

## **The paradoxes of politics**

On the post-workerist reading of Marx

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In this text, a single question is central: how does post-workerism think the act of politics? This question leads directly on to the next question: how does post-workerism unite diverging theses under the concept of living labour to identify production, being and politics in the instance of potentiality? In the course of the short-circuiting of economy, ontology and politics, the following positions are integrated: firstly, the Marxian idea of the real subsumption of labour under capital and labour-power as radically expropriated but creative potentiality; secondly, the feminist thesis of the productivity of reproductive and affective practises; thirdly, the Deleuzian idea of the immanence of creative forces that express an impersonal life that neither belongs to a subject nor comprises an object but only itself as its own cause, a 'desire desiring self-creating';<sup>1</sup> and fourthly, the Foucauldian thesis that the capitalist mode of production is preceded by the inclusion of life in power mechanisms that subsequently co-exists along side it. I explore the question of how to think politics via a series of post-workerist theses because the authors gathered under the name post-workerism emerged at the beginning of the 1990s with the promise of combining analysis of the relation between valorisation, bio-power and law in imperial capitalism with a new idea of communist militancy and a new materialism in the line of Machiavelli, Spinoza and Marx.

### **Reading Marx**

Let's begin with the question of what it means to want to actualise Marx's thought. To align oneself with Marx means accepting a heterogeneous, theoretically aporetic and politically dramatic legacy marked by an activist, a messianic and an analytic dimension: the convening of an international workers' movement, a revolutionary promise, and a critique of the political economy. This encounter is

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<sup>1</sup> Agamben 1999, p. 119.

marked by the fact that it led to the construction of a productivist, police-based order. The acceptance of the Marxian legacy consequently necessitates a distance in relation to the idealisations in Marx's texts, the violence of his theoretical blockades, and a positioning in relation to Stalinism. Here, Foucault's position still sets the example. Foucault calls for an analysis of Stalinism that does not operate in terms of error, but in those of reality. Instead of searching Marxism for something that might serve to judge the camp system, productivism and the bureaucratisation of the political, one should search for what these developments made possible.<sup>2</sup>

So which Marx does post-workerism read? If one rejects the purifying idea of an epistemological break in Marx's work along the seam of scientificity that Althusser recanted in 1973 as a 'theoreticist error'<sup>3</sup> since it implies an equating of science with truth and ideology with error, the polyvalence of Marx's theoretical work becomes evident. In his short and essayistic text 'Reading Marx', Blanchot emphasises the unrelated juxtaposition of three voices: firstly, a direct, long, both philosophical and anti-philosophical voice in which Marx, in terms of a history of philosophical thought, gives answers to questions that remain indeterminate ('alienation, the primacy of need, history as process of material practice, the total man');<sup>4</sup> secondly, a political voice that is brief, direct and a call to participate in the struggle, announcing the immediate dissolution of bourgeois society through the praxis of the proletariat, and expressing the urgency of what it announces; thirdly, the indirect speech of a scientific, critical-economic discourse that analyses the value-form as self-processing contradiction and the reproduction of capitalist relations of production, a scientific speech that undermines itself by, as Blanchot says, 'showing itself as radical transformation of itself, as a theory of mutation always in play in practice, just as in this practice the mutation is always theoretical.'<sup>5</sup> Even if Blanchot ignores the developments and breaks in Marx's works by limiting himself to the thesis that science and philosophy do not emerge from Marx's work unscathed and that his productivity consists in the multiplicity of his voices, he provides us with two references that are particularly valuable for an investigation of the post-workerist reading of Marx: on the one hand, to pay attention to the questions found in relation to Marx's answers; and on the other, to investigate how the relationship between

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Foucault 1980, p. 201.

<sup>3</sup> In *For Marx*, Althusser took up Bachelard's concept of the epistemological break and divided Marx's works into early works, works of the break, works of transition and mature works (cf. Marx 2005, pp. 33–9). He contrasts the ideological early works with the scientificity of the texts after 1845, a distinction that Althusser recanted in 1973 as 'theoreticist error' because it implies an equating of science with truth and ideology with error, cf. Althusser 1976, p. 119.

