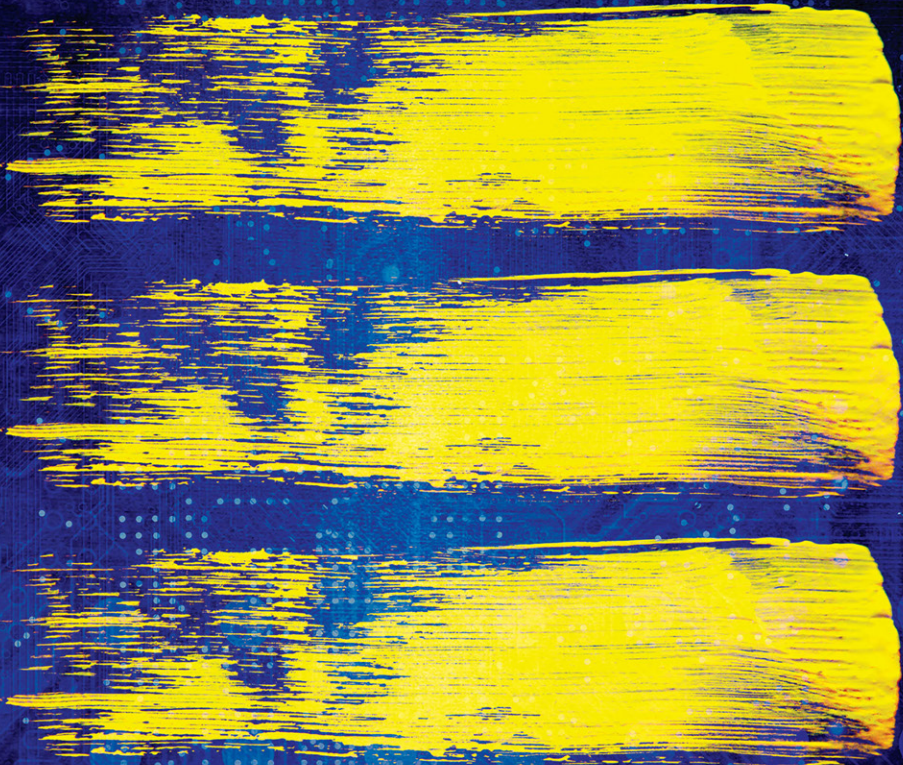


ANTONIO

NEGRI

THE COMMON



TRANSLATED BY ED EMERY

The Common

Antonio Negri

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polity

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Preface

From the 'Public' to the 'Common'

Is democracy, as it is interpreted and experienced today in the West, a guarantee of freedom for citizens? The general and generic answer is, more or less, yes. But, as soon as you try to define this 'freedom' and ask yourself what are the effects of its hegemony in the charters of democratic regimes in the West, that consensus vanishes and you get instead confusion and differences of position. This is because that freedom, as embodied in Western democracy, is the freedom of the individual, of the desire to appropriate that defines the individual more than anything else does, of the contract that the individual produces in order to build the collective moment that is necessary for the development of social life. (I use here the term 'collective' rather than 'public' because the latter retains a juridical origin that makes it ill-suited and hardly does justice to the fulness of its usage in social life.)

In the face of growing scepticism, one wonders in fact whether this constitutive process of the collective as a product of individualism responds adequately to the current situation in which citizens live and produce – whether it is capable of bringing about the transformation of individual freedom into the collective freedom that citizens need, in short, whether it can build a civil society free of even greater difficulties and obstacles. As I restate and clarify my position on whether western democracy, in taking individual freedom as its watchword, can be an effective guarantee of a good life for society, my answer has to be in the negative. There is no connection of individual freedoms on a collective terrain, as long as appropriative individuals, together with their contractual prostheses, are held at the centre of society's constitutive process. The appropriative individual, private property, contractual mechanisms and private law are not machines that form

a free society; rather they are machines that imprison the desire for sociability and the need to live a good life together – a life that is collectively ordered, a true democracy.

This awareness of society's civil rights crisis and obstacles in the search for freedom itself is ceaselessly renewed in the experience of productive life, which constitutes the backbone of modern society. During the last century of capitalist development, production became increasingly socialized, to the point of crossing a threshold: beyond this point it is no longer the result of a socially invasive process, of alienation and consumption, but has become the collective basis and common foundation of every new order of reproduction in society. We have called this new condition 'postmodernity' – this society where production is completely socialized. The continuous interchange between the private and the collective has reached a point of tendential hegemony of the latter over the former and can be seen in the forms of life that have consolidated in the twenty-first century. And these new forms of life, themselves contradictory, demand to be questioned.

