04 2008

The metropolis and the so-called crisis of politics

The experience of Esc

Atelier Occupato ESC (Rome)

Translated by Nick Dines

1. The metropolis and the so-called crisis of politics.

In Italy the "crisis of politics" has in recent years become a popular theme in media debates. In a single blow, the instability of an institutional framework that has struggled to convey consensus and to legitimate political decisions has turned into the moral crisis of an entire country. Anything that moves beyond the boundaries of institutional representation is accused of being "impolitic", as if the category of the political were merely the prerogative of those who claim monopoly over it.

The violence of the securitarian discourse and the redefinition of the institutional framework around the production of public opinion have done the rest of the damage. For us, however, it is necessary to take into account the processes that are implicated in the very redefinition of the "political" at the moment in which this appears to be deprived of its traditional referents.

For us it is important to start from this reflection because we believe that it is precisely in the context of the metropolis that these processes acquire maximum visibility. Rome, in a phase of major economic expansion, presents itself as a particular "laboratory" where the complex reinvention of Italian institutional politics (think the experience of the former mayor Veltroni and the constitution of the Democratic Party) and the reconstruction of an imaginary befitting the crisis of representation are being experimented, and which, from the critical perspective of social movements, is rapidly reshaping the terms of national debate.

What, then, are the processes that are shaping this "crisis of politics" and which are most vividly encountered in the metropolis? Essentially two: on the one hand the redefinition of the composition of the metropolitan class and, on the other, the erosion of traditional dispositives of government and legislation of social life. From the demise of the function of political stabilization of the so-called "middle class" to the constitution of new social polarisations which blows apart the rigid contradistinction between included and excluded, passing through processes of downgrading of new figures of social and intellectual production to arrive firmly at the transformations that appertain to the same nature of capital and its function of government and control. If we wish to desist from a moralistic and ideological reading of the so-called "crisis of representation", then we need to detect in this distortion of social composition the erosion of traditional dispositives of the representation of interests, the waning of the capacity of delegation among classical political institutions and the growing imperceptibility, for the government, of the very "object" on which it is supposed to wield its power.

In short, the metropolis is cut across by an intensive redefinition of classes, a process that is in fact producing a crisis in the legitimacy

of the institutions of traditional political representation and is simultaneously giving rise to new scenarios. It is in these scenarios that the political agendas of movements need to be placed.

2. *Governance* and the impossibility of government

The analyses produced by movements in the last few years have been aimed entirely at redefining the turning point (fordism – post-fordism, modern – postmodern) that separated a before and an after, capable, in other words, of highlighting the impact of the transformation of global capitalism, the shifts in production and power relations, the changes in the time and space of political action, as well as the mutation of the institutions of political representation and the composition of the subjectivity in conflicts.

The understanding of this transition has enabled us to leave behind what we had previously condemned as worn out, and has opened up the possibility of reinventing movements that eclipse the categories in which the left – all of the left – has remained mortally ensnared.

Having described this general transformation, we are left with the urgent task of coming up with a definition of political categories, analyses and hypotheses that adopt the contemporary situation as their arena of action and identify lines of rupture in the here and now.

The search for a "political" definition of the metropolis in this sense becomes an objective of primary importance. It is necessary to break free from purely sociological definitions that in recent years have characterised the study of phenomena connected with the emergence of new urban forms of spatiality and temporality. These considerations need to be placed into a discourse that sees

the metropolis form as the constitution of a changing force field, traversed by mobile boundaries, hierarchical lines and the production of new institutions. This is the arena where the crisis of traditional forms of government produced by the struggles of movements has occurred and is simultaneously the sphere in which new forms of capture and control, inclusion and violence are experimented.