<sup>4</sup> Blanchot 1997, p. 145.

<sup>5</sup> Blanchot 1997, p. 146.

economy and politics is understood, which in Marxian thought oscillates precariously between a primacy of economic form (universal expansion of the value-form that destroys its own conditions) and a primacy of political content (the reality of human labour that explodes the false form of self-valorising value). With the question of the question that is answered by Marx, Blanchot varies the motif of Althusser's symptomal Marx reading formulated in the foreword to *Reading Capital*. The key question, which Marx, in Althusser's view, still formulated in the old Hegelian terms of inner essence and outer appearances, is the question of the effect of a structure on its elements.<sup>6</sup> According to Althusser, Marx shows in multiple ways the presence of a concept that is decisive for his thought and lacking in the context of his discourse: namely, that of the social formation as complex structured whole in which the economic is determinant in the last instance – i.e. not directly, not in a pre-definable or prescriptive way, but constantly deferred, displaced, distorted in the translation to other instances of the social. In this way, the economic has the status of a dominant contradiction that structures the social complexity but which is not itself grounded in any substance or subjectivity, and only exists in its effects. Thus Althusser works with an immanent mode of causality that he borrows from Spinoza, and which he also terms, with Jacques-Alain Miller, metonymic causality.<sup>7</sup> The problem of this position is the following: if the economic is determinant in the last instance, its primacy of effect must be defined independently of the mode of socialisation, that is, independently of social relations, which in each case it would transcend. As a result, the analysis of the modes of socialisation would be totalised anew with the help of an essentialist a priori category.<sup>8</sup>

## **Beyond Marx**

What question does post-workerism find to the answers given by Marx? How does it go beyond Marx's dialectic and teleological idealisation? Let's begin by clarifying what it means, with Marx, to go beyond Marx. This is a challenge that Negri himself signed in *Marx beyond Marx*,<sup>9</sup> and which, as Balibar pointed out in the 1980s, has in relation to the status of materialist thought at least two methodological dimensions: firstly, Marxism participates in the transgressing of its future perspectives

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<sup>6</sup> Althusser and Balibar 2006, vol. 1, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> For Althusser's remarks on this subject, cf. Althusser and Balibar 2006, pp. 32–5, 228–34, 248–61 and the chapter 'Structure in dominance' in Althusser 2005, pp. 251–256; cf. in addition Miller 2009.

<sup>8</sup> For this argument, cf. for example Laclau and Mouffe 1985, pp. 146f.

since it assumes the historical specificity of a discourse, including its own, and is thereby able to reflect the temporal conditionality of its thought, while on a non-discursive level, the labour movement, class struggle, the development of the Soviet Union and the real-socialist states contributed to the way capitalist strategies of government and valorisation have changed and no longer correspond to the conditions that Marx analysed in the mid nineteenth century. Secondly, Marxian theory provides a number of supports for the deconstruction of its own dialectical fictions. Especially Marx's institutional and historical analyses on the legislation of labour time, the creation of large-scale industry and the mechanisation of production in the fourth part of *Capital* manifest a thought that is neither based on an evolutionary development of predetermined forms nor on collective forces immanent to the history of being, and express the right content that explodes the false capitalist form. Instead, one encounters the beginnings of a social theory that investigates the effects of antagonistic strategies: 'strategies of exploitation, domination and resistance constantly being deferred and renewed as a consequence of their own effects.'<sup>10</sup>

It is precisely this aspect of self-displacing interactions between power mechanisms and political acts that Foucault radicalises in his works on biopower and governmentality. In relation to Marxism, the intervention of these works consists in the development of a non-judicial and non-economic conception of power, understood as a strategic relation of forces, to which no law of form and no subjectivity as constitutive instances are immanent. Hence, in this nominalist materialism of power, the thesis of economic determination in the last instance put forward by Althusser and Balibar in the 1960s and 70s remaining tied to the a priori category of a first cause has been deconstructed.

