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A Rift in Empire?

The Multitudes in the Face of War

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The February 15 antiwar demonstrations proved it: the self-organization of free singularities is possible on a planetary scale. And that was an event, despite all that followed. In a manifesto-text written just after those demonstrations, I used the language of Negri and Hardt to say that the multitudes could create a rift in Empire. In a context where the Aristocracy (the great transnational companies) had been weakened by a string of financial disasters, where the Monarchy (the political and military command of the earth) had fallen apart in serious dissension, I wanted to encourage the democratic action of the Plebe, against the scorn of the American, British, Spanish and Italian leaders. It was a moment that had multiplied the world's political stages, overflowing the traditional mechanisms of representation.

This overflow of the multitudes had the surprising character of any real event. Yet it wasn't unexpected. We had just crossed another threshold in the constitution of the networked resistance that became visible with the movements against neoliberal globalization. And now everyone can see how many other thresholds remain. After the war in Iraq, I still think the multitudes can produce a rift in Empire. But that rift must be *produced*, in Europe and throughout the world. How to seize the opportunity of refusal that

revealed itself during the war? How to go much further? Here I'll look into the meaning of these words, *multitudes*, *rift* and *Empire* - in hopes that some work with words might help prolong the movements against war.

The multitude is a figure of political philosophy. But it is inseparable from the actual pathways of the multitudes, as a set of singularities that comes into being through productive activity. What's new is the intersection of thinking and production. Labor - the simple activity of earning a living - is no longer an object of politics, but its departure point, its language or its very principle.

It is known that contemporary labor involves linguistic creativity, the expression of affects, spontaneous cooperation. These are the sources of innovation, indispensable for cognitive capitalism. But no boss can command creativity, expressivity, cooperation - these things cannot be submitted to any disciplinary regime. On the contrary, a certain kind of insubordination must be actively encouraged, in the very interest of productivity. And the possibilities of cooperation must be extended, so that everyone can cross the geographic, cultural and economic distances that separate the participants in a contemporary work group. Modern managerial technique consists in establishing a flexible framework for productive relations. Clearly, the paradigmatic framework for contemporary labor is the Internet. The advantage of such networked systems, for contemporary managers, is to isolate the individuals they link. Yet the ties of optical fiber are real, like the cooperation they encourage. And the establishment of this productive framework took networkers by surprise, because it allowed so much freedom. Now we see that this freedom is always associated with highly personalized control of the employees, via advanced techniques of surveillance. Everything that happens in the productive framework will also be surveilled, and the ideas,

expressions and collective behaviors that prove harmful to the business will be repressed.

Between insubordination and surveillance, creativity and control, you have one of the internal contradictions of the new production regime. The fact that it puts thought to work guarantees the extension of the contradiction beyond the limits of salaried activity. As André Gorz writes in his recent book, *L'immatériel*: "The more work calls on talent, virtuosity, the production of the self... the more these capabilities tend to overflow their limited application to any determinant task." Therefore the worker "will locate his dignity in the free exercise of his capacities, outside of the working context: journalists writing books, ad designers creating artworks, computer programmers demonstrating their virtuosity as hackers and developers of free software, etc." One might feel tempted to laugh at this image of "ad designers creating artworks." The results have been mixed, to say the least. We have seen an outpouring of collective narcissism, a facile idealization of expressivity and interactivity - particularly in the magazine-gallery-museum world, where "ad designers creating artworks" had their day in the sun, throughout the 1990s. But something seems to have changed since then.

The immaterial laborer who thinks, speaks and creates on the job, then finally leaves that job behind to practice a form of creative expression, very soon feels the fragility of her position. Nothing permits her to survive while doing what she had nonetheless been consistently encouraged to do. Reflecting on her own predicament, she can meet all kinds of people: similar individuals marginalized by the effects of the same contradiction, then many others who have never been fully integrated into the productive system. By making the comparison between one's own situation and those of others, one attains a broader understanding of contemporary social

relations, with their hierarchies of inclusion/exclusion extending across the earth. A personal experience of marginality, of precarious labor conditions, can encourage all kinds of solidarities, near or far. This moment of politicization implies at least a partial exit from the productive framework imposed by capitalist management. What then becomes interesting is to continue putting thinking to work. With this difference, that the work has become autonomous: it consists in weaving alternative networks, in view of solidarities and dissenting expressions.

It is at this point that the concept of the multitude can become doubly useful for the multitudes: as an ontological concept, and as a concept of class. As an ontological concept, the multitude indicates a plane of immanence where human singularities discover their fragile potential - that is, the possibility of developing their own individuation through cooperation with others. But as a class concept, the multitude points to everything that stands in the way of this development. That obstacle is Empire: i.e. the sum total of control techniques forged by the corporations and states. These control techniques come to bear on our flesh as *biopower*: the capacity to manage, channel and parasitically exploit the creative power of cooperating singularities. Today, biopower increasingly takes on the explicitly repressive forms of surveillance and the police. Not only will workers be surveilled on the job; but the entire population will be surveilled, while moving through the open systems of transport, exchange and communication. And surveillance is necessarily followed by the police. For the multitudes of the movements against capitalist globalization, Imperial power has taken on the perfectly standardized face of the "robocops" who carried out the repression in Seattle, Nice, Gothenborg, Genoa, etc. But through the visor of the robocop,

what we see - in addition to their eyes - is an organizational mutation that gives rise to the Imperial state.

