12 2023

We do not know what the struggles can do

Marta Malo & Verónica Gago

Preamble

Many of us woke up on Saturday, December 17 2023, with the news of Toni Negri's departure. The first impulse: to write to our friends, to the many with whom we had shared our love for this *cattivo maestro* who taught us again and again the courage to think against the grain of history, in favor of revolt. In these messages back and forth, that helped us to go through the shock, to begin the work of mourning, but also in the rapid publications in social networks and newspapers, the wide geography of political friendships that Toni cultivated was emerging, an intergenerational and translocal multiplicity that today is self-convened, together with the Toni-sparkle, to challenge, with him, death.

Toni embodies for all of us a collective tradition of thought and action, Italian *operaismo*, but also a singular presence that shook us when we were very young, that encouraged us to a kind of commitment both in thought and action and that has never ceased to inspire us, then as today.

The following text started as a contribution to the translocal series of lectures organized by *transversal.at* in homage to Toni Negri on his 90th birthday.[1] We recorded it this very month of June,

literally at a crossroads, in the city of Berlin: Verónica Gago, coming from Buenos Aires, and Marta Malo, coming from Madrid, seated at a table in the kitchen of dear Isabell Lorey. Today we transcribe and rework it: it is our way of joining in the collective embrace of Toni, of remembering him and reminding ourselves of what we learned at his side, what invites us to think about the present situation.

1.- Our encounter with the *cattivo maestro*

We both met Toni in that decade that saw the birth of a new global movement, in the wake of the Zapatista insurrection, a few years before the great demonstrations against the G8 Summit in Genoa and the Argentinean crisis and revolt of 2001.

Some impressions of this meeting.

Madrid, 1988. I browse through my mother's library, as I do so many times. I must be 13 or 14 years old. I come across a copy of a Spanish edition of *Il dominio e il sabotaggio* that my father and mother bought in 1979, when they were still communist militants. I know this because the date is still noted on the first pages of the copy. The title immediately captures my adolescent imagination, but there are no adults around me to guide me through those pages. I don't understand anything. Still, I keep it as a talisman, a kind of secret treasure. Eight years later, the book takes on a new dimension. In the Madrid movement of squatted social centers, I meet Raúl Sánchez Cedillo and Miquel Vidal, who translate and edit small flyers: there are texts from the student movement *La Pantera*, others written in the vast archipelago of squatted social centers, others more theoretical, such as *Virtuosity and Revolution*, by Paolo Virno, or an interview with Toni Negri on the "First

Crisis of Post-Fordism". The flyers have a minimal layout, they are stapled photocopies that pass from hand to hand and feed our study groups. Also in circulation is Toni's book with Félix Guattari, *New Lines of Alliance, New Spaces of Liberty,* which Raúl has just published with Gakoa.

In the heat of that collective adventure in Madrid that is the squatted social center El Laboratorio, in spaces as cold as they are bright, as dusty as they are vivid, we learn Italian while we tinker with computers and electrical circuits, we are initiated in the translation and editing of texts while we build and tear down walls, we travel to Italy with almost no money and we exchange and learn with so many comrades. Later, in the framework of the collection *Cuestiones de Antagonismo*, coordinated by Carlos Prieto, I translated with Raúl Sánchez several of Toni's books.

These are years of personal and collective search in the struggles. Too many comrades older than us are touched by defeat and tell us that "time has stopped", because capital has become one and the same thing with reality. In my bubbling youth, something inside me resists this idea of a definitive halt of History. In Toni's texts and then in his person, in that lively curiosity with which he welcomes us, sits beside us, questions us, tries to think with us, I find another reading of those winter years, of the defeat of the workers' movement and, above all, of the vitality of the struggles of previous decades, a vitality that claims, as I would later read in Benjamin, its power over the present.

From Toni's hand, the long 68 is not something to long for while we inherit the wounds and sadness of defeat, but splinters of time to be summoned to open a revolutionary now-time. This, which I was later able to think more conceptually with many others,

appears as a certainty in the encounter with the *cattivo maestro*, in the form of an irreversible subjective experience.

