06 2007

Living in Transition

Toward a Heterolingual Theory of the Multitude

Sandro Mezzadra

1. Capital as Translation

"It is impossible to undo the consequences of the history of imperialism no matter how desperately one wishes that imperialism had never been effectuated." Let's start from this quite generic statement by Naoki Sakai (1997, 18) in order to map the particular conditions under which his theory of translation can provide us useful tools in an attempt to establish a new ground for a critical theory of politics. I will look to these conditions first of all from the point of view of the meaning of the global dimension that is taking shape under our eyes – in a process of *transition* that doesn't seem to be close to its end. Far from being characterized by homogeneity, the global dimension is deeply heterogeneous as far as both its spatial and its temporal constitution is concerned. Problems of *articulation* of the multiplicity of spaces and times that make up the global dimension lie at the very core of the processes through which power relations are redefined in the present and global capital itself works.

In recent debates the concept of articulation has been widely used especially due to the interpretation of the concept proposed by

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe on the basis of their particular reading of Antonio Gramsci. According to Laclau and Mouffe (2001^2, 113), "the practice of articulation [...] consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity". Despite the critical remarks on this theory made by Stuart Hall (1986), Laclau and Mouffe's definition of articulation is quite consistent with his own use of the concept. Hall points to the emergence of a new historical force, or, more accurately, the emergence of a new series of political and social subjects through a "non-necessary connection" between this historical force and new ideological constellations. Through these influential theoretical positions, the concept of articulation has become a keyword in several proposals to rethink the politics of social movements: proposals that are often developed in the field of identity politics.

From my point of view the basic problem with this use of the concept lies in the fact that it doesn't seem to take into account the fact that articulation is a strategic moment in the notion of capital itself. While this is true at the very level of the *logical* notion of capital – we only need to remember the classical problem of the mediation of single fractions of capital in the unity of what Marx termed *Kapital im allgemeinen* ("capital in general") – the question of articulation becomes even more crucial in the contemporary global age. To articulate radically heterogeneous geographic, political, legal, social, and cultural scales in the global dimension of current accumulation circuits is one of the most important tasks that confronts contemporary capitalism. And also from the point of view of capital articulation "consists in the construction of nodal points" that crisscross the heterogeneity of

the global dimension. But the meaning of these capitalist nodal points (just to give a few examples: global stock exchange markets, rating and investors service companies such as Moody's, transnational legal firms, international and state agencies engaged in promoting neo-liberal globalization, and so on) is far from being "partially fixed". It is rather absolutely fixed and it radically limits what Laclau and Mouffe call the "openness of the social". Nonetheless, articulation, as Stuart Hall (1986) puts it, works as a language. To put it more precisely: it functions in the same way as a language functions when it is confronted with a plurality of other languages that have to be reduced to its code.

Articulation means therefore *translation*, and one of the key points I'll make in this essay is that translation is one of the fundamental modes of operation of global capital. *Capital as translation* is building up its own global dimension: the *language of value* (exchange value in its pure logical form) is the semantic structure, and above all the *grammar*, of this dimension, reproducing itself through an intensified version of what Naoki Sakai would call "homolingual address" (Sakai 1997, Introduction). It can be added that this address is at the same time an *interpellation*, to put it with Louis Althusser: the multiplicity of languages (that is, of forms of life, of social relations, of "cultures") that capital encounters in the deployment and codification of its heterogeneous "chains of value" (Spivak 1999, 99-111) are "addressed" according to the imperative of making themselves conform to the language of value.

A high degree of hybridism, as well as a multiplicity of differences, can be tolerated and even promoted by capital, as Hardt and Negri (2000, 137-146) have suggested: but its semantic structure remains "homolingual" insofar as the language of value dominates it. Nonetheless, also looking at this structure from the point of view suggested by the concept of translation, it remains deeply

antagonistic. Translation itself can be a useful analytical tool in order to develop an analysis of the antagonisms that shape global capitalism. These antagonisms must be located at the very level of what we can call, along with the interpretation of Marx proposed by Jason Read, *production of subjectivity* (Read 2003, 153). Capital as translation addresses (interpellates) its subjects, at a very abstract level, prescribing forms of subjectivity that can be translated into the language of value.

Production of value, in the global age, is becoming more and more identified with this kind of translation. As Christian Marazzi has effectively shown, in contemporary capitalist economy *language* and *communication* "structurally and at the same time shape both the production of goods and services and the financial sphere" (Marazzi 2002, 10). The mediation (the articulation) between the different levels of production of value in the unity of capital can itself be conceived of as a linguistic mediation, basically consisting of a kind of translation. From this point of view, it seems particularly important to remember that, as Naoki Sakai and Jon Solomon put it, "translation names primarily a *social* relationship whose forms permeates linguistic activity as a whole, rather than simply comprising a secondary or exceptional situation" (Sakai – Solomon 2006, 9).

The very concept of *exploitation* has to be redefined and deepened under these conditions. And I think that such a reassessment of the concept of exploitation is one of the basic tasks we are confronted with nowadays. Cultural studies and postcolonial studies, as it has been clearly stated by Stuart Hall (1992), have found much easier to focus on *power* than on *exploitation*. And they have tended therefore to articulate their political stance in terms of a critique of power relations rather than in terms of a critique of exploitation, which would imply a mapping of its geography as well

as of its "intensive" character. Although the Foucauldian emphasis on the productive nature of power has played a crucial role in cultural and postcolonial studies, this unilateral emphasis on power has corresponded to the reproduction of a kind of logical primacy (and of a kind of externality) of power with respect to the movements and practices of subjects.

