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Ethics as Post-Political Politics

It is... necessary to explain at once the precise significance of the term 'ethical' and to counterpose this to moral reductionism. There is no sense in which the ethical multitude can be reduced to a mere sum total of moral individualities, of innocent and beautiful souls. What we have been dealing with is not individual morality, but collective ethics. (Negri, *The Politics of Subversion* 55)

To begin this paper with the appropriate apocalyptic tone, I might suggest that in these times of dissipation and decay, this "period of slackening" (Lyotard 71), we have moved decisively beyond the traditional terrain of politics. That grand old narrative of liberation was finally buried with the Berlin Wall which was the last sign of possible alternatives to capitalism. Politics: 1789-1989 R.I.P. As Baudrillard puts it, with but the faintest hint of nostalgia, "One wonders what was able to extinguish the impact of two centuries of critical and subversive spirit so quickly" (43). Still, as is well known, if once with George VI we were all socialists, we are all liberals now, albeit in the weakest sense that the sign of our liberality is our liberality with signs. When the "material girl" is heralded as subversive and all the Marxists are tenured, we truly have entered the age of the "virtual reversibility of signs of subversion... characteristic of 'post-political' societies" (Lotringer and Marazzi 10).

On the other hand, and in the face of this beguiling chiasm, we might also wonder how much politics was ever fully with us and, more importantly still, for whom was this politics a reality in the first place? If the terrain of the political was the Habermasian "public sphere" of civil society, this was always more public and more civil to some than to others:

Political science long ago began to register the fact that a large proportion of the persons surveyed [by opinion polls] 'abstained' from answering questions on politics and that these

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'non-responses' varied significantly by sex, age, educational level, occupation, place of residence and political tendency. (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 398)

The *polis* has always been marked by its exclusions, and it has been one of the contributions of feminism in particular to call attention to this fact, and to the always unequal distribution both of political power and of the competence to become political. The fact that the liberal fictions of equal citizenship and participation are now wearing themselves thin can be no great disappointment to those who never had authorship of or authority within those fictions. In this sense the political has only been a form of legitimation, and there may be as much—or as little—chance now as ever to negotiate and oppose more fundamental modes of domination.

This paper examines the prophetic nostalgia of Toni Negri, theorist of revolution in the crisis of the post-political, whose project is the construction of an ethics in the era of what Charlie Blake has termed the "anti-ethics" of the "ecstasy of annihilation" (137). This is part of a longer project, towards which I can only hint at present, in which I hope further to temper Negri's millennial optimism through an examination of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice and "practical sense" as the exercise of an ethos or disposition that produces and reproduces choices based upon the unconscious structures imposed by social position. For Bourdieu, such an ethos, though similar in many respects and working on the same level as Negri's revolutionary ethical constitution, tends to function as a force for social conservation, and thus militates against far more than it would ever produce, social change.

I argue that the movement of *autonomia*, of which Negri was a leading spokesperson, had by the late 70s developed an advanced political vocabulary to describe both the vicissitudes of capital and the necessarily destructive power of the working class. However, in an effort to move towards a more positive conception of the working class subject, Negri's key project becomes the constitution of the "ethical multitude." He derives this concept from his analysis of the Italian working class movement but also from his reading of Spinoza. He sees the successive phases of capitalist "restructuration" as being accompanied by corresponding recompositions of the working class—from skilled worker through "mass worker" to "socialized worker." However, he argues there is no necessary dialectical link between the movements of capital and the movements of the working

class—or at least not when these transformations are seen *from the working class point of view*. Rather, the new revolutionary subject that is the socialized worker should better be understood along the lines of the "self-caused cause" of the Spinozan *multitudo*.

Bourdieu also develops his concept of the "ethos" in the context of a specific historical investigation, here his anthropological fieldwork in Algeria. From this analysis of a pre-capitalist society he produces a critique of both the objectivism of structural anthropology and the subjectivism typified by existentialism and interactionist sociology. In contrast to the denial of consciousness of objectivism and the total prerogative placed on consciousness by subjectivism, he formulates the principle of the *habitus* as unconscious structuring principle of agency within a world defined by game theory. It is the *habitus* that constitutes class or group coherence, upon the basis of a repository of responses to historical situations experienced similarly by those in similar social positions. A class or group thus shares an ethic independent of their conscious political determinations.

For the time being, however, I hope to lay out the groundwork for this project by giving a history of the Italian intellectual tradition and political context within which, I argue, Negri makes a transition from a politics of destructure to an ethics of affirmation.