Buenos Aires, 1998. My first readings of Toni Negri's texts took place in a space "between" the university and militancy, thanks to a university professor named Marcelo Matellanes, who made us read the text "Marx and Labor: the path of disutopia". I remember not understanding anything at the first reading, but there is something that catches my attention: something that I feel I have to decipher, dissect, learn. Fortunately, that restlessness finds a way of continuity in the political organization in which I militate, where we also discuss Toni's texts dedicated to Spinoza. Every Sunday, moreover, we get together to read *Potere Costituente* (*Insurgencies*).

A first face-to-face meeting with Toni Negri took place in Rome, in October 2000. A group of young militants from Argentina - Diego Sztulwark, Natalia Fontana and Mario Santucho- interviewed him. We are organizing a collective dedicated to militant research and to rethinking the legacy of the struggles of the 1970s for the new period of resistance we are living through. Susi Fantino, Argentinean exiled in Italy since the 70's and relative of one of the members of the collective, puts us in touch with Toni.

That conversation had a great impact on us, because of his presence, his interest and his way of listening and elaborating, his speed of response, the analysis he returned to us and his way of taking into account what we transmitted to him. We later included this conversation in the book *Contrapoder. Una introduccion*, which also disseminates some of the hypotheses of Toni's work, particularly from *Empire*, in relation to the debates and readings of the Argentinean crisis of 2001 in real time.

I remember two things in particular from that first meeting. On the one hand, the FIAT monkey hanging in his apartment in Trastevere, where he lived with Judith Revel. On the other, the fact that, after the interview, he had to prepare to go back to prison because he still spends the nights there. We were particularly interested in his notion of counter-power to rethink key terms such as "politics", "revolution" and "militancy".

After that, his visits to Argentina followed one after the other, becoming an important figure in the local political debate. We visited with him occupied factories, universities and political spaces. And, on each occasion, the meeting with him is an opportunity to have conversations, new interviews and celebrate what I would like to call a political friendship.

His way of thinking about changes in living labor in conversation with a country like ours, from the Third World, is an interesting counterpoint in the midst of a period of political effervescence in Argentina and in the Latin American region.

I am learning Italian to do an editorial work with Tinta Limon and the work of Toni and other colleagues.

* * *

Toni was not a feminist, but that does not prevent his thought from being an ally of what we have called the Feminist International, that translocal vector of feminist struggles intertwined in mutual resonance. It must be said that, atypically for a communist man of his generation, and despite his obvious discomfort, he always looked at feminism with curiosity and openness. He understood like few others that it was part of an irreversible subjective mutation, that there was no political lexicon at the height of the times that did not incorporate it as an arrow of

the revolution to come. We know, therefore, that he would welcome with joy what we are going to try now: to use some of his most fertile concepts to think from and through feminist rebellions, in a conjuncture of patriarchal reaction, global war and neoliberal dispossession.

2.- *Kairós* as time opened by struggles

One
of Toni's books that we have both read most fondly is entitled *Kairos, Alma Venus, Multitudo*. Toni wrote it in Rebibbia, during his second stay in prison, after the years of exile in France. Manifestolibri published it in the year 2000, that is, around the same time as our first meetings with him.

In *Kairos, Alma Venus, Multitudo*, Toni conceives *kairós* as that instant in which being peers over the threshold of time and, in a generative event that is an encounter with otherness, the name and the thing are given at the same time, simultaneously, producing a new common being.

Negri's *kairós* is a materialist break with the linear and spatial conception of time, with time as duration. Negri tells us that, from the point of view of *kairós*, there is no before and after, but only the eternal and the coming. The eternal is the power of accumulated life, the irreversible and indestructible temporality, the common name of the being that is. It is not a before, a past time, it is a (simultaneous) consisting in the place of *kairós*. The coming, for its part, is also not an after: it is a horizon of expression of the adequacy between the name and the thing, between the common name and the new thing that constitutes a new common being. It is in the struggle for the free appropriation

of the present, Toni tells us, that life opens itself to the coming and desire perceives the creative power of praxis. Here the body is the "bearer of the *kairós*" because it sustains this relation between the eternal and the coming, in its immeasurability.

