

ANTONIO
NEGRI

FROM THE FACTORY
TO THE METROPOLIS

Translated by Ed Emery



From the Factory to the Metropolis

Antonio Negri

From the Factory
to the Metropolis

Essays Volume 2

Edited by Federico Tomasello

Translated by Ed Emery

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Preface

The thesis that the position of the socialised worker [*operaio sociale*] in the metropolis parallels that of the mass worker in the factory was crucial during the transition from the first phase (1950–60) to the second phase (1970–2000) of Italian workerism [*operaismo*]; it was entirely central to that extraordinary phase of working-class struggles that inspired workerism. My writings that followed from it, from *Empire* to *Multitude* to *Commonwealth*, each time took this motif as their centrepiece in the analysis of the transformation of the capitalist mode of production, and tested and consolidated the effectiveness of the *dispositif* right at the heart of globalisation. Recently I have begun to move forward on this terrain (see in particular Chapters 12, 13 and 14 in Part II and Chapters 15, 16 and 17 in Part III). The thing to do was not – or no longer – to take and compare the two models of factory and metropolis, which had succeeded each other in economic development and in the crisis of the industrial mode of production, but rather to move forward, in a description of the difference between the postindustrial and the postmodern metropolis as a place and space, by now stable, of production and of capitalist exploitation (in postmodernity, to be sure).

All the arguments presented in this book are the outcome of an investigation into the transformations of labour that I developed in parallel with my theoretical and political activity, and they represent a testing of some of those abstract hypotheses. More recently, this analysis and these experimentations have reopened the biopolitical dimensions of the metropolis, completing – so to speak – the picture of the evolution of ‘forms of the city’ described in this volume. It is clear that by ‘forms of the city’ I mean ‘forms of life’. With the emergence of the biopolitical dimension, a new analytical point of

view also comes into play: that of the ‘common’ – that is, the effort to go beyond the interplay between ‘private’ and ‘public’, which has always constituted the concept of the city and sometimes represents its political–administrative aspect. Of course, the concept of the ‘common’ has always been implicit in that of the city – and yet, even when it is not denied or concealed, it is underplayed. The idea of the ‘private’ and the ‘public’ had a monopoly on descriptions and programming of the city (and on its consequent corruption, produced by real estate rent), while the ‘common’ was not accorded the primary role that here, in these essays, I discover and proclaim in the biopolitical. Here my aim is to do away definitively with that hypocrisy.

It follows that the contemporary metropolis can be defined as a space of antagonism between ‘forms of life’ produced at one end by financial capitalism (the capitalism of rent) and at the other by the cognitive proletariat. To arrive at this analytical result – which is a prerequisite for the production of a new subject in struggle – it is also necessary for a new image of exploitation to be built. In defining it, I draw inspiration from David Harvey’s studies on the extraction of surplus value from the city; and I show that this finding is consistent with the work conducted by Italian workerism from the moment in the 1970s when it began to define the new forms of exploitation of the ‘socialised worker’. Cognitive proletariat, exploitation through the extraction of surplus value, the common as a condition and purpose of class struggle (meaning the destruction of capitalism): this is the story of my analytical work on the metropolis.

The older texts date from the second half of the 1990s (already twenty years ago . . . how time flies. . .!). But most of the work is concentrated in the first decade of this century. Here I would like to recall to memory the late Jean Marie Vincent and to thank Maurizio Lazzarato, Judith Revel and Federico Tomasello, with whom I have written some of the essays published here – and with whom I have always discussed these themes.

Toni Negri
Paris, July 2015

Part I

Exodus from the Factory

1

The Reappropriation of Public Space

For twenty years things were going on their way – at least from the crisis of 1971–4, when, having digested the struggles of the 1960s and the defeat in Vietnam, multinational capital relaunched its project of development in terms of a postindustrial modernisation and a liberal policy. Those were the years when neoliberalism was imposed. They were grey years, although they were sometimes alleviated, as happened in France, by a number of workers' offensives (in 1986 for example) and by a succession of student explosions – first expressions of the revolt of immaterial labour – around which social protest attempted in vain to organise itself. December 1995 in France marked the first mass break with the political, economic and ideological regime of the liberal period.

Why were the struggles of December 1995 such a breakthrough? Why is it that we see them as the beginning of the end of the counter-revolution of the second half of the twentieth century?

