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Revisiting the Concepts, Politics and Cultures of Multitude

Call for papers

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Networks of protest and dissent, actual and virtual, were understood to have become increasingly centreless and leaderless across the 1990s, and beyond. Even the nature of protest and dissent fell away from previous models, as aligned to pragmatic demands and manifestos, single issues and norms of controlled civil disobedience. Now the masses were understood not to assemble behind any one position, or rally to one slogan, but more to stand in a kind of collective negative correlation to the faltering status quo: a crowd of singularities. This crowd or mass has been identified and explored in various ways as “the multitude” by theorists such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, The Invisible Committee, Mauricio Lazzarato, and Franco Berardi among others.

The roots of this turn have been related to the political disorientation of the “post-ideological” wake of 1989, with the growth of intellectual and network-based labour, economic migration and a precarious substrata of a “grey collar” workforce, the heightened policing of traveller and off-the-grid lifestyles, the

coexistence of the Global South and Global North in megacities, and the supposed vanishing of the traditional working classes in the West. And a neoliberal response to the rise of these networks has come in attempts to co-opt grass root strategies of change: rainbow revolutions; Black Bloc infiltration and provocations; people's protests as invited and allied to IMF reformism (or even cautious support, as with Live8); various forms of middle-class crowd funding and crowd sourcing; identity politics calibrations to "liberal interventionism" in the name of "freedom" (rather than human rights).

This proposed co-edited book will seek to critically engage with the body of thought around the concept of multitude in two main respects. Firstly, we welcome philosophically-inclined attempts at interrogating or rethinking the concept of multitude, taking into account criticisms produced by various cohorts on the Left and by its outstanding spokesmen (such as Slavoj Zizek, Jodi Dean and Jacques Ranciere, among others), over the last two decades. Between the poles of uncritical praising of constituent creativity of the "many" and the recent attempts to rethink the "one" as a form of mobilising popular authority (in the form of the leader or the Party) there is a space for mediation which cannot be theoretically and politically ignored. In tracing the trajectory of the developing idea of multitude from early political-philosophical modernity to the Italian and international debates from the 1990s to the present, we encounter the concept of the State, various subcategories of the political subject (crowd, mass, people, class, Party) but also new concepts and phenomena such as the common, "form of life," individuation, the biopolitical, the Event, the post-national, queerness, the migrant, the refugee, as well as the economic and political crises in Europe and globally, which broke surface in 2008 and continue to reverberate. We maintain that, in spite of being

met with quick rejections and losing traction in the ephemeral cycle of theoretical fashions and jargon in leftist academia and activist circles, the idea to which the name ”multitude” gestures can be more productively reconsidered as a theoretical framework for the analysis of new and coming forms of social and political existence, and struggles they imply, as well as of their cultural formations and “codes” already established in previous decades. Secondly, we welcome engagements with respect to: cultural artefacts (from popular culture to the avant-garde); technological enablings of protest; the artefacts of and occurrences of protest and civil unrest; mainstream and independent reportage of dissent; the structures and organisation of new modes of dissent and protest; radical refusal; production of new subjectivities; co-option of dissent, and more.

This summative work of revisiting and, potentially, displacing or extending the concept of multitude and its applications in theoretical, cultural and political praxis now needs to be achieved. We ask: What does this contentious concept, the ‘multitude’, stand for? What is the inner temporality and historicity of the multitude (if any)? What are the real and potential relations between multitude and political organisation? Can we identify new forms of organisation, which take into account the dimension of the “many”? What is or was the culture of the multitude? What are the political applications and meanings of the “multitude”, as developed in various geopolitical areas of the globe (“the South” and “the North”, and their interzones)? What forms and languages of communication were developed? What forms of artistic expression and experimentation illuminate this abstract and protean idea? (And how does the idea of multitude help us to read otherwise difficult artistic texts?) How was political power understood and utilised? How are we to account for the churn of

protest groupings (anti-globalisation; anti-war; anti-austerity, #Occupy and beyond)? How does the contemporary 24/7 society of late capitalism affects the nature of labour and political mobilisations? What is the impact of "algorithmic cooperation" based on Internet and mobile communications? How can the new dissident cultures of leaking and security breaches contribute to our understanding of the actual political power exerted over the masses? What are the precarious dynamics of new activisms, and how are we to address and assess the widespread phenomena of "burning out" and exhaustion? What is the prehistory of multitude? What is its present, and what could be its future? Is the Idea of communism still its horizon and can we, perhaps, retroactively recognise the hidden features of the multitude in the experiences of the "real communisms" of the twentieth century? Can we now speak of a "post-multitude", which was partly institutionalised, objectified and thus deactivated in the corporations-owned social networks, but may possibly still be re-activated again?

Proposals of 600 words maximum should be in a Word document (not a PDF), with minimal formatting. Please also include (in the same document), and as independent of this word count: name; email and postal address; title and affiliation(s); recent publications / creative outputs; any further relevant biographical information. Please email Drs Benjamin Halligan and Alexei Penzin at b.halligan@wlv.ac.uk and a.penzin@wlv.ac.uk by 1 October 2016. A submission deadline for authors is envisaged for 1 July 2017 (with a possible conference/symposium a few months prior), with a view to publication in 2018/19.

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