Particularly in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault translated his considerations on a strategic concept of power<sup>11</sup> into a series of methodological rules: the immanence of knowledge and power, the constant variation of their distributions, the double conditionality of their micro- and macro-political mechanisms, the polyvalence of governmental practices that are discontinuous and transformative in their effects and enter into various total strategies.<sup>12</sup> For Foucault, political practices coexist with these power relations; it is a matter of two practices that mutually provoke, propel, elude,

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Negri's lectures on *The Grundrisse* that have been published in Negri 1991; Balibar writes in 'From Class Struggle to Classless Struggle' that he summarises post-Marxist thought under 'Negri's beautiful expression' 'Marx beyond Marx' (p. 207).

<sup>10</sup> Balibar 1991, p. 202. On the thesis that Marxism participates in the transgression of its own future perspectives, cf. Balibar 1991, pp. 192

<sup>11</sup> 'One needs to be nominalistic, no doubt: power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategic situation in a particular society' (Foucault 1990, p. 114).

penetrate and in some cases attack each other. A social break is the improbable and eventual result of a particular conjunction of heterogeneous political practices, an idea that Balibar defined in relation to a 'becoming-necessary of freedom' as a 'becoming-contingent of resistances'.<sup>13</sup> With Marx, to go beyond Marx, means in this sense to remove the sublimated idealism from the materialist project and to end all attempts at grasping the social as a totality, and to detect, in the interplay of its parts, a constitutive subjective cause (labour-power) or a constitutive form-giving law (law of value) which would re-introduce either the Hegelian division of inner essence and outer appearance or the idea of a force preceding all historical developments.<sup>14</sup>

### **The conditions of communism**

So how is the post-workerist discourse to be inscribed into the post-Marxist field? Here, we are dealing with an alignment with Marx that is specific, heterodox and linked to practical experience that alternates between a discourse on labour-power (as critique of capitalism and theory of struggle) and a discourse on creative production (as theory of potentiality). Politics is subjectivised and thought in two categories: in the line Spinoza-Deleuze in the category of potentiality, and in the line Marx-Foucault in the category of biopolitical labour-power. Oscillating between these categories and projecting them into each other, post-workerism, with its idea of an antagonistic vital force that exceeds capital, ends up contradicting key post-Marxist positions that had already been taken up by structuralist Marxism in the 1960s and radicalised by Foucault: politics does not have an anthropological or ontological foundation; there is no immediate, necessary or dialectically mediated relation between material being and militant practice; labour-power (seen as a trans-individual cooperative labour-potentiality) is neither the substance of politics nor the content of freedom; all tendencies in Marxism to go back to essentialist explanations of history must be disrupted. How is this difference to be explained?

In the post-workerist reading of Marx, two texts have a central position. While the reading of *The Paris Manuscripts*, in which the young Marx, still entirely inspired by Hegelian and Feuerbachian themes,

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. once again Foucault's fundamental methodological remarks in Foucault 1990, pp. 113–124.

<sup>13</sup> Balibar 2002, p. 30.

<sup>14</sup> In Balibar 1994, pp. 224f., Balibar formulates this demand at the end of his consideration on the concept of ideology in the works of Marx and Engels.

understands labour as self-generation, remains with few exceptions<sup>15</sup> implicit, the re-interpretation of ‘The Fragment on Machines’<sup>16</sup> in *The Grundrisse*, which was already central for the development of workerist theory in the 1960s, is dealt with explicitly and represents the most visible Marxian point of reference. With this divergent reading, the ontological theses of the young Marx on the creative vitality of activity and the historico-critical theses of the late Marx on the socialisation of production are combined and projected into one another. It is precisely at this point that the question becomes evident that post-workerism found to Marx’s answers and which Blanchot with Althusser called for us to search for should we want to understand the reading of Marx in a particular thought: it is the question of the conditions of communism in being and in the historical development of modes of production. Post-workerism operates with the assumption that, with the post-Fordist mode of accumulation, a mass intellectual, cooperative and affective productive force was formed that is central for this mode of accumulation, and which embodies the human of the human being, its ontological determination, its creative potentiality as well as excess, and thus the force of politics to produce the new, a change of change of the world, and by virtue of this force to exceed capitalist modes of production. Here, it is again possible to observe how the projection of an ontological potentiality into a historical development leads to a paradox typical for the history of philosophy that what comes about is what was latently present,<sup>17</sup> a becoming-necessary of freedom.