Here I refer to the book by Rob Jessop, *The Future of the Capitalist State*. Jessop analyzes the paradigmatic shift from a Keynesian national welfare state, to a postnational Schumpeterian workfare state. What do these words mean? The contemporary state no longer cares about the "effective demand" of the workers, nor about any kind of Keynesian social insurance; its preoccupation is with encouraging entrepreneurial innovation, which for Schumpeter was a major source of surplus value. But this kind of innovation, necessary for competition, is done by a fairly small part of the population, marked by a strong tendency toward exit. They tend to leave the constraints of the productive system. As soon as people quit working, the state's problem is no longer that of their welfare; on the contrary, they must be pushed back into the most servile and exploited positions, by way of the coercive programs that Tony Blair calls workfare. The state takes on the role of a collective manager for the flexible labor force - an imperative role under the transnational regime of networked competition. Thus it becomes postnational, adapting to the extended frameworks of capitalist productivity. Yet like the economy it serves, this Imperial form of the state is not stable, or even viable. It is shot through with grotesque contradictions, whereby technical and organizational innovation, the new mainspring of capitalist competition, leads to the political rationality of unlimited war.

Here, to my mind, lies one of the greatest ironies of the current period. The multitudes, as Toni Negri has never ceased to explain, are incommensurable: their immaterial expressions and cooperative innovations are irreducible to the measure of labor time, and therefore to the hourly wage. This disproportion of the multitudes can be understood from several different angles. On the one hand,

it translates the enormous creative potential of scientific knowledge, particularly as it accumulates in the form of technology: and how shall we evaluate the "productivity" of the finger that activates a machine? On the other hand, it brings the indeterminacy of aesthetic experience into play at the very heart of social relations: and how shall we judge the "value" of different expressions? Thus work is uncoupled from wages, and tends to become autonomous. But throughout the 1990s, this uncoupling, this absence of any viable measure, acted in favor of financial speculation, encouraging the most exaggerated valuations of certain sectors, notably where high technology is the vehicle of human expression. The irony lies here. The krach of the new economy in spring 2000 was followed by a general slowdown throughout the world, putting an end to the "roaring nineties." Shortly thereafter, in the face both of an inevitable recession and intense criticism over the conditions of his election, G.W. Bush took the September 11 terrorism and the state of exception it justifies as the ideal means to consolidate his shaky presidency - and more broadly, to realize the disciplinary vision of the American neoconservatives. For it is war, and no doubt war alone, that allows the state to impose its discipline on an autonomous labor force, after it has been mobilized and deceived by the untenable promises of a contradictory production regime.

So we come to the question: What is to be done? As soon as the US took the warpath toward the Iraqis and their oil, the multitudes reacted, overflowing all the bounds of political consensus, and infiltrating all the networks. In Europe the mobilizations were particularly strong: because people remember the 1930s, and they recognize the state of exception, the attempt to impose a new discipline. Great Britain saw the largest demonstration of its history; Italy and Spain were shaken by

repeated mobilizations and direct actions; and France, Germany and Belgium translated public opinion into political opposition, within the arenas of the UN, NATO and the European Union. These dissensions at the heart of the political and military command are new: they mark a first step, a fragile chance to be seized. But can one really speak of a rift in Empire?

First, look at the reality: since the early 1990s, the European Union has increasingly become a distorted mirror of the United States. That is to say, a regional free-trade bloc built up according to the rules of Imperial competition. This neoliberal turn may be cloaked in social charters, but at this point, they count for very little. And the risk that appears with each bout of European chauvinism, whatever its pacifist or anti-American overtones, is that under its cover, countries like France, Germany and Belgium will form a falsely social-democratic center, constructed around a core of protected industries, armament above all - while living in reality off the exploitation of peripheries, internal or external. The danger is that the political class will use familiar hegemonic formulas to reinstate the existing hierarchies of inclusion/exclusion, but on a continental scale. These hierarchies, forged according to the old Fordist model, are protected at gunpoint today. And so France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg held meetings on April 29, 2003, to speak about founding a common military force. In the newspaper *Le Monde* of that same day, a text appeared under the title: "European Defense: Time to Take Action!" The authors were four CEOs from the European defense lobby - our familiar representatives.

Life is elsewhere. The politics of the multitudes consists in opposing the techniques of control, in escaping them - but in such a way that the production of this exodus is itself linguistic, cooperative, affective. What's interesting in the networked

demonstrations is exactly that: what André Gorz called the "free exercise" of each one's creative faculties. But this self-organization is just a foretaste of deeper resistance. A real rift in Empire will require a transformation of the specific forms of redistribution and coercion put into operation by the state, and the creation of more viable frameworks for productive existence. We must dissolve the Schumpetarian postnational workfare state, which upholds unlimited competition and war. And that means carrying out political struggles on the measured ground of representative democracy, without forgetting that the power of the multitudes overflows all the borders. The challenge of the 21st century, in Europe and elsewhere, is to construct social infrastructure that can sustain the incommensurable - outside any technique of capture and control.

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