Going back to the point made by Jason Read, we must recall that "at the foundations of the capitalist mode of production is the production of subjectivity in both senses of the genitive: the constitution of subjectivity, of a particular subjective comportment, and in the turn the productive power of subjectivity, its capacity to produce wealth" (Read 2003, 153). To put it in a rather simplistic way, we can say that while the concept of power accounts for the ways in which the "constitution of subjectivity" is produced, the concept of exploitation points to the level of battles and clashes that shape the reduction of the subjective "capacity of producing wealth" to the norm of *abstract labor*, the condition of its translation into the language of value. These clashes and these battles reproduce themselves not only in the production of "material" wealth, but also in the production of "immaterial" goods such as culture, linguistic and symbolic structures, knowledge and imaginaries. They crisscross, as for instance Brett Neilson (2004) has very effectively pointed out, the very production of the "real abstractions" that make the "homolingual address" and the regime of translation of capital possible.

We must look at exploitation from the point of view of the *living labor* that is invested and "captured" by capital through multiple modalities, all converging toward the production of its global dimension. The composition of contemporary living labor is crisscrossed by this multiplicity of the modalities of its "capture" by capital. While capital articulates its global dimension through

translation into the language of value, we need to think of the constitution of a collective subject capable of radical transformation starting from the antagonisms and conflicts that shape each moment of "capture". Needless to say, no one of these moments is individual, since they all invest networks of social cooperation that themselves produce forms of subjectivity. The attempt will be made in the last section of this essay to apply the concept of "heterolingual address" proposed by Naoki Sakai to the problems of the constitution of a new political subject as a process through which the politics of liberation has to be rethought of today.

But first of all we need to make sense of the quotation from which we started. Why is the history of imperialism so important in order to understand our present situation? In the next section I'll try to show how capital as translation reproduces – under postcolonial conditions – one of the main characteristics of the modern Western colonial project.

2. Capital and the West

Since its very inception, the history of capital is a world history. As Marx stated in the *Grundrisse*, "the tendency to create the world market is immediately given with the concept of capital. Every limit (*Grenze*) appears as an obstacle to be overcome" (Marx 1857-1858, 311). The history of capital is not to be understood unless we conceive of it as the making of this unprecedented geographic scale (Guha 2002, 35, 43). Time and space of capital are structurally interwoven in the project of modernity. As Walter Mignolo and Anibal Quijano have stressed from a Latin American perspective, we need an account of this structural link between time and space within the history of capital capable of displacing the very imaginary produced by capital as a world system in the

process of its development. The "split between the two distinct forms of modernity – the imperial modernity and the colonial modernity – is itself the very definition of something like Modernity in general in the constitution of the hierarchical, non-democratic world of Capital". Once again we are confronted with a problem of *articulation*. The history of capital is not to be separated from the fact that both forms of modernity "are bound to a common index, the normative value of the West" (Sakai – Solomon 2006, 21). This common index articulates both at the material and at the epistemic level the history of capital as a world history.

While we must acknowledge the effectiveness of this articulation, we also need to recall that it operated through violence and domination, and that resistance met violence and domination since the beginning of modern history. The world history of capital is itself split by a kind of double movement, and we must reflect this double movement in any attempt to reconstruct it. On the one hand we have a process of expansion of capital that produces its particular geography, giving way to specific center – periphery relations; on the other hand we have processes of resistance that displace this very geography. On the one hand we have an imaginary constructed around the centrality of Europe and the West; on the other hand we have the "conflictive imaginary that emerges with and from the colonial difference" (Mignolo 2001, 57). This split inscribes itself within the very concept of the West, and must be highlighted when looking at the different series of oppositions that the West itself has produced in order to make sense of the colonial encounters that constitute modern history as world history: Asia and the West, the West and the rest, etc.

It is from this point of view that, as Naoki Sakai has written, modernity "cannot be considered unless in reference to

translation" (Sakai 2000a, 797). The unity of modern historical time (echoing in its "homogeneous and empty" structure what Marx has termed the "spectral objectivity" of capital) had always to be produced through a kind of violent synchronization of a multiplicity of heterogeneous times. And this violent synchronization is itself an act of translation. Let me point to the fact that this problem is particularly acute in the moment of *transition* to capitalism, in that process of "primitive accumulation" in which the conditions of capitalism have to be established. As Dipesh Chakrabarty writes "the problem of capitalist modernity cannot any longer be seen simply as a sociological transition [...] but as a problem of translation, as well" (Chakrabarty 2000, 17). I would like to add that transition – as well as primitive accumulation (Perelman 2000; De Angelis 2007, 136-141) – is not only a historical category: it is at the same time a *logical* category that lies at the very core of the concept of capital.