The postmodern order can be described as a heavy (and sometimes horrible) domination exercised by the few over the very many who work, produce and create the wealth of living socially. The transition from modernity to postmodernity, from the industrial mode to the informatics-led and immaterial mode of production, often takes place by preserving the continuity of the old domination. This is due to the inertia of the past or to the ebb and blockage of the new movements of transformation. While life and production have changed, and while the sense of the collective and a thriving socialization have come to a standstill, command remains the same. Representative democracy – which had a hard time portraying values of freedom and participation (and all too often did so deceptively) – is definitively on the decline. The collective has to find means of political expression. This is the only way to save democracy – through self-renewal. But how is that to happen?

In the interregnum in which we were living, it did not take much for a positive 'key' to be introduced in the debate – an element to help us traverse these times and win some space in the conflicts that run through it. (Nothing much was to be expected from those who, like the Marxists who criticized *operaismo*, had come up with proposals for reading the great transition from modernity to postmodernity.) A theoretical key that arose from a reflection on the transformations in the production of life and from perceptions of the advanced degree of its socialization.

We were sunk in a state of confusion and indistinction. The complete socialization of the form of life gave the sensation of being in a common dark condition. But in order to live one had to turn on a light and shake and question that dead assemblage of lives. We had suffered a becoming common that now confused us. Life rose up and wanted to regain meaning. That 'becoming common' had to be analysed; and immediately it appeared to have two senses. On the one hand, it was a common like a collective of production and consumption in which the domination of capital had been completely realized and that presented itself now in totalitarian form. On the other hand, it was a common that, in addition to the recognition of capitalist socialization, appeared as a capacity of the cooperation of workers and citizens to be effective and as their political power. The maturation of this opposition was the sign of the limits of capitalism in our time; the common showed itself as the active force that recomposed production, society and life into a new experience of freedom.

It may be objected that, at least since the birth of socialism, this trend towards the growing socialization of production has been taken to be a prerequisite of progress towards the common. And the objection is correct. But there are writers, still today, who do not make the distinction but rather emphasize the continuity of eras and see the common as an ideal to be realized across them – one and the same, from the birth of the first workers' leagues to the self-revelation of the worker as a communist in the more advanced informatics networks. This is not true. When we speak of 'the common' today, we do not speak about a utopia to be realized, or an ethical-political principle, or a metaphysical truth that could unite humanity in a project to come. Rather we speak of a being-together, already powerfully realized in daily life, and thus of a real condition (presupposition, foundation) in every form of contemporary life: the common has become the ontological structure of living.

The subject of production, like that of the *polis*, is collective. As such it is organized as labour power and commanded by the order of exploitation. But in this condition, as a subjectivity hitherto objectified, it can – by rebelling, recognizing and assuming the power that constitutes it – break the relationship that binds it to the capitalist order and open up to the order of the common.

The function that keeps these two conditions apart and opposed to each other is private property. The juridical order of property is what constitutes the line of fortification of modern individualism against the postmodern common. And this is an efficacious operation. In this way the common is born in the cage of private property, and when it comes

out it is once again caged, put in new chains and in new containers. This is where socialist reformism has done all its misdeeds. But one cannot expect that the power of the common will not explode sooner or later, demolishing all the miserable constraints that hold it back, and that the common will not appear, subjectivated and rearticulated, in institutions that will strengthen, along with freedom, the equality and ability of every citizen to participate in the making of the city.

This book brings together a number of articles, previously not translated into English, in which I continue and deepen at the political level the theoretical work that I conducted with Michael Hardt from 2008 on, in the volume *Commonwealth* (published in 2009), precisely on the subject of the common. As will be seen, my concern in these writings is to ground the concept of the common in a materialist fashion. Only one essay published here, the first, precedes the others: it was written in 1975. But it is useful both because it links the discussion of the common to the Marxist critique of the concept of state (on this account it was part of the political materials produced in the struggles of Italy's long red decade) and because it brings out with clarity, from the beginning, the materiality of the concept of common – which is thus set outside any modernist assimilation to the concept of public. I would therefore say that the pieces in this collection were written against the new metaphysics of the common, against its idealization. We do not know the common as an ideality, except in the hybrid form it takes in financialization – the ultimate expression of the alienated common, the common of money. Or in law. Or – and here we go back to basics – in private property. Each of these aspects of the odyssey of the common is taken into consideration here, as are the steps in a rediscovery of its new materiality: the common as a mode of production – that is, within or against the production of the common: the common as a starting reality from which a new communist project becomes possible.