I. *Operaismo* and *Autonomia*

Toni Negri is the most widely known theorist of so-called "autonomist" marxism (or *autonomia*), a diverse movement in 1970s Italian political and intellectual culture that developed from 1960s Italian "workerism" (or *operaismo*).¹ Now that four of his books have been translated into English (and with another co-written project published recently in the US), Negri has in effect been made into the sole representative of an otherwise neglected theoretical tradition. That he has achieved this relative prominence is in large part because of the circumstances surrounding the autonomists' decline: among the many autonomist intellectuals arrested in April 1979 for their alleged participation in terrorism, Negri became notorious for his supposedly particularly influential role in the kidnapping and murder of Christian Democrat patriarch Aldo Moro in 1978. Negri was accused of direct involvement in the kidnapping, imprisoned in 1979, but elected to the Italian Parliament in 1983 and thus subsequently released. Shortly afterwards he went into exile in France and was sentenced *in absentia* to thirty years for "subversive association."²

The subsequent prominence given to Negri as an individual theorist (he is the only autonomist who has had book-length texts translated into English) undoubtedly distorts any interpretation both of his work, and of the intellectual contexts and milieu from which it arises.³ More generally, outside Italy there has been very little attention to Italian marxism as a whole and *autonomia* (including the *operaismo* from which it developed) in particular. As Yann Moulier puts it in the introduction to Negri's *The Politics of Subversion*:

Knowledge of Italian Marxism in countries to the north of the Alps is limited in general to a few words on Gramsci, a writer who is often quoted but never read, a few words on Della Volpe whose work is often ransacked without acknowledgement, and a few words on Coletti, especially on his work on the history of thought in philosophy. (4-5)

Moulier continues by acknowledging that the lack of an anthology of the major texts of *operaismo* and *autonomia* is complicated and supplemented by "the problem of the aridity or the obscurity of this form of Marxism which is like no other manifestation we have known" (5). Though its fearsome difficulty is, I would suggest, hardly the foremost reason for the poor dissemination of this tradition outside Italy, this is not a factor to be taken lightly; clearly to be arid and obscure by comparison to other marxist discourses is to be arid and obscure indeed.⁴

Despite this, however, and without going so far, for example, as to say with Jim Fleming that Negri's *Marx Beyond Marx* is "one of the most crucial documents in European Marxism since ... well, since maybe ever" (*Marx Beyond Marx* vii, Fleming's ellipsis), I would suggest that *autonomia* constitutes a significant challenge not only to the interminable debates within marxist theory itself, but also to the major paradigms of cultural studies in both Britain and the US.⁵ In this context, perhaps its most important theoretical contributions are the following: First, a reconceptualization of the nature and roles of civil society and the State that underlines the importance of the State's management of civil society (which thus "withers away") in the face of working class antagonism. This position can be directly contrasted with both the Leninist "autonomy of the political" and the essentially Gramscian position of the (relative) autonomy of the ideological or hegemonic. Second, and consequentially, the autonomists posit a move from critique to what Michael Hardt has termed the subjective "project" of working class self-valorization to accelerate

and organize this antagonistic force (Hardt 188). Finally, and fundamentally, we thus see the autonomist determination to found analysis in "the working class point of view" and, simultaneously, to redefine the working class in line with the new character of post-Fordist relations of production, whereby women, youth, the unemployed and so on are also structurally part of the working class in the situation of the real subsumption of society within capital.

II. From *Quaderni Rossi* to "Wages for Housework"

To understand the autonomists' theoretical innovations—and thus to understand Negri's own conception of the ethical multitude—we must briefly examine at least a small portion of the history of postwar Italy to which they are intimately tied. Some of the difficulty the texts present can be ameliorated if returned to the context of the social movements in what Negri terms "this odd country of ours" ("I, Toni Negri" 255).

The precursor of *autonomia*, *operaismo*, can be traced back to the review *Quaderni Rossi* ("Red Notes"), founded in September 1961 by Raniero Panzieri, Mario Tronti, Romano Alquati and Toni Negri. This review was only one of the many small, obscure and short-lived expressions of the left-wing intelligentsia that were current in the early 1960s; however, as Lumley says of both *Quaderni Rossi* and the subsequent *Classe Operaia* ("Working Class"), "[t]heir role has retrospectively acquired mythic qualities" (*States of Emergency* 37). These journals formed the nucleus of the first attempts to theorize and practice left-wing politics outside the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and its associated union federations, primarily the *Confederazione Generale Italiana dei Lavoratori* (CGIL).