People have begun to give answers to these questions, and these are often interesting. It is eminently obvious that the growing awareness, particularly marked in France, of the intolerable nature of the processes of globalisation and European integration and the feeling of the new presidency's betrayal of republican promises, along with the set of contradictions produced by the new organisation of social labour – mobility, flexibility, break-up of the labour market, exclusion – and by the crisis of welfare, had immediate effects on the process of formation and radicalisation of the struggle. What seems to me particularly important is the definition of the new context in which the various demands were produced: this was a 'biopolitical' context in the sense that the struggle came up against all the rules of discipline and control of all of the conditions of the reproduction of the

proletariat. In short, the struggle took on a universal meaning and became a struggle 'for the general interest', to the extent of being a refusal of the diktat 'liberalism or barbarism' and of pointing to a new threshold of possibility for the activity of protest and for the expression of a desire for a new world.

However, if we want to understand the radical nature and significance of the epochal rupture that this struggle signals, we have to ask: Who is the protagonist? What is the hegemonic subject of this struggle? What is the stratum of society that has succeeded in a very short time in turning a demands-based struggle into a political struggle against globalised capitalist command? And why? What are the material *dispositifs* that determined the expansion of the struggle and of its political becoming?

It is easy to give an initial answer: this subject is called 'workers in the public services'. They were the ones who – on the railways and in urban transport, in telecommunications, in postal services, in hospitals, in schools, in energy supplies. . . – triggered the struggle; they were the ones who led it, giving a generally offensive meaning to trade union claims. But, unless we ask in what sense these sectors represent something new today within the political and productive apparatus of advanced capitalism, that answer may not be of much interest. I mean that, in the history of working-class struggles, there have been other episodes in which the ability to block the circulation of goods has been fundamental to political confrontations (in particular, strikes on the railways have always been part of the insurrectional history of labour). But today, in the organisation of advanced capital, the ability – of workers in the public transport services, and in communications, health and energy – to assail a system of production with decisive political force becomes decisive by comparison to any other capacity. Thatcher and Reagan, those muscular initiators of liberal strategy, showed that they knew this well when, in launching their restructuring so as to set an example, they targeted workers in the energy sector and in the air transport industry. But why?

An answer that is not mere platitudes is possible only if we recognise above all that, within the structure of advanced capitalism, the ensemble of transport, communications, education and energy, in other words the major public services, is no longer simply a moment in the circulation of goods or an element in the reproduction of wealth; rather it represents the global form that structures production itself. They told us a thousand times that production had become circulation, that we had to work by 'just in time' methods, and that the worker had to become a link in the social chain. The public

service strikers have just shown that, when they hit the link of circulation, they also hit the whole chain of production; that, when they acted on the content, all the content had to react. And, since we are talking here not only of structures of production but also of *subjective forces* that come to be defined through them, we can see clearly why the struggle of public service workers ‘represented’ from the start the totality of workers and why, from the strategic place that the former occupy, their struggle immediately struck the entire production system and its new social and political dimensions.

To all those who define this fight as ‘reactionary’ and ‘conservative’, and also to those who are keen on objective analyses of the process of production, we can immediately retort that these struggles and their main actors have, on the contrary, a central and decisive role in the new mode of production: they have brought the [class] struggle to bear on the really decisive point of capitalist ‘reform’ and, for this reason alone, have blocked it.

* * *

But the protagonists of the fight were not only blue-collar workers and, more generally, workers in the public services. In a similar way, the million women and men who, in Paris and in all the cities of France, in order to get to work or simply to travel around, made efforts worthy of a time of war, in very difficult conditions – those people too were protagonists. The media portrayed these efforts and this daily toil with a certain lyricism – in an attempt first to organise a consumer revolt, then, once this operation had been massively rejected, to extol the civic-mindedness and conviviality of the public’s behaviours while harping on the hardships caused by the strike. But have not industrial sociology, neoliberal ideology and state literature been telling us for years that in the postindustrial system consumers are themselves producers of services? How did these producers of ideology manage to contradict themselves so blatantly, by trying to set the community of users against the public service workers or by attempting to define them at all costs as two separate communities?

Users are indeed ‘coproducers’ of public services. They come in different categories (the gamut ranges from maximally passive consumption to minimal interactivity and from minimal passive consumption to maximal interactivity; an example of the former is users in the energy service, while operatives in telecommunications, education and health are examples of the latter). In the struggle today, this ‘coproduction’ has manifested a very high level of consciousness. The users have recognised interests of their own in the fight of workers

with whom they coproduce the services. If services are a form of coproduction, then they are public by definition. I am not denying that there may be opposition and that contradictions may emerge between supply and demand for services; I simply want to make the point that these contradictions occur within a public dimension. So, when the service workers turned their struggle into a defence of and a statement about the public nature of their production and called for it to be recognised as such, the ‘users’ recognised themselves completely as ‘coproducers’ of this same struggle. Trekking on foot in the snow, hitch-hiking, queuing, hours of waiting, all this has to be considered moments of struggle. The power of the strike was not demonstrated solely through noisy trade-union marches, but above all through the festive parades of people in the streets every morning and every evening. It was not a ‘strike by delegation’ but a diffuse strike that involved the whole of social life and people’s everyday routines. In the dictionary of strikes invented by the proletariat in struggle (trade-union strike, general strike, staggered strike, wildcat strike and so on) we should add this new entry: the metropolitan strike.

