity of the polemics on modernity and post-modernity. At times Negri views post-modernity as having a liberating role, according to the logic of the 'greatest peril' concealing the 'greatest emancipation'. Thus 'in post-modernity, that is, the era which began in the Sixties and in which we still live today, the ethical and ascetic illusion of modernity seems to have come to an end, and along with it, the metaphysical madness of transcendence and of ruling has withered away. Now the common can appear in the full plenitude of its definition' (Negri 2000; 2001: § 15; Negri 2005: 177). To post-modernity Negri opposes the production of subjectivity.

11 For a carefully argued, but tendentious challenge to the idea of 'multitude' – especially the historical claim of 'another modernity', that of Machiavelli and Spinoza against that of Hobbes and Rousseau – see Bull (2005); for more on Marxist appropriations of Machiavelli see Vatter (2004).

prisingly for a materialist – Negri invokes the concept of ‘flesh’ (*chair*) from Merleau-Ponty:

the primary matter [or: raw material, CW] of the multitude is the flesh, i.e. that common living substance where the body and the intellect coincide and are indistinguishable. Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes: ‘the flesh is not matter, nor mind, nor substance. In order to designate it we need the old and new term element, in the same sense as this term was used to speak of water, air, earth and fire, i.e. in the sense of a general thing — a sort of embodied principle that brings a style of being where there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an element of Being’. (Negri 2002b: 40, Negri 2008a: 118)¹²

Of course, rather than remain at the level of the individual body and its mystery, as Merleau-Ponty would (Wolfe 2010a), Negri takes the properties Merleau-Ponty has described as belonging to the flesh – the potentiality, the life-force, the relation to being – and attributes them *to the multitude*. ‘like the flesh, the multitude is oriented towards the fullness of life’ ((Negri 2002b: 40; Negri 2008a: 118). And further, in a way consonant with Haraway’s theme of the cyborg (and with all Marxist refusals to oppose a sacred essence of Nature or Life to a lesser essence of technology or work), he adds that the multitude, a ‘revolutionary monster’ which appears, rather messianically some would say, ‘at the end of modernity’, continuously ‘wants to transform our flesh into new forms of life’ (ibid.). We are back at the Marxist emphasis on transformation.

It may seem as if I have passed under silence this dimension of Negri’s thought, aside from the quotations from the *Grundrisse*, admittedly an ‘esoteric’ work. Of course, thousands of pages have been written on this by now – half of them attacking Negri for his betrayal of Marxism, the other half expressing shock that anyone could still describe themselves as a Communist; for a refreshing change of tone one should look at Negri’s dialogue with Félix Guattari, the English-language title of which is revealing here: *Communists like us* (Guattari and Negri 1985, 1990). Nevertheless, one set of

¹² Thanks to Katja Diefenbach for pointing this out to me. The fondness for Merleau-Ponty is still more explicit in *Commonwealth* (e.g. Hardt and Negri 2009: 30).

objections presented to Negri by Danilo Zolo, are useful to consider since they bring the concepts of Empire and multitude into sharper focus.

Zolo makes a classic, and legitimate objection against Marxism, in three parts: (i) DIAMAT, and its claims to formulate scientific laws of the development of history; (ii) the theory of labour-value as the basis for the capitalist mode of production and premise of a Communist revolution; (iii) the theory of the withering-away of the State and the consequent denial of an *état de droit* and rights in general. What does Negri reply? That of course, if Marxism were tantamount to these three principles, he would have ceased to be a Marxist many decades ago. Instead, he asserts the need for the Machiavelian return to principles, against the present. So (i) against dialectics, the affirmation of a non-teleological form of struggle; (ii) against the theory of labour value, an analysis of General Intellect, in which society and capital merge; (iii) as for the State, Negri is less clear, but he asserts that Marx's theory of the State could only have come to fruition, in any case, once sovereignty became coextensive with the globe – what he calls Empire. Notice that this connects to the 'No-Global' movement again, in the sense that global sovereignty, Empire, also means, *mutatis mutandis*, that 'struggles' are global – even if there is also the paradox, discussed by Michael Hardt in an elegant, clear but unfortunately unpublished paper (Hardt 1999) but also touched on their collaborative works, that 'From Berlin to Moscow, from Paris to New Delhi, from Algiers to Hanoi, from Shanghai to Jakarta, from Havana to New York, struggles resonated with one another throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' (Hardt and Negri 2000: 50), whereas '(potential) revolutionaries in other parts of the world did not hear of the events in Beijing, Nablus, Los Angeles, Chiapas, Paris or Seoul and immediately recognise them as their own struggles' (*ibid.*: 54; see also Hardt and Negri 2002).