From the point of view of the *kairós* as Toni conceives it, it is possible to think a materialist feminism that does not essentialize any feminine identity, that is aware of the extent to which the "subject of feminism" is a subject in becoming. And this because, in the Negrian *kairós* that we make our own, the body (which is never THE abstract body, but *a* singular body), appears, of course, immersed in the materialist field, that is, as matter made of layers of historical sediments; but, and here is the relevant nuance for its revolutionary consequences, this same body, loaded with history, is at the same time open to innovation, to the generative event at the threshold of time, to that point where it can *become-other*, in a mutation that is of the name and of the flesh, of the word and of corporeal matter, simultaneously. This conception of the body through *kairós*, geological as well as meteorological, eternal as well as oriented towards the coming, calls for a praxis that does not take the body as an inert datum, given once and for all, but is, precisely, corporeal production, production of bodies, at the edge of time, in the restless undulation of being. In other words: revolutionary praxis starts from what there is while at the same time producing it in another way; that is, it generates mutations that are ontological and irreversible.

Recent feminist struggles, thanks to their radicality and massiveness, their capillarity and transversality, have shown themselves capable of opening the time of the *kairós*: life open to a time-to-come. This means that they have been able to produce *collective corporealities* in becoming and this is precisely what has made them so powerful and unforeseen. They are not a re-

emergence of women's movements, but rather, intertwined with dissimilar feminist genealogies, they carry a radical desire to change everything, including that very thing called feminism. Feminist praxis today has an irreversible impact on the body that we are.

3.- A thought in / with struggles

We have already said it when talking about our meeting with the *cattivo maestro*: what impresses us most about Toni is the type of intellectual he embodies. We both remember the impact on us of that precise knotting between thought and action that we found in him and in many of our companions of Italian *operaismo*. We refer in particular to the practice of the *inchiesta operaia*, to the study groups in the factories, with students and workers, to the conviction that the struggles were the criterion for verifying any theoretical analysis and to the determination to think not about the struggles but from and for the struggles.

There is here a tension that is ethical, where knowledge is produced by doing and vice versa, in its exposure to the common event, that is to say, to the struggles; to those common notions that emanate from the struggles and that are inscribed in our bodies as a point of ontological irreversibility. From here on, writing, speaking, thinking with others, is not something that has to do with individual authorship but with a machine-making with struggles, with creating assemblages of theoretical-practical doings.

Something of this thinking that becomes a machine or, better said, that becomes a body with the struggles, is present in the feminist movement today, within what we could call a *desire for theory*: that is, a vital, organic need to produce concepts, to find words, to rehearse ways of narrating what is happening. We believe that there

is here a radical difference of the feminist movement with respect to other social movements that often repeat the anti-intellectual gesture as a guarantee of the authenticity of experience. In the feminist movement we can observe a proliferation of slogans, songs, fanzines, reading groups, books and newspapers. There is an enormous amount of debates, meetings, seminars, spaces for self-education, changes in university curricula, etc. All this is part of a theoretical-political desire that implies a specific dispute: to make the cry and the notion not completely separate elements - when we shout in the streets, we are somehow creating and giving life to common notions; when we theoretically elaborate concepts, we nurture a common body.

4.- Autonomy as self-valorization

It is probably in *Il dominio e il sabotaggio* where Toni's notion of autonomy is expressed with the greatest vigor, perhaps because it is written in the heat of the Italian '77, where the autonomous workers' movement reached its maximum levels of radicalism and expansion. The booklet is translated into Spanish in 1979, but it is out of print. Later it was included in a compilation entitled "Los libros de la autonomía obrera" (The books of workers' autonomy), which brings together all the books for which Toni was tried in 1979 on charges of incitement to terrorism. In this text and in Toni's later thought, autonomy is not understood as a space of separation from the State, but as a workers' practice of self-valorization, as an exercise of cutting, within and against, which inaugurates a we, which is produced again and again and, at the same time, produces another world. *This exercise of cutting, within and against, is sabotage*.