Let’s take a closer view: when we press this idea of a ‘coproduction’ of underground struggle, we are indicating a concept of the ‘public’ that has revolutionary value. It is impossible not to recognise an act of ‘reappropriation of administration’ in the feeling of co-responsibility that ‘users’ experience towards a practice such as a strike in the service sector; a direct and subversive act. Having understood the nature of this act, our thinking cannot but retrace its assumptions: the identification of the public service, and thus of its management and its productive functions, at a very general level, as something common to all; common to all in the manner of all products of cooperation, from language to democratic administration. This is a definition of the ‘public’ that has nothing more to do with its ‘statist’ definition.

* * *

When it sets about privatising public services, the state reveals its capitalist face. On the contrary, these struggles reveal a subversive face beyond the state and its function as guardian of capital. Even when some of the actors support the idea of a ‘public service in French style’ [*alla francese*], I think that very few would consider defending this residue of the Third Republic, which is reactualised by the Fordist compromise between the popular forces of the Resistance and Gaullist technocracy and still exists in anachronistic ways, as a credible option today. Today’s struggles tell us that, if a ‘public

service *alla francese* is to have any future, it will have to be set up in completely new terms: as a first experiment in the reconstruction of public service within a democratic dynamic of reappropriation of administration, of democratic coproduction of the service. In fact a new problematic is opening up through these struggles: a constitutive problematic. So we have to understand what it means to talk about a new 'public nature of the services', which, by allowing their removal from privatisation and from the rules of the world market, also allows their removal from the ideological mystifications that arise from the globalising and directly capitalistic function of the activity of the national state. Awareness of this problematic is implicit in the struggles; it represents their subversive potential. In addition, if it is true that services are now the 'global form' of every form of productivity, both statist and private, and if it is true that they reveal how the role of cooperation in production and circulation as a whole is central and exemplary, then this new concept of the public will be the paradigm of any new experience of socialised production.

In short, the public, understood as a set of activities under the supervision of the state that allow the reproduction of the capitalist system and of private accumulation, has ceased to exist here. We are facing a new concept of the public, namely that of a production organised on the basis of interactivity, in which the development of wealth and the development of democracy become indistinguishable, just as the interactive widening of the social bond [*il legame sociale*] is inseparable from the reappropriation of administration by the productive subjects. Here the elimination of exploitation becomes visible; it appears no longer as a myth but as a concrete possibility.

* * *

But this new subjective dimension of the public is not something that affects only the socialised workers [*operai sociali*], in other words the workers in the social services sector. It is something that, as we have seen, has also invested the subjectivity of the coproducers of services, and therefore of all the citizens who work. The 'Tous ensemble' ['All Together'] element of the slogan used in the struggles has brought to light a new community, a productive social community that wants to be recognised. This recognition is twofold. At stake here in the first place is the dynamic of recomposition that runs through the movement, the community of struggle in which all workers [*lavoratori*] are called together by those factory workers [*operai*] who, by virtue of their position, form the substantial axis of productive cooperation. And this is the first dynamic of the process. Then, in the second

place, the recognition claimed here consists in the reappropriation of the service, both by the community in struggle and by those who, in their work, use the services to produce wealth.

So the struggle functions as the prefiguration of the aim [*fine*] towards which it tends; the method – the ‘being together’ in order to win – is the prefiguration of the goal [*finalità*], it is ‘being together’ in order to build wealth outside capitalism and against it.

What is worth emphasising here is that, in the struggle we have lived through, and especially where public services were involved, the concept of community has been enriched with fundamental articulations. Especially in subversive thought, the concept of community has often been considered, as something that obfuscates the concrete articulations of exploitation, flattening them into a shape in which the association of subjects as a whole would be given in the unity of the function rather than in the contradictory articulation of the associative and productive process. In the course of the struggle that I am analysing, an extremely articulated community appears for the first time: a *Gemeinschaft* that has in it all the characteristics of multiplicity and opposes power, as a productive ensemble.