Palmiro Togliatti, leader and one of the founders of the PCI, had consistently "made caution and electoralism the hallmarks of Communist action... [so that] numerical gains at election were seen as the principal instrument for shifting the balance of power in Parliament and thus in the country" (Ginsborg 83). This reformism was to some extent grounded in a reading of Gramsci's prison notebooks that stressed the necessity for a "war of position" to gain hegemony in civil society rather than any insurrectionary "war of manouever" to take over the State.⁶ This was a strategy which later reached its apogee with the "historical compromise" forged by Enrico Berlinguer between the PCI and the ruling Christian Democrats in 1973.⁷

In line with this political assimilation of the party to the State apparatus, the CGIL pursued corporatist unionism within the factories, engaging in a project to gain wage increases tied to labor productivity. Importantly, however, during the Italian “economic miracle” of the late 50s and early 60s, the expansion of the Northern industrial base (which created some of the largest concentrations of industrial activity in Western Europe) fueled a massive series of internal migrations, first from the North-East and later from the largely rural South, to the “industrial triangle” of Turin, Milan and Genoa (in the North-West). Ginsborg estimates that “between 1955 and 1971, some 9,140,000 Italians were involved in inter-regional migration” (219). These new arrivals significantly altered the composition of the Italian industrial working class and—in part because they were soon consigned to the bottom of the blue collar hierarchy, in part because they brought no tradition of adaptation to Fordist and Taylorist divisions of labor—found it hard to accept that “the key mechanisms of division and hierarchical control within the factory were not comprehensively challenged by the unions” (Lumley 25).

The intellectuals of *Quaderni Rossi* were inspired by this mounting frustration in the factories, which was marked above all by the Piazza Statuto incident in 1962 when Turin FIAT workers attacked union offices.⁸ However, they had also been given room to manoeuvre following the crisis of PCI legitimacy after Khrushchev’s revelations in 1956 (up until this point Togliatti and the PCI had been very closely associated with Third International Communism). Their point of departure was an analysis of the current political situation situated resolutely *dal punto di vista operaio*—“from the working class point of view.”

This injunction to refuse to view capitalism “from the point of view of capital” (in the form of managerial communism or conciliatory unionism) was interpreted variously. For example, one move was toward empirical sociology (and projects in oral history) investigating the condition of the working class.⁹ There was also a program to re-read Marx (particularly *The Grundrisse* rather than *Capital*) as less the theorist of political economy toiling in the British Library than the engaged pamphleteer working on a “practico-political synthesis” of the revolutionary struggle” (*Marx Beyond Marx* 2).¹⁰ In association with this, some theorists of *Quaderni Rossi* sought to re-theorize capitalism as essentially *reactive*, recomposing its law of command in response to working class struggles such that “the capitalist class,

from its birth, is in fact subordinate to the working class” (Tronti, “The Strategy of Refusal” 10). Finally, and consequentially, if the working class point of view demonstrated that the working class held the initiative under capitalism, this demanded a new understanding of the necessary intervention of the State (seen in the first place along the lines of the Keynesian State) to supplement and ensure the fragile dominance of capital and to impose the point of view of capital.

It is in this context that *operaismo* demanded the “refusal of work” as the foremost practical strategy against domination. In contrast to the union movement (and to much orthodox socialism more generally), *operaismo* rebelled against any Stakhanovite concept of the dignity of labor. Reformism could only be what Hardt terms “bad faith reformism” (181), or the program to demand more of capital than it could ever give. This tactic is clearly outlined in Tronti’s “Lenin in England,” where it has to be aligned with an ultimate strategy not of ameliorating the work situation, but of abolishing it altogether. In other words, the refusal of work combined with bad faith reformism produces “the temporary strategy, of a revolutionary outcome and reformist tactics” (Tronti, “Lenin in England” 4).

This perspective fundamentally changes the nature of the relation of the working class to itself and to its self-definition. After all, the working class has traditionally been defined in terms of its relation to capital—as “a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital” (Marx and Engels 226). This is the objective form of the working class, the class as seen from the point of view of capital extracting surplus value from a reified labor power. The standard interpretation is then to state that whereas this is the state of the working class in itself (*ein sich*), what is necessary is the class’s realization of itself for itself (*für sich*) through the raising of revolutionary consciousness. From the point of view of *operaismo*, however, the working class already exists for itself, as is attested to by sabotage, absenteeism, wildcat strikes and other manifestations, informal and formal, of the refusal of work and of the demand for *separation* from the labor process. In as much as the working class moves to realize itself through self-valorization, it is a liberation from rather than through work which entails the demise of its own identity as working class. The working class is therefore an “impossible” class, not an ontological category but rather the name given to “a project for the destruction of the capitalist mode of production” (Negri, *Revolution Retrieved* 36).