★

I want to conclude this sixth volume of essays for Polity Press with a few words about Ed Emery – the translator of these trilogies and of many more of my writings. Having come to the end of a life of study and political activity devoted to building a society of free and equal human beings, and having learned how strong the repression of these passions is, the more I feel friendship – or, better, brotherhood – for a man like Ed, who has always been by my side – in sharing intelligence and in overcoming difficulties. Thanks, Ed. In addition I would like to offer a big thank you to Manuela Tecusan for her precious editorial work on these texts.

Part I

Advances

1

State, Public Spending and the Decrepitude of the Historic Compromise*

In this article I continue my exploration of public spending, a discussion that began with my article ‘On Some Trends of More Recent Communist Theory of the State: A Critical Review’ (now in my volume *Marx in Movement: Operaismo in Context* at Polity, 2021).

This is also something of a bibliographic review (many materials not mentioned in the first review, or that have come to my attention subsequently, are presented here). My purpose is simply to set out a proposal for debate.

This deepening of the discussion doesn’t come without a polemic – against those who use Marxist terminology to discuss the state but have never read a state budget; against those who philosophize about the state or about the ‘autonomy of the political’ but do not act in a Marxian way against the concrete modalities of exploitation guaranteed or organized by the state.

1. The problem, broadly outlined: conditions in the literature and conditions in reality

In the major capitalist countries, public spending (of the state and of the public sector) currently approaches or exceeds half of the gross national income. The rate of growth of public spending, as compared with the rate of growth in national income, is an unstoppable

* First published as ‘Stato, spesa pubblica e fatiscenza del compromesso storico’ (1975), in Antonio Negri, *La Forma Stato: Per la critica dell’economia politica della costituzione*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 1977, pp. 233–47 and 251–60.

upward trend.* ‘Despite this, in the Marxist literature there are only isolated studies that examine the causes and effects of this unprecedented growth.’¹ And where these studies do exist, only rarely do they capture the specificity of the new situation; rather they find the explanation in the old objectivism of the theory of state monopoly capitalism, with results that are entirely unsatisfactory.

In the theory of state monopoly capitalism, government spending appears as a simple financing of private capital or of its direct public projections. The crisis effects related to the expansion of public spending are both unexplained and inexplicable.

Now, the interpretations of the crisis in the advanced capitalist countries that avoid the problems of public spending, in their indisputable individuality, seem to me rather like Don Ferrante’s explanations of the plague!

Yet, while the communist theory of the state has rejected the theses of the theory of state monopoly capitalism and its parallel versions, recently it has not refused to take on board the new relationship between the state (as centre of real and collective attribution of the capitalist ideal) and the critical contortions of the capitalist economy;² and there seems to be no doubt now that the state moves as a political and at the same time economic force at the centre of the process of circulation of capital – not a subordinate force but one with essential functions. The trend noted by Marx and Engels is now coming to its completion. And the complementary component of the tendency is also being realized: the action of the working class has a definitely unbalancing effect on the system.

The more the double face of the commodity and of the process of producing commodities is revealed in the antagonism that constitutes them, the more the mechanism of circulation of capital – production plus reproduction – takes place and reaches global proportions in the advanced capitalist state.

But theoretical awareness generally stops here. If the state assumes this central role, as they say, its spending, which means public spending, should be considered as a wage bill of the state as factory [*fabbrica-Stato*].

And when criticism of political economy commits violence against political economy (as communists should), the fight *over* public spending should be seen as a crucial battleground. But no. The statist mythology of the social democratic and revisionist tradition gets

* ‘upward trend’ in English in the original.

the upper hand again and intimidates criticism when it cannot avoid it, or forces it to bow to the capitalist fetishes of balance and financial evaluation! Marx is replaced by Schmidt and Gotha triumphs over critique.

So Jim O'Connor, who has pushed forward the identification of wages and public spending more than anyone else,³ dithers about the distinction between state as social capital and state as social spending, an analytically useful but entirely abstract distinction, and also a wrong one if it tends to assert that the production and reproduction of elements of variable capital (as is today the chief function of public spending) need to be viewed as unproductive spending. On the contrary, in the second section of Marx's schema for the structure of reproductions,⁴ this spending for the reproduction of elements of variable capital is indirectly productive and thus is productive of surplus value, all the more so as the mechanism of capitalist production extends over the whole of society.⁵ The gap* that O'Connor rightly registers between directly productive state investments and indirectly productive state spending is not *in itself* a determinant of economic imbalance (as seems implicit in his position): it becomes one insofar as working-class and proletarian action unbalances the relationship in terms of power, of continuous and unrelenting pressure, of continuous struggle.