Reflection on the movement thus leads to raising the problem of the transition to a higher level in the organisation of production, where the public is regarded as a set of social functions that, thanks to the wealth of its articulations, does not require a separation between levels of production and levels of command. On the contrary, the reappropriation of command in the production function and the construction of the social bond now form a continuum. The problem of transition to an autonomous social community, to communism, lies now not only in the definition of the forms of struggle to be conducted against the state, but rather in the definition of stages and forms that will allow the reappropriation of the productive functions by the community.

‘Tous ensemble’ is a project of transition to communism. These struggles allow us to start once again to call the real movement of transformation of the present state of things by its name. And, while the work to be done to recompose in the imaginary the real movement and the development of history is huge, we can begin to give shape to the utopia of the movement through enunciations that translate the desire.

* * *

The slogan ‘Tous ensemble’ was launched and taken up by the movement, in conjunctural fashion, as an invitation to workers in

private enterprises to join the struggle. We have seen how the slogan then gradually transformed itself. But it is true to say that its first meaning, the first invitation, fell on deaf ears. Why? Why was it that workers who belonged to the sector of the economy defined as 'juridically' private did not join the fight?

The explanations that have been offered for the fact that workers in the private sector did not join the fight are very realist. They range from reasons that cite the wage structure (wage earners were picked out according to the extent of their involvement and hence suffered immediate repression from bosses in the event of strike action) to reasons that cite the crisis of trade unionism in the private sector, both in industry and in services. However, while they are realist, these explanations overlook an important structural element of the private enterprise, namely that the tendency to the transformation of the production structure into a public service structure is not yet clear there. It remains hidden, on the one hand by the strong persistence of manufacturing industries and on the other by the egregious dominance of the rules of private profit, often reinterpreted in the light of financial models. The time has perhaps come to say that the productive functions related to manufacturing are on the way out; therefore working-class social strata tied to manufacturing functions are the ones most sensitive to the threat of unemployment and hence most vulnerable. It is precisely for this reason that they are less able to carry out struggles of an offensive nature. Now they are locked into a paradox: when the moment comes for them to join the struggle, they will be effectively engaged in destroying the places of production from which they receive their wages today. They are a bit like the peasants in the French Revolution, fighting to ensure not the victory of the system of production of which they are a part, but rather that of another system of production, in which they will be crushed.

But this interpretation holds not only for the workers in the private manufacturing sector. In the private sector, by contrast, service companies are now present in growing numbers. The large manufacturing companies are increasingly 'outsourcing' their directly and indirectly productive functions, reducing them to commercial services and inserting them into the context of social production. And it is in the private services sector that the rediscovery of the public, and therefore the recomposition of the new proletariat, are possible. They are possible in the private sector, in those spaces where workers take on temporal flexibility and spatial mobility as their fundamental characteristics. These are the spaces where profit is formed, as in the public sectors, most notably through the exploitation of social cooperation.

In the December struggles the invitation extended to the private sector to join the movement was characterised by delay and confusion. This invitation was made in the traditional form of an appeal to private sector manufacturing workers, whereas during the struggle it was the workers and the operators of services, even services in the private sector, who had come to recognise themselves in the new concept of public – and hence in the cooperative reappropriation of the production of wealth through the democratic construction and administration of a productive society.

Now I can return to the problem of identifying the subject of the December movement. At a superficial level, I can start by saying that we are dealing with ‘public service’ workers. Later they come to be seen as ‘social workers’, in other words as producers of social *products* and, through those, as producers of wealth. In the third instance, this identification is reinforced by the fact that the customers for those services, or citizens in general, have coproduced this struggle. Fourth, it is clear that the service sector is public in nature, which makes it the strategic location of exploitation and therefore of the new contradictions on which offensive struggles can be developed. Fifth, it is clear that workers in the private sector services, in other words the majority of workers in the private sector that has restructured itself into services, will in turn be drawn into the cycle of struggles.

But social workers are immaterial workers. They are so inasmuch as they are highly educated, because their work and their effort are essentially intellectual and because their activity is cooperative. A production made of linguistic acts and cooperative activities is now located at the heart of society and of its structures of power. The social worker is immaterial by virtue of participating in the new intellectual and collaborative nature of labour.

Now, this new nature of work is always *bios*, a whole life of needs and desires, of singularities, and of generations that succeed one another. The subjects of the December movement have shown, through the struggle and its objectives, that the whole of life, in all its complexity, is an object of struggle and a production of subjectivity – and thus a refusal of the enslavement of social cooperation to the development of capital.

In any case, as the striking workers told the government, even if you are not willing to acknowledge the freedom proper to the intellectual and collective nature of labour, you will be forced to acknowledge that it is not going to go away and to acknowledge its power [*potenza*]; without taking this reality fully into account, you