

EXODUS, UNIQUENESS AND MULTITUDE

Interview of Marco Scotini with Paolo Virno

Marco Scotini: In tracing a map of the "multitude continent"—a figure with which you yourself define the actual condition of social life—how would you represent it? Does a model for the representation of the "many" exist that can counter and substitute the decline of unifying images showing membership in a class, populace, race, and religion, especially in a moment in which the new social protagonists refuse to support a representative government (of sovereignty) and the conditions that make every representation possible?

Paolo Virno: Well, above all there is the strict problem of political theory: what are the political organisms of the "many," of this plurality that persists as such, which is not a limited episode, between parentheses, but a possible form of political existence? What are the organisms? Certainly, the theory of representation that had as its terminal point the State has decreased. In any case, with the sovereign deriving from the forms of absolute monarchy, from the forms of real socialism, etc, there is therefore a corrosion of the representation of the State, which has been justly defined, for example, by Carl Schmitt as "the monopoly of political decision". Here, obviously, the multitude is antimonopolistic, corroding and reducing, put in a condition to avoid damage. Therefore, this monopoly is a mode of being that undermines the foundations to the roots of representative democracy. One may speak thus of a long period—that which lies before us—of the invention of political organisms that are not representative, of a non-representational democracy. All of the weakness of the question rests in that need to define in a negative and non-representational way a thing that otherwise would merit a profile in high relief with its very own characteristics.

I have as an impression that the basic themes of the Commune of Paris and even those of the Soviets become realistic only now, only in these conditions of scientific, intellectual, and communicative development. Thus, one may speak of a "Soviet Mass Intellectuality" or of the "Commune of the Multitude," but this deals with allusions. What counts is that the organisms of non-representational democracy have neither the anarchic simplification nor the myth of the permanent assembly. In reality, it regards the re-appropriation of that which today is frozen in the state administration: knowledge, scientific nexuses, and science. It concerns, let us say, giving value to that cooperation that is already very rich and complicated in itself, and that already lives as a constitutional principle in the productive process of post-Fordism. That is to say, it assumes a constitutional importance for which the aspect of self-government, the re-appropriation of that which today is fixed and frozen in the administrative apparatus, becomes a realistic fact. So the organisms of non-representational democracy or "Soviet Mass Intellectuality" are capable of resolving from within, in the most pertinent and inventive manner that I know, the problems of the environment, of revenue, of work, of migration, and the difficulties with the systems of communication. Here, it would naturally be wrong to think that the multitude is a myriad, a dusting of proliferating differences. The multitude also has its own communal point.

M.S.: In that case, is it still possible to create representable unity as such out of the multiplicity? Is plurality already destined to be pure dispersion, inarticulate fragmentation, and difference? Yet is it necessary to assume a diverse point of view in order to be able to represent it?

P. V.: In the political scheme established in the seventeenth century and thereafter, the One is the terminal point and the point of convergence, a point in which all processes in a certain sense cease and this One is the sovereign, the State. The question to ask oneself is not so much if the Many, the multitude, rid themselves of the One, because this would be a dangerous naïveté, but rather how much they prepare themselves for a different One and for a diverse relationship between the One and the Many. The different One, in short, I think is a little like what Marx called the "general intellect" of the society. With this

terminology, one can intend many things with regard to aspects of human nature and of our species: the possession of language, abstract thought, and capacity for coordination and self-reflection. Some materialistic and social characteristics of the species that became highlighted can as such constitute a common premise for the action of single elements. So it would be a matter of One's actuality of knowledge, intellect, language, and communication capable of constituting that unitary basis that then authorizes differences, but which precisely authorizes them as a supposition and a premise. It is a matter of understanding anew this Marxist image of the general intellect that Marx adopted principally to explain how capitalism with respect to its situation would have functioned in the future. He said, "No more simple and parcelled work with work on the one side and knowledge on the other, but the true pillar of the production of wealth will be the intellectual capacity of the society". Here, the problem is to understand if this passage, aside from being a key to explain how the post-Fordist (actual) economy functions, can also be a political principle and thus be the One upon which many depend and therefore a premise rather than an arrival point. In a certain sense, one can say, playing with the phrase of Rousseau on *general will*, "Well, the many do not have need of a *general will* because they already have a *general intellect* on which to rely." While it can be put in this way, there is still another aspect.

M.S.: Is the "general intellect" always predetermined? Is it something from which to draw for once and for all, or in as much an attribute of actual work, to be re-determined from time to time?