We can put it this way: transition is equivalent to the establishment of the possibility of translation, through the regime of "homolingual address" that makes capital possible. Let me add that if we look at the concept of transition from this point of view, it is pretty clear that it is precisely transition in colonial contexts that most effectively reveals the main problem that lies at the very heart of transition to capitalism. Marx attempted to grasp this problem through the concept of "Asiatic mode of production", which precisely for this reason still deserves careful consideration despite all its well known shortcomings and pitfalls (Spivak 1999, 97): the particular kind of heterogeneity encountered by capitalism in non-European contexts made the general difficulty of establishing the conditions of its translation into the language of value even more acute than it was in Western Europe (where nonetheless, as we know from Marx's analysis of the "so called

primitive accumulation", it required a dramatic employment of violence). What we need to add is that the problem of transition reemerges in each historical moment when the conditions of translation have to be established anew. My point is precisely that global capitalism is characterized by the fact that capital as translation is compelled to confront the problem of the establishment of the conditions of possibility of translation at the very level of its everyday operation. Primitive accumulation and transition (what Marx called the "prehistory of capital") are the ghosts that haunt capital at the highest level of its historical development.

Naoki Sakai has brilliantly pointed out how the concept of modernity "can never be understood without reference to [the] pairing of the pre-modern and the modern". And he has stressed the fact that this pairing is structurally linked to a geopolitical understanding of the West as the site of modernity and the non-West as the site of pre-modernity. Narratives of modernization have articulated the relation between the West and the non-West, taking the shape of different theories of the "stages" of historical development. The concept of the West itself historically emerged "in the midst of interaction with the Other", establishing itself as the common ground on which historical and cultural "differences" had to be made commensurable. Modern universalism is indeed unthinkable outside of this continuous translation: as Sakai writes, "the West is particular in itself, but it also constitutes the universal point of reference in relation to which others recognize themselves as particularities. In this regard, the West thinks itself to be ubiquitous" (Sakai 1997, 154-155). The colonial imprint of modern universalism lies precisely in this movement of translation, and there is a structural affinity between modern universalism and capital from this point of view.

It is important to stress, along with the development of postcolonial criticism, that this movement of translation has never been "smooth", since it has been interrupted, challenged and continuously hybridized by the multifarious intervention of non-Western subjects. But it is equally necessary to keep in mind the effectiveness of the Western "homolingual address" in its attempt to shape at the same time a topography of knowledge and a geopolitics of power. Naoki Sakai's emphasis on "demands for symmetry and equality", on the "imitative relation to 'the West'" that has shaped through a logic of "cofiguration" the creation of the history of modern Japanese thought (Sakai 1997, 48, 68; see also Sakai 2000b) is a good exemplification of this effectiveness. At the same time, his criticism of the rhetoric of "Asian values", in which he sees "a simple reversal of Eurocentric culturalism" (Sakai 2000a, 800), reminds us that "the West" still holds its influence in the global present.

Nonetheless, it is worth considering the hypothesis that our time is characterized by the long crisis of the structures of power that historically articulated and channeled the Western "homolingual address" within an established regime of translation. The instability of global capital finds here one of its most important roots: to put it once again in a very abstract way, each act of capitalist translation is at least potentially confronted with the problem of establishing the conditions that make translation itself possible. Anti-colonial movements and struggles successfully disrupted the "metaborder" that distinguished the metropolitan from the colonial space and time, compelling capital and the West itself to come to terms with a much more complex, with a *postcolonial* geography of power (Mezzadra – Rahola 2006). It is a geography crisscrossed by lines of conflict and relations of power, by a multiplicity of borders to which huge divides in the distribution of wealth correspond. But

its increasing complexity makes more and more difficult to make sense of it using fixed categories of centre and periphery, North and South. Modernity is not anymore synonymous with the West, and the defeat of the US unilateralism in Iraq has something to say about the crisis of old-style imperialism. Global capital itself is not necessarily Western in its composition. But what remains strong, and still needs to be provincialized and disrupted, is surely the West (not only Europe) as an "imaginary figure" (Chakrabarty 2000, 4) that keeps on addressing and interpellating the subjects that inhabit the global present.

My point is that this enduring influence of the West as an "imaginary figure" is part and parcel of the enduring dominance of capital on a world scale. It is precisely the deep affinity between the "homolingual address" of the West and the regime of translation through which capital operates that ensures the reproduction of that "imaginary figure" well beyond the rhetoric of the "clash of civilizations" and the "war on terrorism". I totally agree with Naoki Sakai and Jon Solomon that under these conditions "the critique of Eurocentrism becomes a good rhetoric for the elite, whose subjectivity is partly formed in their systemic competition with "the West" through the structural (class) accumulation of value by the labor of their social inferiors" (Sakai – Solomon 2006, 21). This is not the path we have to follow. In a way we have to accept the full deployment of the logic of capital on a world scale, we have even to accept – to put it provocatively – the becoming-world of the West under the dominance of capital, we have to carefully map the new antagonisms that crisscross this process. And we have to search for a different regime of translation, capable of interrupting and disrupting the "homolingual address" of capital and opening up new spaces of freedom and equality. Spaces in which a new world can be invented: beyond the West and beyond the Rest.