The refusal of work, then, is the means by which the working class achieves a complete “destruction” of the system of value and the capitalist law of command that it upholds. This is a strategy generalizable beyond the industrial labor process itself, to encompass the totality of socialized labor. For example, in terms of the feminist movement, the “wages for housework” campaign first theorized the use of the wage as a means of division within society as a whole whereby those allotted the task of reproducing the means of production were unremunerated to ensure “a stratification of power between the paid and the non-paid, the root of the class weakness which movements of the left have only increased” (*Lotta Femminista* 262). This is an example of the “bad faith reformism” mentioned above, though also predicated upon the extension of capitalist command over society as a whole as evidenced in the Keynesian welfare state. However, alongside this move to push the contradictions of the system to the limit, there was also the demand to refuse housework and the work of reproduction altogether—hence the fight for the divorce and abortion laws. Here, as elsewhere, the emphasis was on autonomy—from the State and, where necessary, from the traditional working class movement.¹¹

III. From Archaeology to Project: Politics and Ethics

The refusal of work was often theorized as spontaneous and inevitable. In this process there was little need for a Leninist vanguard party on two grounds: first, because the necessity was to attack not the “weakest link” but that point at which capital was seemingly strongest, in the labor process itself; second, because of capital’s restructurations, all of society was now a part of the labor process (now constituting “the social factory”) and refusal at any point was a direct attack on the law of value. This process was further analyzed historically, and the autonomists had little hesitation in focussing on the US situation in particular, as they developed “an analysis which relegate[d] events in Western Europe and elsewhere as peripheral and provincial footnotes to the U.S. experience” (Piccone 1). For clearly, it was argued, the world’s most advanced capitalist country also must contain the world’s most advanced working class, and the fact that the US working class organizations were so weak only pointed to the possibility of working class gains outside the official labor movement.

In this analysis, the New Deal, Keynesianism and the international monetary agreements of Bretton Woods were all capital’s responses

to increased working class militancy both in the US and worldwide following the revolution of 1917. As a result of the articulation of working class demands and needs during the 1910s and 20s, the State had to extend the range of its command function to include pensions, unemployment benefits and so on. Further, this entailed a recomposition of the working class to produce the “mass worker” of Taylorism and Fordism—innovations that came late to Italy, as these were only products of the “economic miracle” of the 50s. This revolution in capitalist economic theory and practice produced the “planner state” (or “planned state”) whose aim was to control development, produce equilibrium through public spending, and thus pacify the working class:

The relationship between development and crisis is reformulated in terms of a relation that is wholly political, with no residual illusions of objectivism, a relationship with no alternative, dictated by the need to contain the working class attack. (Negri, “Marx on Cycle and Crisis” 72)

For the autonomists, the cycle of working class antagonism, manifested through the refusal of work, and consequent capitalist restructuration, is once more to be seen in the early 1970s, demonstrating that this reformist project of capital is “impossible” and that thus (this is its specificity for Negri), “*The twentieth century is impossible reformism*—that is, the impossibility of the only form of possible capitalism” (“The end of the Century.” *The Politics of Subversion* 68). Once again, the focus is on the USA, where the project of a reformist capitalism under the “planner state” is seen to have failed under the impetus of the generalized revolt of the 1960s. Here, black liberation struggles (inside and outside the factories) are seen as pivotal, with key events including the 1967 riots in Newark and Detroit (Carpignano 16-21). The capitalist response is seen to be Nixon’s decisive abandonment of the goal of equilibrium in the decoupling of the dollar from the gold standard in 1971. At this point, the State becomes the “crisis state” and the relevant class composition becomes that of the “social worker” (de-massified and diffuse) and there is now no longer any mediation between capital and society. The fact that this is a “crisis state” indicates not so much that the state is in crisis than that the state accepts crisis—inflation, unemployment, budget deficits: “[t]his ‘neo-liberal’ version of the crisis-state form only brings into sharper relief what were the essential characteristics of the Keynesian state-planner form, translating them into explicitly author-

itarian terms" (Negri, "Crisis of the Crisis-State" 183).

Much as this archaeology of working class history can be seen to demonstrate the extent of power from below, it is some stretch to gain real faith in the possibilities of capitalist downfall—although the renewed disturbances of the Italian "movement of 77" were also viewed as a source of inspiration. Essentially, autonomist theory required a positive or affirmative counterpoint to the destructive tendencies represented by the refusal of work. *Autonomia* had never been based upon either a liberal theory of rights or any form of identity politics; indeed quite the opposite, for the logic of the refusal was one of "separation" and an anti-contractarian attempt to renounce the oppression of present identities. However, at the very least some strategic base for organization was required if autonomist theory were to be less a series of *post factum* historical analyses and more a project to guide practical antagonism. A further practical consideration was the presence of, and competition between, a wide variety of different forms of organization in the movement during the 70s. In particular, as minor incidents of violence, for example, naturally arose on picket lines or as a result of police provocation, a widespread debate arose as to the place of violence—and of clandestinity—in the movement. At one end of the spectrum (and in a climate of growing violence on the part of the right, too), the Red Brigades were formed in October 1970, although their activities consisted mainly of minor kidnappings before 1976 and the killing of the Genoese judge, Francesco Coco.¹²