What we commonly term 'governance' represents inextricably the attempt to respond to this crisis. Any vision that associates governance with a sort of *soft* government, open to processes of democratization and pluralisation of society, risks loosing the thread. Governance operates where traditional forms of government no longer operate: this is the only condition for its existence. Thus when we speak about metropolitan governance we are alluding to a set of public practices that represent, in the face of the harmonisation of irreducible and heterogeneous interests, the response to the inability of deriving decisions from an initial process of institutional legitimation. The weakening of traditional mechanisms of social regulation and the channelling of interests has in fact rendered subjectivities impervious to the practice of government. Governance, in a certain sense, constitutes the struggle to continually produce, through variable and flexible structures, subjectivities that are consonant with the 'administrationalization' of life, where the boundaries between public and private become transient and elusive. It is the relationship between inclusion and exclusion that is completely eclipsed. What we find ourselves facing is the proliferation of the needs of government whose inclusive ability, while differential and disjunctive, represents the condition of its very operation.

What is generally dubbed "the securitarian turn", something that has indeed had a major impact upon urban life, in reality responds

less to a neo-authoritarian instinct of power (which in movement circles has seen the return of the same old crude story about fascistization) than to the irrepressible need to penetrate the social; to render it above all visible and administrable.

What does it mean to administrate a labour force, such as that of the metropolis, when this is absolutely irreducible to traditional regulation? What does it mean to administrate urban flows during the era of their greatest desynchronisation? The limits and fragmentation of government are the outcome of a growing antagonism whose terrains of conquest and arenas of struggle are to be found in the spatiality and temporality of the metropolis.

3. Gentrification and the constitution of territory: the experience of Esc (Rome)

The experience of Esc is situated in the district of San Lorenzo (Rome) which has been heavily influenced by these dynamics. Historically a university neighbourhood, in recent years it has become a veritable district of cultural consumption. With the growth in speculative real-estate interests, which has led to a huge rise in rents and living costs, the historic residential communities have responded by unleashing a full blown “war against young people”.

On the one hand, the capitalist valorisation of the district gives rise to an intense process of social polarisation and “gentrification” unites to the flows of real-estate rent the constitution of a creative upper class which reshapes the urban environment. On the other hand, the historic residential communities have, through forms of identity reterritorialisation, become the anchor that legitimates the

dispositives of control of the territory and the segmentation of youth flows.

These two processes need to be read in light of their symmetry. They are both based on the general deterritorialisation of the neighbourhood that has been brought about by the life styles of young people and students that represent an alternative to the temporality of waged work and which transcend the embalmed identity of the neighbourhood itself. In other words, gentrification and community resistance have both operated on the smooth space produced by the nomadic crossings of forms of life that revolve around use value and the refusal of work. Gentrification is the attempt to endow value on an urban space that has been redefined by productive forces by means of exception, rent and control. The growing antagonism between these forces and their attempt at a normative and mercantile codification has created a convergence of public and private subjects united by the desire to regulate urban space and time: local institutions, resident communities, traders, associations, the historic left parties and police forces have together given birth to a new, all-embracing form of political action, that has produced a militarization of the neighbourhood and a prompt and continual control of the flows that pass through it.

In this scenario the action conducted by an occupied space such as Esc has been to propose ourselves as a catalyst of forces (students and precarious workers) and as an activator of autonomous forms of institutionality. Former ideas about territorial rootedness have not only been eclipsed but are suicidal. As metropolitan hierarchisation no longer operates through the dialectic between inclusion and exclusion but through mechanisms of differential inclusion, the problem we face is to work out the type of role that social centres are able to perform.

On this very issue, we have encountered two tendencies in the panorama of Italian social centres: either integration in the metropolitan hierarchy and the pursuit of recognition of political and cultural roles, or else the ghetto option, which is equally functional to the mechanisms of differential inclusion.

The political problem that we pose ourselves, then, is how to inflate the mechanisms of governance; how to construct battles, not in an impossible outside, but within and against the processes of differential inclusion; how to reappropriate a public and establish collective rule (institutions of commons as places of the organization of escape and rupture); how to take action on boundaries, where these spaces of resistance, subversion and exodus.