3. Space and Time of Global Capitalism

Time and space have been indeed crucial to the discussion of globalization. The discourse of "time and space compression", first articulated by David Harvey (1989), has become a kind of cliché in current debates. I think we must go beyond this cliché, and try to investigate much deeper transformations in the *articulation* of space and time, that seem to announce a kind of political, economic, social, and cultural experience significantly different from the "chronotope", to put it with Michail Bakhtin, that has been characteristic of modernity. To put it simply: the rhetoric of "time and space compression" seems to take for granted the *unity* of time and space, and therefore produces an image of the contemporary global dimension of experience that is paradoxically a kind of mirror of the ways in which time and space are imagined by capital: that is, as "smooth", "homogeneous and void" coordinates of accumulation processes. And it does not address the crucial problem of the *production* of these coordinates.

Something similar can be said also about the use of the image of "flows" in order to describe the landscape of the global age: as Anna Tsing has effectively pointed out, this image too often leads us to ignore "the recarving of channels and the remapping of the possibilities of geography" that make these flows possible (Tsing 2000, 327; see also Ferguson 2006, 47) while limiting, stopping and "taming" other flows (most notably movements of migration). While the image of flows tends to limit the analysis of the global condition to the level of circulation, what is urgently needed is once again a criticism of the "hidden relations of production" that lie beneath the "surface" of circulation, to use the metaphor suggested by Marx: however we must be aware of the fact that these relations of production have not to do merely with traditional

labor relations, but refer more generally to "the making of the objects and subjects who circulate, the channels of circulation, and the landscape elements that enclose and frame those channels" (Tsing 2000, 337).

Let's look at the transformations of space from a political point of view. Sovereignty and law have been in modern times the two basic criteria of definition of a political space (Galli 2001): a territory was defined in its unity as the geographical sphere of validity of a particular State sovereignty and of a particular (national) legal system. Nowadays, while a global law is emerging as "centered on a multiplicity of global but partial regimes that address the needs of specialized sectors", sovereignty "remains a systemic property but its institutional insertion and its capacity to legitimate and absorb all legitimating power, to be the source of the law, have become unstable" (Sassen 2006, 242, 415). The image of a "mixed constitution" of Empire proposed by Hardt and Negri (2000, chapter 3.5) is particularly effective in order to grasp the situation emerging from these complex transformations. But we must always remember that it makes sense to use the notion of "mixed constitution", as well the notion itself of Empire, only if we stress its character as a tendency and not as an already established and fixed model. This means to take seriously into consideration, as a defining element of the concept itself and not as occasional "perturbations", the possibility of conflicts and clashes on each layer of the multilevel articulation of the "mixed constitution". And at the same time it should imply the necessity of analyzing the production of the space corresponding to the "mixed constitution" as an ongoing and dynamic process.

From this point of view I find the notion of lateral spaces, or "latitudes", particularly thought provoking. This notion has been proposed by Aihwa Ong within a critical discussion of Hardt and

Negri's *Empire*. While in my opinion she often tends to oversimplify Hardt and Negri's argument, I do think that her notion of "latitudes" can be very useful in order to further develop an analysis of the transformations that are reshaping political and economic geography under the sign of global capital. Put very shortly, Ong points to the fact that the stretching of market powers does not correspond to a homogenization of labor control and worker politics. "Striated spaces of production that combine different kinds of labor regimes" are emerging, and contrary to the idea of a linear transition from a disciplinary to regulatory modes of control "contemporary transnational production networks are underpinned by carceral modes of labor discipline" (Ong 2006, 121, 124).

While the unity of national spaces in East and Southeast Asia is disrupted by "neoliberalism as exception" and by "zoning technologies" that open up the spaces in which "market-driven calculations are being introduced in the management of populations" (Ong 2006, 3), lateral spaces and enclaves are reproducing on a transnational scale conditions of labor segregation that tend to be ethnicized. This notion of "latitudes", which would deserve comparison with the analysis of "resource-extraction enclaves" in Africa recently provided by James Ferguson (2006, 13-14, 34-38, 194-210), helps us to deepen our knowledge of the heterogeneity of the global space of capitalism. But it also gives us a hint as to the complex structure of global time. Investigating the architecture of electronics-production systems run by Asian managers, which "displays a striking interpenetration of high-tech systems with migrant or ethnicized techniques of labor incarceration", she observes that "the "geographical stretching of network economies is often accompanied by a temporal stretching,

a regression to "older" forms of labor disciplining epitomized by the high-tech sweatshop" (Ong 2006, 125).

It is a problem we can frame in the terms suggested by the Marxian distinction between "formal" and "real subsumption of labor under capital" (along with the one between "absolute" and "relative" surplus value). At stake in that distinction is precisely a question of different historical times: not in the sense, as it is often misinterpreted, that they merely define two different "stages" in the development of the capitalist mode of production, but rather in the sense that they point to two different relations of capital with time. While real subsumption refers to a situation in which capital itself directly organizes the mode of labor and cooperation, producing a kind of synchronicity between the time of capitalist accumulation and the time of production, formal subsumption points to a different situation: to a situation in which capital encounters "*already* existing" (Marx uses the verb *vorfinden*) forms of labor organization and discipline (Marx 1857-1858, 405, emphasis added), limiting itself to incorporate (and to exploit) them in the process of its development. Formal subsumption points therefore to a situation in which a peculiar temporal disjuncture inscribes itself in the structure of capital.