It was in this context that Negri wrote "Capitalist Domination and Working Class Sabotage," an attempt to theorize the "*project of proletarian self-valorisation*" (95). Given that "[t]he 'crisis-State' has not for one moment ceased to be also a 'planned-State'" and that "the 'catastrophe' appears not to have materialised" (94):

The working class consciousness within the critique of political economy must transform itself into awareness of the revolutionary project.... a constructive project is possible.... the polemic within the movement can only develop if it takes as its practical and theoretical starting point *the deepening of both the concept and the experiences of proletarian self-valorisation*. (95-6)

Here Negri recapitulates the familiar themes of *autonomia*—the refusal of work, the new form taken by the "crisis state" and so on, the required radical separation from the point of view of capital—but also moves forward onto the terrain of defining the constructive side of

the autonomist project. In this text, he does this essentially in three ways: by examining the organization of the party; by articulating the "measure of non-work"; and by formulating the concept of "invention-power." Throughout, he continues to use the terminology refined through autonomist theory, and further redefines traditional marxist and Leninist terminology. Thus, for example, he re-examines the concept of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" as part of an argument concerning the role of violence in the movement.

At the same time, however, I would suggest that Negri is moving beyond this traditional political terminology—the dictatorship of the proletariat, the party, the discourse of politics itself—or (as the translator's note puts it) "emerging from the confines of political concepts" (116). Consequentially, the text bears the burden of this operation, this attempt to move beyond the immediate political context, perhaps because the debates and the positions set up in the course of the movement's criticism and self-criticism have become untenable. On the one side he has the "jackal voices" of the *operaismo* based solely upon the model of the Mirafiori industrial worker (110) which does not accept the diffusion of work under post-industrialism; and, on the other, he faces the potential threat of the "State prosecutor" (116) which comes with the widespread diffusion of violence in these "years of lead." However, the text is also marked specifically by the difficulty of going beyond the "refusal of work" *credo* toward a more positive conception of working class power.

In his attempt to deal with this problem, Negri asserts a new category of "invention-power" opposed to "labour-power":

The re-appropriation of the productive forces by the class transforms class composition from being a passive result into being a driving motor; from effect it becomes a cause.

This transition can be qualified in material terms: *from labour-power to invention-power.... We define invention-power as a capacity of the class to nourish the process of proletarian self-valorisation in the most complete antagonistic independence; the capacity to found this innovative independence on the basis of abstract intellectual energy as a specific force of production*. (122-3)

However, it is clear that this is something of a circular definition that does little to advance a concrete analysis of the specificity of working class power, especially insofar as the definition returns immediately to the concept of negation and separation—whether "antagonistic independence" or "innovative independence." Though Negri is

trying to assert the possibility (the material self-constitution) of the working class as it exists outside of capital, he is continually brought back to its impossibility within capital.

It is in the same vein that Negri asserts a re-definition of the political, that seems more a function of faith than of analysis, just as under the real subsumption of labor to capital, "the extent of your faithfulness to the system is watched more closely than the actual value you produce" (108). Negri is attempting a material definition of a truly separate politics, but it would appear that he remains on the level of rhetoric:

For capital, politics is division and hierarchy, for the proletariat it is unity and equality; for capital it means the subordination of labour, for the proletariat it means the process of self-valorisation (109)

Negri is looking for a means to analyze "the specific and determined nature of power" (96) in contrast to two opposed, but self-reinforcing positions. The first is the concept (associated with both the PCI and the Red Brigades) that it is possible to take over State power (whether through gradualism or insurrection) and utilize it on behalf of the working class. The second is the total critique of power (associated, though with differing implications, with some aspects of the youth and women's movements, and with the *nouveaux philosophes*) that asserts that power "can be defined and qualified solely as an attribute of capital or as its reflection" (96).

In opposition to these positions, each of which asserts an effective monadology or homology of power, Negri suggests that there are "two irreducible ways of conceiving power" ("J'Accuse" 294), that there is a form of power that is radically different from that exercised by the State. Clearly, this can be seen as a re-statement of the founding principle of operaismo—the injunction to begin from the point of view of the working class—but I would suggest that this is a significant move from that position in at least three ways. First, there is the fact that the dichotomy between capital and the working class is clearly posed in terms of power for the first time. Second, whereas the focus previously (in Tronti's "The Strategy of the Refusal" for example) was upon working class power as part of capitalism, though separate from and antagonistic to capitalist command itself, here we see a sustained attempt to conceive of the working class outside capitalism. Finally, the emphasis is most fully upon ontology rather than, as had been the case from *Quaderni Rossi* onward, epistemology.

Indeed, if the working class had previously only been possible as a project, now Negri is attempting to give that project substance.