4. Metropolitan organisation between technical and political composition

The metropolis is an opaque and not an indistinct space. Constructing a political image of the metropolis therefore means mapping the hierarchical lines that cross it and the different potentials that exceed it and constitute it as a living body. The romantic idea of civil society in contraposition to power is hardly useful for us in this context. We need, on the contrary, to immerse ourselves in the metropolitan composition to identify, in its irreducible heterogeneity, points in which to implement possible political actions, to recognise within the hierarchical manoeuvrings of the biopolitical fabric the products of subjectivities, their different capacity to open up scenarios of generalization, to successfully influence ruptures and to produce autonomous institutionality. This is what afflicts us.

How is it possible to transform the dynamics of differential inclusion and the processes of hierarchisation of the post-fordist labour force into forms of attack?

On this issue it seems to us useful to reconsider the *operaist* (workerist) distinction between technical and political class composition. Schematically we can define technical composition as the capitalist structuration of the relations of production, in other words the set of organisational, technical and legal processes that define the form of labour activity; and political composition as the forms of subjectification of living labour through which capital is forced to restructure and continually modify exploitation. Such a distinction needs to be retrieved in order to radically redefine its terms: indeed, the dynamics that characterise cognitive capitalism compel us to rethink in depth notions forged around factory work and worker subjectivity. What might technical composition mean today as social, cognitive and anthropological dimensions become increasingly central to forms of labour distribution? And how do we define political composition once the structural excess of conflicts has been assumed in relation to the tight perimeter of formally distributed labour? This article does not answer these questions. It is important for us to simply insist upon the centrality that the relation between these two dimensions needs to assume in the analysis of metropolitan conflicts. The problem, in other words, is to reconstruct this link.

The movement debate, at least in Italy, appears in fact to oscillate between two opposite positions. On the one hand, the definition of subjectivity rests on a sort of absolutisation of technical composition. Subjectivity is attributable to little more than its sociological definition: it is the structure of the post-fordist job market that produces antagonist subjects. In this sense expressions such “cognitariat”, “migrariat”, “precariat”, creative class, etc. all

share the idea that the technical structure is the base around which subjectification is produced. The risk involved with these positions is on the one hand to naturalise the hierarchies present in the job market, when these hierarchies function precisely as a capitalist instrument of disjunctive conjunction within productive processes; on the other to allow the process of subjectification simply to be the prerogative of an act of consciousness which operates upon an identity that is already structured but which lacks political awareness. This awareness, moreover, almost always coincides with the mere request of recognition (of expertise, social and economic status) in the market.

On the other hand, instead, we find positions in which the definition of subjectivity is entirely subordinate to political composition. In this case subjectivity coincides with the moment of its insurgency: the spread of conflict is the only possible criteria for its definition and analysis. It is the event which, in its transcendence, defines subjectivity. These positions have the major limit not only of disembodying subjects from production and exploitation, but also of not being able to say anything before and after the event has taken place. They do not pay sufficient attention to the "possibility" and the "continuity" of the production of subjectivity and of the event itself. This is the risk that is encompassed in a definition of multitude uncoupled from its condition as the redefinition of the concept of class. In the absence of significant moments of conflict, these positions therefore capitulate to the temptation of developing a discourse about organisation entirely centred around existent militant communities.

From our point of view, instead, the problem of metropolitan organisation is located precisely in the problematic and complex relationship between the analytics of power and the production of

subjectivity, technical and political composition. The problem of the definition of subjectivity should therefore focus on those processes that move beyond the structure of hierarchy and trace lines of possible composition. The political work conducted at University does not simply emerge out of the social condition of those who pass through Esc, but, on the contrary, is a struggle around one of the key elements in the redefinition of the relationship between the constitution and segmentation of the post-fordist labour force and the accumulation of subjective power. We are already situated in the conditions of the possibility of transformation: the hypothesis of an external avant-garde has happily long since disappeared. However, these conditions do not identify us as a constituted subjectivity: political militants are at the heart of the composition of the multitude, but they are not "yet" the composition of the multitude. It is in this margin and distance that we believe the question of organisation and the "class to come" needs to be posed.