P.V.: The *general intellect* can be understood in different ways and not by chance in the last thirty or forty years has been the object of even fierce discussions that nevertheless had the merit of referring to what happened concretely utilizing such a category as a litmus paper in order to understand reality better. Marx substantially understood it as a system of machines that introjected within itself the natural sciences and applied them to production.

Today, one may understand above all, this *general intellect* as a whole of actual work that cooperates and communicates. Therefore, it has a change of position from fixed capital to actual work and should not be considered as a whole of knowledges fixed in their content, because otherwise, one would find oneself before an embarrassing situation with a vaguely totalitarian flavour, that is, that there are knowledge that are premised on the acting of the many. No, the problem is more to consider the contents of knowledge and the faculty itself that is the power of knowledge and the power of communication. Therefore, how can I say, the *faculty of thought* more than a determined thought. The whole of this faculty—now one uses the term "species-specific" to indicate those that characterize our species—which has an immediate social relevance, an immediate visibility, and that today can be assumed as the *general intellect*. Nevertheless, then, every speaker has the same relationship with his own language. Language is not a whole of fixed contents. It is the possibility to leave from that which constructs the phrases and the most diverse expressions. Finally, the *general intellect* is more intellect in general and more the faculty of the intellect than an established repertory.

M.S.: Who brought the *general intellect* to this level of historical and conceptual awareness as a universal and essential factor of the multitude? Was it the process of globalization?

P.V.: Yes, it should have been visible, precisely seen as a point of immediate departure of every work, of every praxis (action), and of every initiative. So rather than a relationship between the global and local—which is naturally true—there is this connection between a high level of generality—*general intellect*—and the unrepeatable contingency of the unique action of the individual.

M.S.: In this sense you affirm that foreigners "are always thinkers" because they return to the "communal places" in order to orient themselves in a world in which they are never at home. And the condition of foreigners now belongs to everyone as a constituent characteristic of the "many."

P.V.: We have to fare with the world rather than with little environmental niches that have always been a way for culture to take refuge from the world as a vital context filled with the unexpected. The niches, the pseudo cultural ambients, and historians had very important apotropaic, defensive, and protective functions. Instead, the actual condition is one placed in direct relation with its worldliness, with the "world of the haves."

There is the other question that you posited, that notion of representation that no longer exists—not withstanding that there is an obvious homonymy and that there is also probably a conceptual relationship—that of political theory, of the theory of representation but which is instead that more philosophical and aesthetic theory of representationalism. Here effectively, there is a crisis or a difficulty that is actually a difficulty regarding production that needs to be looked after: of representation—if you want—as an inclusion of the single in the species and of the species in the genus. There is a performative feature of representation, that is to say that representation dismisses its presumption, and its aspirations for validity, and accepts to adhere to that determined *hic et nunc* (here and now), and that "qui e ora" (here and now). Like the act of word and gesture, there is an ancient notion of representation that knows a sacrosanct unbreakability. There are two notions that aside from homonymy are rather diverse, however in both there is a landslide.

M.S.: I am thinking of a movement, that you know well, the Argentine *piqueteros* in which the two notions of "representation" appear to coincide, on the one hand as the condition of the representative or sovereignty, on the other hand as a true production of signs. In both cases, the task of the *piqueteros* has appeared to dismiss representation in favour of a spatial and temporal immanence.

P.V.: Indeed, I used the expression *hic et nunc* (here and now) because it came to my mind—but this is only an intimation— Benjamin in his famous essay on the technical reproducibility of a work of art says, "There, there is no longer the uniqueness because the aura of the work of art has decreased, its *hic et nunc* (here and now) has diminished." Now, instead, the situation is curious. Maybe typical of the way the multitude live, produce, and communicate in which there is a uniqueness—certainly one does not speak of a new aura—but one could speak of a uniqueness without aura and thus of a *hic et nunc* (here and now) that is relieved of the criterion of authenticity that then refers to the standard of roots, of tradition, etc. On the contrary, the criterion is neither the roots, nor tradition, nor aura, yet it is a cure for uniqueness, the uniqueness of experience, uniqueness of performance, and uniqueness and unrepeatability of the act of word and of the act of communication. Because it is no more than a formula, this formula of a uniqueness without aura returns and helps to return this character of extreme globalization and extreme singularization. It regards performativity rather than using the term virtuosity or an equivalent one. Basically, virtuosity is the whole of the talents that characterizes the one executing *performances*, that is to say the performing artist. It is a good category from several aspects because it keeps together artistic experiences, aesthetic experiences, and also today a good part of the working experiences. Moreover, it has been an image of political action from the time of the classical world, from the Greeks. In all three of these cases, the post-Fordist work, the practice of the performing artists (pianists, dancers, actors), the politician, the common thread is that they do not leave behind a work. They do not produce a stable work but give place to that which is defined as an unrepeatable event which needs a public.