Far from being a relic of the past, formal subsumption reproduces itself and crisscrosses real subsumption in the age of global capital. Moreover, as the example of electronics-production systems proposed by Ong shows, we cannot take the distinction between formal and real subsumption as a key to map the geography of global capitalism, as though it were possible to think of the global "North" as the space of real subsumption and of the global "South" as the space of formal subsumption. Once again the problem we are confronted with is to make sense of the *articulation* between the

two different forms of subsumption, of their *translation* into the unitary language of value.

More generally, it is the radical heterogeneity of global space and time that makes articulation and translation strategic moments in the concept itself of global capital, interpreting this concept as the hallmark of the capitalist determination of the world we live in. I would suggest that a basic logical operator of articulation and translation can be seen in the *border*. In several works Étienne Balibar has argued that far from being marginal the border tends nowadays to inscribe itself at the very center of our political, social, and cultural experience. Europe itself is becoming in his opinion a "borderland" (Balibar 2005; Balibar – Mezzadra 2006). But we need to stress the fact that borders themselves are sites of deep transformations that are reshaping the very institution of border. To sum up a huge literature on the point using the recent important work of an Italian scholar (Rigo 2007), borders are becoming mobile without ceasing to produce fixed mechanisms of closure, they are becoming "deterritorialized" without ceasing to invest particular places.

The European experience is in fact particularly interesting from this point of view. Looking at the so called enlargement process and at the new migration regime in the making, the mobility of borders can be traced both in its effect as strategic device that allows the articulation of European space with "neighboring" spaces (and the translation of European law into other legal orders), and as a biopolitical technology (Walters 2002) that inscribes within European citizenship "lateral spaces" around which labor markets can be reorganized. Particularly investigating the position of migrants within European citizenship and labor markets, Enrica Rigo has effectively argued that new hierarchies are emerging at the very level of legal regulation, disrupting the traditional formal

homogeneity of modern citizenship. And while these hierarchies are penetrating in the structure of European labor markets, tracing peculiar "borders of production" (Rigo 2007, 191-197), "temporal borders" are emerging as a result of the many "waiting rooms" designed for migrants both on their way to Europe and inside Europe, "legally defining the condition of migrants according to a rule of a temporary character which is bound to permanently reproduce itself" (Rigo 2007, 214).

I think it is worth linking this notion of "temporal borders" with the problems of articulation and translation between "formal" and "real subsumption of labor under capital" addressed above and to think of "temporal borders" as key devices in producing junctures among different kinds of labor regimes and disciplines that seem indeed to belong to different historical times. If we tackle the notion of latitudes again from this point of view, we can make the point that latitudes are made up and "fenced" by a complex set of borders and boundaries: "geopolitical" borders that articulate their "transnational" character, legal borders that curtail migrants' mobility and rights, cultural and social boundaries produced by processes of ethnicization, borders of production, temporal borders that separate different historical times and make their translation into the unitary language of value possible. While these borders and boundaries are key to what Achille Mbembe (2000, 260) has called "the domestication of world time" from the point of view of capital, we must think of them as constantly *in the making*, since they are confronted with a set of subjective practices, behaviors, and imaginaries that challenge them. It is this challenge that makes borders and boundaries social relations, crisscrossed by the multifarious tensions between "border reinforcing" and "border crossing" (Vila 2000): movements and struggles that develop around them, particularly involving migrants and issues of

mobility, are key to the possibility of imagining and producing different modalities of "domestication of world time", different kinds of articulation and translation capable of disrupting capital's domination (Mezzadra 2006).

4. Living Labor in Transition

Movements of migration and practices of mobility are key to the transformations of the composition of contemporary living labor. I employ the concept of composition along the lines that have been developed since the 1960s by Italian "autonomist Marxism" (Wright 2002). But I'm speaking of living labor particularly taking into account the reflections on this Marxian concept proposed by Dipesh Chakrabarty in a seminal chapter of *Provincializing Europe*. Chakrabarty looks in a very original way at the classical problem of the relation between "abstract" and "concrete" labor, in a way substituting this latter concept with the one of "living labor" that is particularly used by Marx in the *Grundrisse*. The critical point, Chakrabarty writes, "is that the labor that is abstracted in the capitalist's search for a common measure of human activity is *living*" (Chakrabarty 2000, 60). The very process of abstracting living labor from the multiplicity of differences that make up "life" is conceptualized by Chakrabarty as a process of *translation* (Chakrabarty 2000, 71): a process of translation that is at the same time a deeply antagonistic social relation.

Discipline, violence, and "despotism" are the key modalities through which capital addresses living labor in its attempt to translate it into the code of abstract labor. To be more precise: they are the key modalities that crisscross capital's relation with living labor especially in processes of *transition*, when the norm of abstract labor – that is, the "key to the hermeneutic grid through

which capital requires us to read the world" (Chakrabarty 2000, 55) – has to be established in front of the radical heterogeneity of "life". One of the main problems implied by transition to capitalism is the political and legal constitution of the labor market. In order to make labor market possible, a particular commodity has to be produced, that is "labor power", a concept fully developed by Marx only in *Capital*. I think we have to take this concept into account in order to further develop Chakrabarty's analysis of the relation between abstract and living labor. The concept itself of labor power, as it has been stressed by Paolo Virno (1999, 121-130), directly addresses life anyway, since it is defined by Marx as "the sum of all physical and intellectual attitudes contained by a living body" (Marx 1867, 181). What makes it particularly important in the context of our present discussion is that it points to the necessary process of *separation* (of abstraction) of these "attitudes" from their "container" (the "living body") that logically precedes the capitalist relation of production.