I would suggest that it is a tribute to Negri's new direction, that his references are for the first time not solely confined to the marxist tradition or bourgeois political economy. In particular, Negri frequently cites Foucault, specifically both *Discipline and Punish* (122) and *The Uses of Pleasure* (99). Indeed, he appears to perceive Foucault's project as very much similar to his own, as a search for a non-homologous counter-power:

One cannot move from the understanding of deconstruction as an effect, to the identification of the process of self-valorisation as cause. This is particularly clear in the analytic principles of Michel Foucault (and in particular his methodological treatment in *La Volonté de Savoir*), which have caught my attention because of the way they strain after a notion of productivity, a creativity of an unknown quantity located beyond the cognitive horizon. (99)

Most of Negri's essay does indeed move from the understanding of deconstruction (a principle by this stage well theorized throughout the autonomist movement) to self-valorisation as cause. However, Negri realizes that, if nothing else, *autonomia's* favored case studies of deconstruction and capitalist recomposition, based in the US experience, demonstrate that self-valorisation may lag a long way behind the unconscious subjectivity of antagonism in the labor process. Negri himself is still reaching for what he terms in Foucault a "creativity of an unknown quantity," a concept that Foucault himself in *The Uses of Pleasure* terms "ethics" (Foucault). For Negri, too, the move is now from politics to ethics—an ethics of the constitutive ontology of power.

IV. Rebibbia and Spinoza

Negri's move out of the arena of direct political action in the movement was to some extent determined by external forces. While detained and awaiting trial in the Special Prisons of Rovigo, Rebibbia, Fossombrone, Palmi and Trani, he began work on a project more similar to his work on Descartes, written ten years previously, than anything he had done in the intervening period. Though this may at first appear surprising, it may perhaps be seen in relation to Foucault's move of self-distancing to document the ancient world in

The History of Sexuality, and also might be understood in terms of some fundamental similarities between *autonomia* and early modern philosophy. If, for example, we see modern moral philosophy as predicated on “the movement from the view that morality must be imposed upon human beings toward the view that morality could be understood as human self-governance or autonomy” (Schneewind 147), then Negri’s move to Spinoza accords with an attempt to develop a fully theoretical understanding of autonomy outside customary political terminology.

Furthermore, Negri’s analysis of Spinoza hinges upon a historical analysis of the Dutch transition to the capitalist mode of production in advance of the development of the corresponding State form. In other words, Negri suggests that in Spinoza we can see a philosophy predicated upon untrammelled productive force—and that Spinoza maintains this revolutionary impetus even as the newly formed institutions of capital react to impose their law of command. If discussions and theorizations of politics have traditionally been drawn to the model of the French revolution, Negri suggests we return to the pre-political (before the bourgeois *polis* has been established) of the Dutch revolution. Moreover, Negri is not alone in this return to Spinoza, as this is territory covered by both Deleuze and the Althusserian school, particularly Macherey and Balibar.¹³ In this sense, we can see Negri, while in prison, widening the sphere of his intellectual engagement beyond the specificity of the Italian situation.

Thus in moving to study Spinoza, Negri relocates *autonomia* in a series of wider historical, geographical and philosophical traditions. As he himself puts it, his aim is:

that of constructing a ‘beyond’ for the... weary and arthritic tradition of revolutionary thought itself. We find ourselves with a revolutionary tradition that has pulled the flags of the bourgeoisie out of the mud. We must ask ourselves, though, confronting the historic enemy of this age: What besides the mud are we left with? (*The Savage Anomaly* xx)

I suggest therefore that through ethics Negri goes “beyond” politics in a situation where critique is now exhausted and discredited. Moreover, beyond epistemology, Negri searches for the art of organization in the “mud” of ontology.¹⁴

As Hardt observes in his translator’s foreword, the fundamental axiom of *The Savage Anomaly* is the re-theorization of power—which Negri was searching for in “Capitalist Domination and

Working Class Sabotage.” Power is re-conceived as having two non-homologous forms: *potestas* and *potentia* (translated here as Power and power). *Potestas* is the form taken by power in the contractarian logic of the State—this is a power that is always necessarily mediated through the transcendence of the law. *Potentia*, on the other hand, is the immanent, immediate “extension of practical being” that is the determinate expression of the *multitudo* or multitude (27).

In an inversion of the apparent logic of the “refusal of work” therefore, it is *potestas* (State Power) that is defined in terms of negation or withdrawal. The bourgeois State is predicated upon the transfer of power through the theory of natural right, that constitutes a “dislocation of power” (110). This is power that then has to be withheld, refused, in the empty dimension of legalism and universalism: “it is precisely in the dialectical transfer from the individual to the universal, to the absolute, that the political miracle (and mystification) of the bourgeois ideology of the State originates” (113). In as much as the State operates as a mediating force, appropriating the so-called “natural right” of each individual (that it constitutes as such in the same instant à la Foucault’s disciplinary panopticon), the State also gains the sole “legitimate” rights to the use of violence. In doing so, the State directly appropriates the real, to perform “the duplication of the world in a political and juridical image” (71). The representation upon which the State is founded thus entails an essential “lack,” signified by temporal discontinuity. Justice is founded in delay, in the act of withholding judgement, to produce selectivity and division. This can hardly have been an abstract formulation for Negri as he waited on remand for his trial to begin.