Even less is it possible to continue to maintain that the crisis induced on state budgets by increased public spending is internal, and indeed determining, in relation to the profitability crisis of mature capitalism.⁶ Such a relation no doubt exists, but it is certainly not linear: the crisis does not consist in the increase in public spending, nor does it insist on the fact that this spending is itself in contradiction with private accumulation. Public spending becomes an element of contradiction because working-class and proletarian power upsets the relationship with the state's system of domination – in the capitalist relation the latter is, on the contrary, a balancing element – and upsets it in *the irrationality* of proletarian pressure and workers' struggle.

So then, addressing the relationship between state and public spending means eliminating from the outset any simplification that might derive from objectivisms of the type generated by the theory of state monopolist capitalism. It means assuming once and for all that the state is both terrain and subject of the fundamental contradiction

* 'gap' in English in the original.

that capitalist development registers in the face of the social emergence of the proletarian class. It means finally recognizing that the mechanisms of crisis follow, in Marxian fashion, from the ‘explosion’ (as Marx called it) of the relation that capital is, in other words from the relation between the two classes in struggle, since ultimately everything rests on the ‘proportion between necessary labour and surplus value or, if you please,* between the different moments of objectified labour and living labour’⁷ around the problem of exploitation and its proportions. Public spending is the public and statal form in which the relationship of statal exploitation of the workers’ society of productive labour is misrepresented: public spending is social wage, and the analysis and unbalancing action of the working class must develop on it.

Finally, addressing the relationship between state and public spending means disposing of any residue of social democratic and revisionist statism, of any illusion about the state as a neutral and relatively autonomous mediator, and also of the alleged dual nature of the state – ‘good’ when it assists private capitalists, ‘bad’ when it finances them! Unfortunately the state is not Manichean; it is an organic structure of the power of the ruling class. ‘Whatever its form, the state is essentially a capitalist machine. State of capitalists, an ideal capitalist collective.’⁸ The chapter on the state in *Capital* that Marx did not write was written by the later capitalist development, but it follows the indication left by the Marxian tendency. The duty of critique falls on us.

So much for public spending. A revolutionary use of direct wages, of relative wages, has always been part of the working-class experience: ‘the struggle against the reduction of relative wages also means struggle against the commodity character of labour power, that is, against capitalist production as a whole. The fight against the fall in relative wages is no longer a battle carried out on the terrain of mercantile economy but a revolutionary attack on the foundations of this economy; it is the socialist movement of the proletariat.’⁹ But a chapter of struggle that remains unknown, or in any case has not reached a sufficient level of militant awareness, is the one that needs to be written on the social wage versus the state.

This is a programme that concerns society’s productive labour power in its entirety, at the level of capitalist development that Marx describes as a phase in which the potential of the entire community

* ‘if you please’ in English in the original.

of labour is opposed to capital as a simple mediator of circulation–realization.¹⁰ Here the critique of political economy turns immediately into a critique of politics, because the proletarian assault on the social wage invests public spending as a capitalist terrain of the organization of the relationship between production and consensus, between development and domination, between political constitution and proletarian social struggles.

Here the theoretical practice of capital is a step ahead on a terrain that the proletariat confronts only episodically and spontaneously, when it comes to struggle.

Of course, working-class spontaneity is enormous and deadly: in all mature capitalist countries there is not a single municipal budget that holds – I mean, at the level of the relation of mediation and direct control exercised by the state as employer [*Stato-padrone*]. The capitalist attempt to extort social surplus value in order to mediate and contain the level of social struggles is everywhere in crisis. The mechanism of authorizations and controls – this fundamental key to the administrative rationalization of the state-based command of capital – has been thrown into crisis everywhere, by waves of struggles of appropriation.¹¹ But even as the levels of working-class struggle are high and strong, capital, too, works continuously on readjustment, on the concentration of control, on administrative planning and spending. Properly speaking, capital and its science do not anticipate the problem but win out on the transition from working-class determination to capitalist closure of the crisis; they anticipate its outcome. ‘They’ are all working flat out on this. How to close the gap between the state budget and public spending has become the fundamental problem; how to rearticulate together, in one unit, the differences and asymmetries between the mechanism of financial control and the urgencies of political intervention is the second essential problem, correlated to the first.¹² Where the principle of bureaucratic–rational legitimation is insufficiently grounded and incapable of being applied to a too deep and widespread a conflict, one has recourse to charismatic legitimacy, to political pressure, and to participatory mystifications of the ‘pink councils’ [*giunte rosa*], so that the level of inputs* in the demand for public spending be reduced.