This process of separation *is* the production of labor power as a commodity – that is, the production of particular kinds of subjects who are *compelled* to sell their labor power in order to reproduce themselves. This was the main problem at stake in the scene of the "so called primitive accumulation". From a series of recent historical works (see for instance Moulier Boutang 1998; Steinfeld 1991 and 2001) we know that the solution to this problem could not lie, contrary to many statements by Marx himself, in the smooth establishment of "free" wage labor as the "normal" modality of subsumption of labor under capital. Other modalities of "capture" of labor were (and are) rather structurally necessary in order to make labor power available as a commodity. A huge deal of violence (a series of "nonpecuniary" pressures to compel work, ranging from slavery to indenture to peculiar administrative

statuses for migrant workers) had and has to be employed to ensure the continuity of capitalist accumulation – and the continuity of what Marx called the "encounter" between capital and labor power (Marx 1867, 181, 742; Althusser 1982, 584-587). This is the main reason why primitive accumulation cannot be considered to be only a historical moment: it is rather to be regarded as a kind of reservoir of potential "exceptions" (to what Marx called the "silent compulsion of economic relations" [Marx 1867, 765]) that can be activated at any "stage" of capitalist development when the ordinary functioning of labor market appears to be interrupted.

I think it is worth considering the contemporary global situation from this point of view. The radical heterogeneity of labor regimes not only at the "global" but also at each "local" level, mobile and flexible labor relations, the problem itself of articulating what Ong calls lateral spaces of production with the global circuits of accumulation – all these continuously confront capital with the possibility of the refusal by living labor to subordinate itself to the norm of abstract labor. And let me add that this problem is crucial also in order to establish the "stability" that is needed in order to ensure the functioning of financial global markets: also the life of the inhabitants of the "planet of slums" so effectively described by Mike Davis (2006) is subject to the norm of abstract labor, independently of the fact that their labor power can remain outside of the labor market. It is precisely the production of the conditions of this subordination of living labor to abstract labor that constitutes one of the main problems of transition, not only at the point of production but also more generally as a societal problem.

This is the reason why we must take seriously the idea of *living labor in transition*. The very fact that the subordination to the norm of abstract labor cannot be taken for granted and must be reconstructed by capital along the entire deployment of its

heterogeneous chains of value makes the traditional image of the working class, as a collective subject disciplined (and made political) by capital itself through its organization of labor cooperation, obsolete. This is not a kind of sociological statement, and it has nothing to do with the fact that factory workers continue to exist in huge masses. The crucial point rather consists in the fact that the constitution and composition of living labor are nowadays *open processes* both from the point of view of capital and from the point of view of the subjectivities that make up living labor itself. Since capital is compelled to impose abstract labor as a common measure of human activity, it needs a unitary figure of labor in general: but the radical heterogeneity of the modalities of contemporary "capture" of labor makes this capitalist representation of the unity of labor problematic, an *ongoing process of translation* much more than a stable presupposition of development – a process of translation moving back and forth from production to circulation to finance itself, where, as stated above, the appearance of the exchange of capital with capital cannot get rid of the necessary continuous reproduction on a global scale of social relations shaped by the norm of abstract labor. On the other hand, from the point of view of what Jason Read calls "the productive power of subjectivity", the heterogeneity of labor does not only correspond to a multiplicity of hierarchies that crisscross its composition. It also expresses the diversity of human faculties, of practices of cooperation often developing outside the direct command of capital, of "forms of life" that make up that productive power.

5. Toward a Heterolingual Theory of the Multitude

In this diversity we must be able to acknowledge the imprint of a complex history of struggles and movements of labor that blew up

the traditional notion of working class and its political representations. Among other things, it is in order to grasp this complex "genealogy" of contemporary living labor that the concept of *multitude* has been introduced in recent years within the tradition of Italian autonomist Marxism (Hardt and Negri 2000 and 2004; Virno 2004). There are at least two current misunderstandings of this concept that must be avoided. Firstly, the concept of multitude doesn't aim at opposing labor as multiplicity against capital as One. It rather attempts to focus on the particular kind of articulation between unity and multiplicity that lives at the heart of capital and tries to imagine a different kind of articulation between the two elements, starting from the construction of a new common ground (of a new One) capable of sustaining a different regime of cooperation and production. Secondly, although the concept of multitude is critical of the traditional representations of the working class, it is not a kind of mystical or merely aesthetic icon. It is – and maybe this aspect has not been stressed enough in the debate – a *concept of class*. This means that it is a determined concept, constructed around the manifold forms of exploitation that characterize contemporary capitalism and retaining the *partial* nature of the notion of class.

The concept of multitude tries to acknowledge the fact that the heterogeneity of labor corresponds to a multiplicity of struggles, practices of resistance and refusal that cannot be linearly unified and represented by traditional political organizations as parties and unions. The problem of the communicability and translatability of these necessarily partial struggles and practices becomes therefore the central problem of a political theory of the multitude. To put it rather schematically, while capital posits its element of unity (the language of value) as a presupposition of its "homolingual address", to imagine a process of political subjectivation of the multitude

means to think of the production of the *common* as a work in progress, as the result – in terms of shared institutions, shared resources, a shared space – of a movement capable of constantly reinventing what Étienne Balibar (1992) has defined as *égaliberté*, the indissoluble unity of freedom and equality.