As Toni states in *Il dominio e il sabotaggio*, "In the society of capital, the self-valorization of the workers means the possibility of not working hard, of living better, of guaranteeing themselves a wage: the greater the appropriation of the productive forces by the workers, the greater this possibility will be." Here, the advance of the revolutionary process, that is, of the process of self-valorization, is measured by "the increase of socially useful work dedicated to the free reproduction of proletarian society" or, in other words, "by the quality of our life and of our liberation".

This idea of self-valorization that happens within and against, through practices of cutting, of sabotage, is very useful for thinking feminist autonomy: autonomous feminism, from this perspective, is not so much that which sustains an exteriority with respect to the State or an independence with respect to the masculine world. Nor is it an identity or an ideology. Feminist autonomy consists rather in that practice of cutting with respect to patriarchal, masculinist, statist and capitalist logics, which affirms another world, that world in which we are for ourselves: "Estamos para nosotras", as written on the walls of Buenos Aires during the feminist strike of 2019.

If in the workers' movement of the 1960s and 1970s this cutting practice was sabotage, in feminism it is the feminist strike, understood as a disruption that goes beyond the workplace and unfolds in homes, in squares, in beds, in offices, in markets: everywhere. There is here a possibility of updating the debate on class composition from a perspective already present in the 1970s but now revitalized: that of reproductive work and the ways in which, in the South of the World (also in that South that is in the interstices of the North), it overlaps with informalized and precarious forms of work. The feminist strike has an impact there,

interrupting the circuits of violence, exploitation and dispossession, to put at the center the "tasty life" of the many.

5.- The method of tendency

With Toni's trajectory and writings we thus learned a method of analysis: that the composition of labor takes different historical forms that configure the possibility of rejecting the synthesis of capital through the political practice of sabotage and that the miscroscopic diffusion of rebellious behavior coagulates as collective subjectivity modifying what is desired, what is believed possible and even reinventing proletarian bodies. The materiality of that thesis that sustains the autonomy of the labor force, its capacity to autonomize itself from the command of capital, spreads the formula that labor, labor force as creative force of life, comes first and the logic of capital (as Marx said), adjusting the metaphor of the vampire, comes behind.

This does not necessarily lead to triumphalism, it does not claim victory a priori, but recognizes the irreducible preeminence of struggles, even in the most aggressive and expropriating moments of capitalism's becoming financial. At the end of his autobiographical chronicle *Storia di un comunista*, Toni describes the world of his childhood, where patriarchy, capitalist exploitation and the sovereignty of the nation permeated the lives and heads of people, where fascism prevailed, the fatigue dominated every other passion and the harsh discipline forced souls to insensitivity to pain. And then he asks himself: has the world today become like that again? One senses the implicit answer: perhaps yes. It would seem that the conclusion should be, then, nihilism, claudication. However, from the conviction of the pre-eminence of struggles and of the autonomous power of living labor, Toni invites us precisely

to use collective intelligence to pierce any nihilistic temptation, by tracing the subterranean threads of struggles, by reading the collective vectors that they draw, the dynamics of self-valorization. It is a matter, then, of inverting the Gramscian formula, finding the way to activate an optimism of reason against the onslaughts that sweep away our will and to enliven, thus, the desire to change everything. Where Spinoza writes "we do not know what a body can do", Toni adds "we do not know what struggles can do". That is why, again and again, we take up the challenges, we venture, we try everything.

Dear Toni, strangely, in the midst of the pain of this world shaken by war and generalized dispossession, in the midst of the mourning for the farewell of your flesh, evoking what we learned at your side brings a smile to our faces. Truly, to think with you is to think against fear and despair, it is, immediately, to activate commitment and imagination.

---

[1] The audios of the complete series can be heard in English on the transversal.at web page: https://transversal.at/blog/irrepressible-lightness-and-joy-of-being-communist.