By contrast, *potentia* reveals itself as a form of open-ended, non-teleological participatory democracy. Again, the classic formulation of *autonomia* is inverted, to produce a theory of ethical constitution as pure affirmation and expansion. With hindsight we can see that Negri had offered a glimpse of this perspective previously:

Above all else I am looking for a method by which to deepen my separation, to conquer the world by embracing the alternative network spread by class valorisation. Everytime I succeed in doing this, I enlarge my existence as part of the collectivity. (“Capitalist Domination” 116)

Yet now, in his reading of Spinoza, Negri is able to articulate this movement as foundational ethical ontology, rather than as something merely reactive and compensatory, as it had appeared in his earlier

work. Whereas the refusal of work had effectively functioned as mediation on the path to self-valorisation, here “[t]he *multitudo* is no longer a negative condition but the positive premise of the self-constitution of right” (*The Savage Anomaly* 194).

Negri emphasizes the re-foundation of the subject as a production of the body and mind in immanence: “The subject is the product of the physical accumulation of movements. The collective subject can only be appreciated as a physics of collective behaviours” (226). Clearly Negri regards this as the basis of projects for alliance and coalition, as the subtitle of *Communists Like Us: New Spaces of Liberty, New Lines of Alliance* suggests. This marks his most decisive break from the factory-based workerism of *operaismo*, and continues to be the basis of his politics when he relocates his work back to the more immediately political topics of his pre-Spinozan phase: “when we return to the question of working-class subjectivity, we shall be involved in discussions about ethics” (“From Mass Worker to Socialized Worker” *The Politics of Subversion* 82).

v. The Politics of Failure: A Passing Note Concerning Bourdieu

If we are now involved in discussions about ethics, however, we are still awaiting the revolution. Although Negri did not turn to a theory of affirmation until the late 70s, he could never be accused of being short of optimism. Somewhat more harshly, Bob Lumley has written of:

Negri’s apocalyptic absurdities in which “the proletariat” does indeed appear as a sort of St. George always ready for insurrection. (“Working Class Autonomy” 125)

As Negri himself states with unusual sobriety: “There remains but to reconsider the defeat—its causes and the ways in which the enemy has beaten us, remembering that there is no linearity to memory: there is only ethical survival” (“Letter to Fèlix Guattari on ‘Social Practice.’” *The Politics of Subversion* 157).

I would suggest, briefly but finally, that one way in which to re-contextualize Negri’s thought—to perform another dislocation—is to present his ethics beside Pierre Bourdieu’s theorization of ethos. In many respects, Bourdieu’s arguments are very similar to Negri’s. For example, we might compare Negri’s “real subsumption of society within capital” to Bourdieu’s relentless use of economic categories in his analysis of culture: for Bourdieu, precisely the same operations

and rules inhere in the workings of cultural or symbolic capital as in financial capital such that we can observe “a unified market for all cultural capacities... guaranteeing the convertibility into money of... cultural capital acquired at a given cost in time and labour” (*The Logic of Practice* 132). However, for Bourdieu, great importance resides in the fact that this aspect of cultural transactions remains *misrecognized* by the parties involved, and thus the market secures its efficacy through the support garnered even by those who remain disempowered by its operations.

Second, Bourdieu’s notion and analysis of “practical sense” could also be described as “a physics of collective behaviours” (much like Negri’s Spinozan collective subject) without too much distortion. This too describes a form of “unconscious subjectivity” or “*ethos*” which, being the product of a learning process dominated by a determinate type of objective regularities, determines ‘reasonable’ and ‘unreasonable’ conduct for every agent subject to those regularities” (*Outline* 77). Clearly, however, Negri’s notion of ‘reasonable’ as it is determined by such material conditions and objective practices is very different from Bourdieu’s pessimistic assessment of the reproduction of social division.

Finally, I would suggest that we might see a similarity between Bourdieu and the autonomists if we compared the “refusal of work” to the refusal to “play the game” to which Bourdieu occasionally refers (eg. *Homo Academicus* 172 or *Distinction* 144). Thus we could redefine a notion of “cultural work”—which could still be part of *autonomia*’s project to examine the socialization and diffusion of labor—and an associated affirmative “cultural ethics” in contrast to the divisions perpetuated by cultural “distinction.”