It is not an utopian project: while it points to the necessity of inventing new institutions, new "organized networks" (Rossiter 2006), for instance, it gives us a general criterion that also allows us to value the action of traditional institutions, which can be made internal to the political subjectivation of the multitude insofar as they are able to open up and consolidate elements of commonality: "nodal points which partially fix meaning", to go back to Lacalu and Mouffe, and that can become tactical junctures of articulation of the multitude. We are very close to the horizon of "radical democracy" indeed; but we interpret (and therefore keep alive) within this horizon the fundamental legacy of the communist critique of democracy insofar as we put at the center of our theoretical endeavor the material power of the multitude, as a partial subject, to *produce* the common. At the same time, while especially the strategic character of migration and practices of mobility in the composition of living labor leads us to underscore the global scope of the contemporary composition of living labor, the concept of the multitude does not end up in abstract theorizations of a new global democracy. It rather points to the possibility of "rooting" radical political projects in particular spaces, from the local to the continental level, developing in a creative way the "possibilities of geography" referred to by Anna Tsing and making concrete a new cosmopolitanism.

Freedom and equality become themselves along these lines "place holders" (Chakrabarty 2000, 70), sites of communication and translation where their very content is open to a constant

transformation. While this crucial position of freedom and equality distinguishes the project of the multitude from a simple criticism of "Eurocentrism", these two concepts themselves need to be conceived of as "living in transition" and *therefore in translation*. Freedom and equality are not defined as transcendental conditions of politics, they do not preexist as "universals", to put it with Judith Butler, to "particular" social movements: the possibility itself of conflicting notions of universality must be taken into account, requiring a practice of translation that is quite different from the one implied by the traditional concept of hegemony (Butler 2000, 162-169). Freedom and equality are rather to be conceived of as Derridian *traces*, as the potential negation of domination and exploitation that is bound to be made actual by movements and struggles of subjective constitution that challenge them and open up a new field of the politically possible. The concept of the multitude tries to grasp the complexity of these movements and struggles of subjective constitution against domination and exploitation, rooting their convergence in practices of social cooperation capable of producing a new *common*.

Since the common does not preexist these movements and struggles, these practices of social cooperation, the multitude is a "non aggregate community of foreigners": that is, as Naoki Sakai has written, "a community where we relate ourselves through the attitude of the heterolingual address" (Sakai 1997, 9). Far from preexisting it, also the language of a "non aggregate community of foreigners" – its *common* – only emerges from a communication that takes the foreignness of both the addresser and the addressee as its point of departure independently of their "native language". Translation is the language of a *subject in transit*. Not abiding "by the normalcy of reciprocal and transparent communication", but instead assuming "that every utterance can fail to communicate

because heterogeneity is inherent in any medium, linguistic or otherwise", the heterolingual address clearly implies that "translation must be endless". It therefore challenges the borders that, through "national, ethnic, or linguistic affiliation" (Sakai 1997, 8), define commensurable communities as conditions of the "homolingual address" and its transparent ideal of translation. It disrupts the very idea of community we have inherited from modern history and thought, that continues to be a strategic site "of primitive accumulation for the construction of majoritarian subjects of domination", of "authoritative bodies" and of "forms of relation regularized according to the apparently natural boundaries of "the individual" and its corollary, the collective" (Sakai – Solomon 2006, 20-21).

Far from being limited to the anyway strategic task of imagining new forms of transnational practice of theory in cultural and postcolonial studies, this disruption of very idea of community that lies behind the homolingual regime of translation helps us to question any simple notion of the "We" we refer to in our political practices. But at the same time it leads to intensify the search for a new ground of commonality capable of making social life richer, more equal and free. As Meaghan Morris writes, Naoki Sakai's approach "asks what actually happens in an effort of translation, rather than beginning with a presupposed ideal or an already accepted story of what a world without need of translation – without the "dust" created by linguistic difference and textual materiality; without folds of incommensurability and the grit of incomprehension, in short, a world without language – would or should be like" (Morris 1997, xiii-xiv). We can answer the question in a rather simple way: what happens in an effort of "heterolingual" translation is precisely that a new commonality is produced precisely while difference is produced out of incommensurability.

This seems to me a good way to describe the kind of common we have in mind talking about the multifarious social struggles that make up the multitude.

Bibliographical references

Althusser, L. 1982, "La courant souterrain du matérialisme de la rencontre", in Id., *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, Tome I, Paris, STOCK/IMEC, 1994, 553-591.

Balibar, É. – Mezzadra, S. 2006, "Citizenship, War, Class. A Dialogue moderated by I. Saint-Saëns and Manuela Bojadzjiev", in *New Formations*, 58, 10-30.

Balibar, É. 1992, *Les frontiers de la démocratie*, Paris, La Découverte.

Balibar, É. 2005, *Europe, Constitution, Frontière*, Bègles, Éditions du Passant.

Butler, J. 2000, "Competing Universalities", in J. Butler, E. Laclau, and S. Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality. Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, London, Verso, 136-181.