## **Onto-technology**

In other words, the post-workerist reading of Marx is structured by an ‘onto-technological trick’<sup>18</sup> that consists in combining two arguments: firstly, contrary to the assumption of their non-totalisability, complex historical processes are reduced to the fulfilment of an ontological determination; secondly, the instance of potentiality is identified as medium of this fulfilment in which processes of being can be linked to processes of production. This instance is analysed, inconsistently, as non-corporeal potentiality of the brain (memory and attention in Lazzarato),<sup>19</sup> general pre-individual properties of

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. for example Virno 2008, p. 39, cf. Negri and Hardt 2009, pp. 22–37, 249.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Marx 1993, pp. 590–609.

<sup>17</sup> ‘[I]t [capital] confronts the totality of all labours δυναμιει [potentially]’, Marx writes. ‘Here it can be seen once again that the particular specificity of the relation of production, of the category – here, capital and labour – becomes real only with the development of a particular material mode of production and of a particular stage in the development of the industrial productive forces.’ (Marx 1993, pp. 218, 219).

<sup>18</sup> Rancière 2005, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Lazzarato 2007, p. 186; Cf. however also the chapter ‘Brain machine’ in Negri 1998.

the subject producing the human of the human being (capacity for speech, abstraction, improvisation, and self-reflection in Virno),<sup>20</sup> or flesh, in the sense of an incarnation of potentiality in a first element (in Negri).<sup>21</sup>

The determination of an onto-technological instance, oscillating between disembodiment and incarnation in which post-workerist authors link being and production, can be traced back to different interpretations of the Marxian concept of the ‘general intellect’, a concept that Marx used in the sixth and seventh notebooks of *The Grundrisse*<sup>22</sup> to designate the transition from the labour process to the production process. In these notebooks Marx diagnosed a final crisis of industrial capital, since the productive deployment of the totality of knowledge available in society and the efficiency of machinery created an effect that opposed the logic of valorisation – objectively as well as subjectively. In relation to machine capacity, the expenditure of labour-power becomes secondary, the necessary labour time to produce a commodity decreases, the value of the commodity sinks, the dimension of freely available time becomes accessible, the all-sided unfolding of the individual can be anticipated. Marx writes: ‘Capital is itself a moving contradiction in that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side as the sole measure and source of wealth.’<sup>23</sup>

Like Marx, who in *The Grundrisse* oscillates between the analysis of the self-contradiction of capital and the announcement that the social potentialities serving capital as mere means are in reality the condition to ‘explode’ capital,<sup>24</sup> post-workerist authors also recognise in the ‘general intellect’ a proto-communist instance that is constantly reintegrated into capitalist relations of production and reproduction. With the prophecy of a last confrontation repeating the eschatological gesture of *The Grundrisse*, post-Fordism is designated as the final stage of this re-integration. Following the struggles of 1968, living labour was autonomised for Negri by incorporating the knowledge and the means to administrate production: ‘Historically, capital provided the worker with the instrument of labour; as soon as the human brain re-appropriates this instrument of labour, capital loses the ability to articulate the command by means of the instrument.’<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Virno 2004, pp. 136; 151f. In his 2008 book on the multitude, Virno, in an examination of Plessner and Schmitt, subscribes more strongly than before to the thesis that man is a dangerous animal, distinguished by language and an indeterminate potentiality to act that is not proto-communist, but can be expressed in both a reactionary as well as emancipatory way, cf. especially ‘So-called “Evil” and Criticism of the State’, pp. 9–66.

<sup>21</sup> Negri 2002, pp. 115ff.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Marx 1993, pp. 590–609; this chapter is designated in workerism as ‘The Fragment on Machines’.

<sup>23</sup> Marx 1993, p. 601.

<sup>24</sup> Marx 1993, p. 602.