But the stakes around these issues are big. Even when the theories of communist writers do not lead us to define the scale of the problem, the behaviour of the two parties in struggle would necessarily

* ‘inputs’ in English in the original.

take us there, anyway: the proletarian insistence in this area, and the capitalist attempt at repressive anticipation. At this point, ‘public spending’ becomes a central element of the debate. Around it we have to try to understand whether that category includes and transforms some important problems of analysis and of proletarian struggle – namely problems related to the quality and intensity of exploitation – and whether, from the point of view of an overall working-class theoretical practice, the eventual new relations do not modify our assumptions on the definition of the state and the communist struggle against the state.

Of course, an analysis around this theme could be conducted altogether differently; it could be focused on the material dimensions, *chez nous*, of public spending and of the possibilities of working-class attack.

I am aware that many comrades are working on this question, and I hope that the results of their work will soon be made public.

2. An initial analytic approach: elements of evaluation regarding the trend towards the social unification of productive labour

In discussing public spending it is perhaps necessary, more than in any other case, to place oneself firmly on the Marxian ground of analysis of the process of circulation of capital, as a sphere of production and reproduction (and innovation) not only of commodities but also of social relationships, and thus – in the Marxian tendency – of the subject and of revolutionary antagonism. This is difficult when, as happens even in the writers most definitely associated with the class point of view, the neoclassical and Keynesian mystification of the commodity system continues to dominate the horizon.

Take for example the categorization of public spending proposed by J. O’Connor.¹³ In his definition, public spending involves the following categories. ‘(1) Social investments, consisting of projects and services that increase the productivity of given amounts of labour, and, all other factors being stable, increase the rate of profit. This is social constant capital. (2) Social consumption, consisting of projects and services that lower the reproduction costs of labour power and, all other factors being stable, increase the rate of profit. This is variable social capital. (3) Social spending, consisting of projects and services required to maintain social harmony.’¹⁴ Now, this distinction – which is both analytically useful and insecure¹⁵ – becomes

dangerous when it is unilaterally assumed to define the gaps* and the reasons for imbalances between sectors of spending. For in this way imbalances, crises, and especially inflation are seen objectively and, to put it in Keynesian language, as arising from dysfunctions in the organization of distribution. But the analysis does not go beyond that tiny barrier. It limits itself without venturing to address the materiality and strength of the social relations that preside over the diversification of sectors and over the disproportions that occur in spending or distribution. ‘Necessarily’ – as Hirsch notes,¹⁶ when writing about the work of Offe – ‘in this way the concept of “society” is reduced to a phenomenological concept of structure’ and the state is stripped of the class character which characterizes its (political) structural intervention in society for domination over the relations of reproduction.

Instead, what needs to be immediately attacked is the terrain of the proletarian subject and the location of that subject within the capitalist circulation of goods, because here the changes have been so large as to destroy the possibility of neoclassical and Keynesian interpretations of the asymmetries and imbalances in public spending. In short, my hypothesis is that these are not simply imbalances of distribution; they reveal a much weightier and deeper structure, which is manifest first in the modification of the place and nature of productive labour in mature capitalist society and, second, in the level of struggle and demand for power expressed by the new proletarian subject. I shall attempt to demonstrate this claim.

At the root of the theory of disproportions in public spending and of the theory that inflation is an effect of increase in public spending (especially in the sector that O’Connor defines as ‘social spending’) lies the belief that ‘all or most of state sector jobs are unproductive’.¹⁷ But the possibility that even employees who work in the sector of ‘social consumption’ (as O’Connor calls it) are non-productive seems definitively excluded by the consideration – already mentioned – that they are subsumed under the second wing of the Marxian schema of reproduction. This leaves the employees of the third group mentioned by O’Connor – the ‘social spending’ group, which one is imperceptibly led to identify with work in the production of ‘luxury’ goods – anyway, not producers of value, as one remembers from Marx.¹⁸

But what does this compartmentalization mean at the present level of capitalist integration (through the state) of civil society? Are the

* ‘gaps’ in English in the original.