As much as a re-examination of Spinoza means “abandoning the last vestiges of teleologism” (Holland 14) in its refusal of the dialectic (and its emphasis on subjective constitution), we must beware of the re-inscription of faith performed by Negri in the course of his analysis. Although Negri’s turn to ethics is a useful dislocation from the ritual of political rhetoric, in Bourdieu we see the continuing presence of unconscious investments in the apparent certainties of belief and the limits beyond which expansionist coalition politics and ethical constitution dare not go:

like legitimate culture, the counter-culture leaves its principles implicit (which is understandable since it is rooted in the dispositions of an ethos) and so is still able to fulfil functions of

distinction by making available to almost everyone the distinctive poses, the distinctive games and other external signs of inner riches previously reserved for intellectuals. (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 371)

NOTES:

- 1 There are continual problems with definition and categorization when dealing with *operaismo*, *autonomia* and associated movements. Almost by definition, none of these movements were associated with any clearly defined party or organization for any clear period of time, although some 'institutions' such as *Quaderni Rossi* and *Lotta Continua* were clearly of major importance. For one attempt to map the Italian revolutionary left 1968-78, see the diagram (originally published in *L'Espresso* 5th February 1978) in *Working Class Autonomy and the Crisis* 204-5. Roughly speaking, I am using the term *operaismo* to designate that section of the extra-parliamentary influenced by *Quaderni Rossi* in existence up until 1968-9 and *autonomia* to designate the still more diffuse groupings in existence from 1969, through the movement of '77, up until 1979. As far as I can see, however, there has still been no adequate definition of *autonomia*, a fact that whilst in some ways a strength was also in others its downfall, as there was little clear differentiation between the autonomists and the *Brigate Rosse* (Red Brigades).
- 2 The most comprehensive biography I have found (though still very sketchy) is in the "Editor's Preface" to *Marx Beyond Marx*.
- 3 A major problem in reading Negri is in fact determining which are the specific contributions made by Negri himself, and which are either theoretical proposals introduced by other writers (such as Tronti) or general principles current in the movement. Negri's general failure to footnote or attribute scarcely helps alleviate this problem.
- 4 On Negri's particularly intractable style, see the translator's note by Red Notes (Negri's major translators) heading Chapter 6 of "Capitalist Domination and Working Class Sabotage":

In translating, we found the first two pages of this section incomprehensible. Consultation with comrades in Italy produced a suggestion that, since they add little to the argument, we should omit them. Furthermore, Toni Negri himself, in a clandestine "Interview From Prison" ... has stated that in this section, in emerging from the confines of political concepts, he hit on difficulties of self-expression and "dubious literary quality". Therefore we have omitted most of pages 42-42 of the original—but a draft translation is available from us on request. (*Working Class Autonomy* 116)
- 5 Cleaver argues that *autonomia* is most similar to the "Johnson-Forest Tendency" of C L R James and Raya Dunayevskaya on the one hand, and *socialisme ou barbarie* on the other (Cleaver 45-66).
- 6 During the Second World War, Togliatti had access to Gramsci's Prison

Notebooks while they were still unpublished. For the influence of Gramsci on PCI strategy after the war, see Ginsborg 44-46 and Weber.

- 7 For more detail on the historic compromise, and the PCI in the 1970s, cf. Lange.
- 8 The particular importance of FIAT—and especially the FIAT plant at Mirafiori, at the time the largest single factory in Western Europe—for both orthodox and autonomist interpretations of Italian labor history can scarcely be understated. Indeed, after the April 7 arrests of *autonomia's* leaders in 1979, perhaps the fundamental measure of the movement's defeat was the failure of the "total strike" at Mirafiori in October 1980. Cf. Ginsborg 402-5.
- 9 Cf. Pescarolo and the section on "The Struggle at FIAT" in *Working Class Autonomy* 167-195.
- 10 This project of re-reading Marx through the *Grundrisse* (and also the so-called "sixth chapter" of *Capital*) did, however, occur more in the 70s than the 60s.
- 11 For more on the women's movement, cf. Dalla Costa, James, Chelnov, Caldwell and de Lauretis. Clearly, even the new social movements were significantly affected by the rise of feminism, especially in the 'second wave' of activism after 1970, demonstrating the extent to which *autonomia* had still not totally broken from its traditional roots. Indeed, in 1976 *Lotta Continua*, one of the most organized of the extra-parliamentary groups, dissolved itself under the weight of self-criticism concerning women's issues (Ginsborg 380, but also cf. *Italy 1977-78: Living with an Earthquake* passim).
- 12 Cf. Allen for a useful examination of the "rhetoric" of terrorism.
- 13 For a very useful summary of Spinozan marxism as conceptualized by both Machery and Negri, cf. Holland.
- 14 Cf. Brian Massumi's discussion of "muck" (Massumi 47-52).

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