For Negri, this autonomy of a mass-intellectual labour-power represents the culmination of the socialisation of production. Living labour does not create the means of social life, but social life itself. Economy, politics and trans-individual being coincide. The productive forces are immediately translated into relations of production.<sup>26</sup> Labour is substantialised; capital derealised as nothing more than a parasitic mechanism appropriating creative productivity. Hence, the multitude as embodiment of this productivity is defined in a circular way. It represents both the condition and the result of social change. It embodies the active dissolution of the existing order and the production of the new. Its radical subjectification is carried out at the precise point at which the processes of social change. Its labour potentiality is given in post-Fordism the highest actuality, introducing the transition to communism. In short, it is the last class, the last content of a false capitalist form. It is the ontological and biopolitical entrepreneur of itself and of communism, 'the entrepreneur of fullness, who seeks essentially to construct a productive fabric',<sup>27</sup> the embodiment of proto-communist potentiality.

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The drama of this political ontology, in which living labour is the historically decisive and constitutive factor, consists in the fact that it cannot think politics' distance to itself. It understands politics in the Christian tradition as an expression of common being, a cooperative becoming-one of a multitudinous subject that articulates its potentiality to act and thereby its historical sense. The multitude is a multiple one, infinitely self-affirmative and self-cumulative. Conflict, difference and the question of organisation lose their place in politics as do asociality, inactivity and death. However, if we assume that politics is a name for the conjunction of different militant practices that has no ontological, existentialist or economic foundation, but is the effect of this conjunction, politics encounters a series of paradoxes.

Firstly, it is exposed to contingency. Politics wants to produce a radical change of change and thus a process that can be neither planned nor guaranteed by a substance, a subject or the existence of a

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<sup>25</sup> Negri 2007, p. 21.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Negri 1996, p. 152: 'There is an immediate translatability between the social forces of production and the relation of production themselves.'

<sup>27</sup> Negri 1998.

decision, since each radical transformation is catalysed by an event, an eventual crystallisation of time in which different practices enter into a conjunction with one another. The excess of politics, its transforming force, comes from this conjunction of the heterogeneous. It cannot be traced back to the constitutive activity of a historical human instance (labour-power, decision). The attempt to stabilise, organise and institute this process introduces conservative and non-libertarian elements into politics.

Politics is secondly exposed to a normalising or disciplining displacement. Its forces are permanently reintegrated, disappear or become destroyed. Each politics must assume the possibility of its becoming-reactionary, and politicise this possibility in a politics of a second order. The politicisation of politics distances politics to itself. It attempts to interrupt such effects of political subjectification as missionarism or existentialist identification, or such effects of political activity as militarisation or bureaucratisation. Here lies the difference to a micro-political position that assumes that everything is political without organising the distance of politics to itself by a politicisation of its effects

Thirdly, politics, understood as a conjunction of different practices formulated from disparate places and problems, makes universality become a secondary demand. Politics consists of the assemblage of the heterogeneous that wants to be arbitrary and singular and is exposed to the paradox that the struggle for this possibility of becoming a whatever being demands a mobilisation that is opposed to this becoming.

In this sense, politics, fourthly, constantly oscillates between a too much and a too little: on the one hand, political acts are not simply a particular placeholder for the universality of a coming community of the free and equal. This freedom is already articulated in them. Beyond symbolic articulation, they are the crystallisation of another time, a micrological intensity. On the other hand, however, political acts are not absolutely singular. As pure singularities they wouldn't construct any connections, they wouldn't point beyond, but only to, themselves and go out like tracers in the night. They could not contribute to the possibility that the improbable occurs, that, through the conjunction of heterogeneous acts, a militant field of forces is created, through which the social situation could be interrupted and changed in a radical way.

To initiate these radical forms of interruption requires, fifthly, a militant organisation that is opposed

to the potentiality of a life not to have to choose between activity and passivity, expenditure and sleep. Thus, one effect of politics can consist of subordinating revolt and dream to the economic primacy of effective doing. The 'organisation which we are able to give to ourselves'<sup>28</sup> is therefore there to both coordinate and keep a distance to the process of politics. For this it would have to reject the romantic tradition by not equating politics with life and a common to be produced.

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Hölderlin, "Hyperion Fragment", p. 33

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