Chakrabarty, D. 2000, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton – Oxford, Princeton University Press.

Davis, M. 2006, *Planet of Slums*, London, Verso.

De Angelis, M. 2007, *The Beginning of History. Value Struggles and Global Capital*, London, Pluto Press.

Ferguson, J. 2006, *Global Shadows. Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*, Duhram – London, Duke University Press.

Galli, C. 2001, *Spazi politici. L'età moderna e l'età globale*, Bologna, Il Mulino.

Guha, R. 2002, *History at the Limit of World-History*, New York, Columbia University Press.

Hall, S. 1986, "On Postmodernism and Articulation. An Interview", in *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 10, 45-60.

Hall, S. 1992, "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies", in L. Grossberg – P.A. Treichler (eds), *Cultural Studies*, New York – London, Sage, 277-286.

Hardt, M. – Negri, A. 2000, *Empire*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.

Hardt, M. – Negri, A. 2004, *Multitude. War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Penguin.

Harvey, D. 1989, *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Oxford – Cambridge, Mass., Blackwell.

Laclau, E. – Mouffe, Ch. 2001[2], *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London – New York, Verso.

Marazzi, Ch. 2002, *Capitale & linguaggio. Dalla new economy all'economia di guerra*, Roma, DeriveApprodi.

Marx, K. 1857-1858, *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Frankfurt a.M, Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1967.

Marx, K. 1867, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, 1. Band, Berlin, Dietz Verlag, 1988 (Marx-Engels, *Werke*, Bd. 23).

Mbembe, A. 2000, "At the Edge of the World. Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa", in *Public Culture*, 12 (1), 259-284.

Mezzadra, S. – Rahola, F. 2006, "The Postcolonial Condition: A Few Notes on the Quality of Historical Time in the Global Present", in *Postcolonial Text*, 2 (1), online: http://postcolonial.org.

Mezzadra, S. 2006, *Diritto di fuga. Migrazioni, cittadinanza, globalizzazione*, Verona, ombre corte.

Mignolo, W. 2001, "La colonialidad a lo largo y a lo ancho: el hemisfero occidental en el horizonte de la modernidad", in E. Lander (ed.), *La colonialidad del saber: eurocentrismo y ciencias socials. Perspectivas latinoamericanas*, Buenos Aires, Clacso, 55-85.

Morris, M. 1997, "Foreword", in N. Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity. On "Japan" and Cultural Nationalism*, Minneapolis – London, University of Minnesota Press, ix-xxii.

Moulier Boutang, Y. 1998, *De l'esclavage au salariat. Économie historique du salariat bridé*, Puf, Paris.

Neilson, B. 2004, *Free Trade in the Bermuda Triangle. And Other Tales of Counterglobalization*, Minneapolis – London, University of Minnesota Press.

Ong, A. 2006, *Neoliberalism as Exception. Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press.

Perelman, M. 2000, *The Invention of Capitalism. Classical Political Economy and the Sectret History of Primitive Accumulation*, Durham, NC – London, Duke University Press.

Read, J. 2003, *The Micro-Politics of Capital. Marx and the Prehistory of the Present*, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press.

Rigo, E. 2007, *Europa di confine. Trasformazioni della cittadinanza nell'Europa allargata*, Roma, Meltemi.

Rossiter, N. 2006, *Organized Networks. Media Theory, Creative Labor, New Institutions*, Rotterdam, NAi Publishers.

Sakai, N. – Solomon, J. 2006, "Introduction: Addressing the Multitude of Foreigners, Echoing Foucault", in *Translation, Biopolitics, Colonial Discourse*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press ("Traces", 4), 1-35.

Sakai, N. 1997, *Translation and Subjectivity. On "Japan" and Cultural Nationalism*, Minneapolis – London, University of Minnesota Press.

Sakai, N. 2000a, ""You Asians": On the Historical Role of the West and Asia Binary", in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 99 (4), 789-817.

Sakai, N. 2000b, "Subject and Substratum: On Japanese Imperial Nationalism", in *Cultural Studies*, 14 (3/4), 462-530

Sassen, S. 2006, *Territory, Authority, Rights. From Medieval to Global Assemblages*, Princeton – Oxford, Princeton University Press.

Spivak, G.Ch. 1999, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason. Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge, Mass. - London, Harvard University Press.

Steinfled, R.J. 1991, *The Invention of Free Labor. The Employment Relation in English and American Law and Culture, 1350-1870*, Chapel Hill – London, University of North Carolina Press.

Steinfeld, R.J. 2001, *Coercion, Contract, and Free Labor in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge – New York, Cambridge University Press.

Tsing, A. 2000, "The Global Situation", in *Cultural Anthropology*, 15 (3), 327-360.

Vila, P. 2000, *Crossing Borders, Reinforcing Borders: Social Categories, Metaphors, and Narrative Identities on the U.S.-Mexico Frontier*, Austin, University of Texas Press.

Virno, P. 1999, *Il ricordo del presente. Saggio sul tempo storico*. Torino, Bollati Boringhieri.

Virno, P. 2004, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, New York, Semiotext(e).

Walters, W. 2002, "Mapping Schengenland: Denaturalizing the Border", in *Environment & Planning D: Society & Space*, 20(5), 561-580.

Wright, S. 2002, *Storming Heaven. Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, London, Pluto Press.