Conclusion

We have seen that Negri's thought proposes new articulations of the ontological and the political, with concepts ranging from the slightly familiar but very idiosyncratically treated, like Empire and multitude, to the rather unfamiliar (like constitutive ontology). A general theme here is that of a radical commonness, immanence and sociality, at the level of minds, bodies, machines, labour, art and technology as a whole; it is the insistence

that 'there no such thing as a private ontology' (Hardt and Negri 2009: 181). But for all this to hang together, it is also important that the multitude is irreducibly a creature of desire and affect – for otherwise how could struggles 'determine being' (Negri 2002b: 45–6; Negri 2008a: 123)? It is on this affective note that I would like to end. For those who are familiar with the debate on modernism that shook Marxist aesthetics in the 1930s – between Brecht, Lukács, Bloch and the like, concerning authors such as Kafka, Mann and Joyce (Bloch et al. 1977) – I would venture to compare Negri with the 'modernist' strain, which sees irreducible complexity rather than the Social Realist necessity to bring out contradictions in social relations. There is something Joycean in Toni Negri, both in the 'Odyssean', heroic sense of *Ulysses* and in the post-heroic, post-humanist sense of *Finnegans Wake*.¹³ We saw this in the posthuman dimension and in his emphasis on the affective dimensions of labour. It makes both his Marxism and his invocations of ontology very distinctive. He speaks often of the power of the imagination, notably with reference to Spinoza, and recently has added discussions of 'love' and 'poverty'. For instance, in the above-mentioned long interview with Zolo, Negri declares,

I don't understand why one must ridicule as 'Promethean universalism' the fact that many people around the world run away, migrate in the search for hope. I don't think migrants only escape from misery, I think they also search for freedom, knowledge and wealth. Desire is a constructive power and it is all the stronger when it is rooted in poverty: poverty, in fact, is not simply misery, but also the possibility of many things that desire points to and labour produces. The migrant has the dignity of those who search for truth, production, happiness. This is the strength that breaks the enemy's capacity of isolating and exploiting. (Negri and Zolo 2003; Negri 2008a: 30)

A dominant tradition in Marxism has emphasised discipline – factory discipline, Party discipline – and Negri has long sought to bring out, in contrast,

¹³ One can see this in his brief writings on art, in his book on Leopardi, but also in the 'Letter on Manhattan', published in the early 1980s (Negri 1983: 188–98; Negri 1992), in which Negri chronicles a clandestine visit to New York when he was a fugitive from Italian justice – in this piece as elsewhere, Negri's scorn for anti-Americanism is apparent.

the 'affective' dimension he currently calls 'poverty' with a Franciscan twist: 'Consider how, when in the early 1950s Vittorio De Sica and Cesare Zavattini set the poor to fly away on broomsticks at the end of their beautiful film *Miracle in Milan*, they were so violently denounced for utopianism by the spokesmen of socialist realism'.¹⁴ In general the 'operaist' tradition and certainly Negri's own ideas of the past decades are more sympathetic, not just towards affect and fantasy, but towards the search for happiness, for delight ('I always find a strong moralistic and religious side to any attack and critique of consumption', Negri 2008b). From migrants in exodus away from intelligent warfare to humans becoming hybrids and cyborgs, and on to the poor flying away on broomsticks: It seems a fitting place to end.

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14 Hardt and Negri (2000: 158) (and discussion in Ricciardi 2007). The book in fact concludes with an account of St Francis of Assisi as a high utopian form of Communist militancy, and Negri's recent *Kairos*, *Alma Venus*, *Multitudo* (Negri 2001; 2005) contains long, sometimes metaphorical discussions of poverty.

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