M.S.: I believe that many relationships today are taking a place and form as "situational thought," not so much local as relational, which finds the Situationist movement as an undiscussed antecedent.

P.V.: Clearly, Situationism, as with many avant-garde historical movements and also the reality of the African-American ghettos in the United States, has been a laboratory of techniques and experiences that have then been absorbed into post-Fordist production. It thus anticipated in critical and conflicting terms that which then would become the norm, the legal order of post-Fordism. In any case, I and others had little to do with Situationism. The fact is that Situationism, cultured and criticized, had affected in advance between the 80's and the 90's much of postmodern mentality, and had above all described a situation in which the communicative and human capacity had become the first matter of work. And this has been a fact of great importance that could translate now in terms different from those of Debord, listing those aspects for which the cultural industry has been a bit like the prototype of that which is post-Fordism in general. That is, rather than a species of industry *sui generis* (constituting a class of its own) with some exceptions, with some peculiar and even marginal characteristics with respect to what I know about the industry of steel or of the automobile, it was curiously an omen of that which then would become every industrial sector. That is, a situation in which the effective productive forces were made of—and why not— communication, aesthetic tastes, and sentiments. In this sphere, there is the power of some of Debord's intuitions.

M.S.: Yet it also involves an ideal "precedent" of a sort of contemporary intellectual genealogy, of the "Movement of 1977" in which you yourself played a part.

P.V.: I appreciate above all Debord's book, *The Society of the Spectacle*, which detaches itself from that which surrounded it and becomes a thing that is still capable of speaking today, entering in relation to even the most present-day phenomena, passing them the wrong way. At the same time, the criticism that I know, about Vattimo and a more or less malleable and weak Postmodernism was before its time. Certainly, in general, Situationism in the same way in 1977, was like the presentation of that which could and can be the conflicting face of post-Fordism. It is a thing that has also happened at other moments in the history of capitalist development where, at the beginning of a cycle of economic development, the figures destined to become the hinge of this show a rebellious face. The relationship of the "Movement of 1977" to the taste for mobility or to the flight from the factory, from the imprisoning factory, and from the factory-for-life is clear. Then we saw in the 1980's and 90's the coming of flexibility, the flexibility, however, of Damato and Confindustria. This transfer exists and we have it, and in a certain sense, it appeared before that which could and will be the conflicting face of post-Fordism. On the other hand, it is evident that social figures always work on the same things: what form to give these things and the modus of being. So, if there is a modus of being like the contemporary one, more linked, as far as I know, to the taste for the possible, to the strong rate of variability, which is a way of saying "exposition to the world," then the problem is precisely which form to give to this modus of being. A form can be the unlimited flexibility of the workforce with all that it entails. The other modus is that of the strong taste for the initiative and autonomy of the single, alluded to by the "Movement of 1977". Both are possible but it has always been this way, the same lump of possibility, the same modus of being, and the same aspirations that assume one version or another. This exists in the situation in which many aspects of contemporary capitalism work, act, and give a specific form (often horrendous) to that which could be called the absolute actuality of Communism. Communism, however much discredited and hardly workable, that is the word, is something that has been from the beginning diverse and adverse to Socialism and that needed for itself the maximum valorization of that which in the life of everyone is singular and unrepeatable: the suppression of work under the owner and the disintegration of the monopoly of political decision that is the State. A definition of that kind of Communism is obviously on the antipodes of socialist experience that in a certain sense is that on which post-Fordism and globalization work, giving their version of the maturity and realism of this necessity.

M.S.: And here, it seems to me, the concept of the workforce lies and that not by chance becomes for you the true subject of biopolitics, allowing you to go beyond not only the disciplinary vision but also beyond that of the controlling society. Does the productive possibility in that relationship lie with what Agamben called "naked life"?

P.V.: What is this workforce? Marx only repeated it—and truly there is no interpretational stretch—saying that a singular thing happens, that is, a commodity is bought and sold, a workforce is quite simply not real. It has no presence and no consistency; it is the pure possibility to do any productive act. When the human psychic and physical power as such in its generic and undetermined nature becomes the principal merchandise, then something happens there that leads to biopolitical results. Such that one could say, "Biopolitics regards slavery." And Marx with great acuteness would declare, "No, not for anything". And yet, is this saying that slavery is nothing other than the possession of a body? Instead, it is not because, as Marx says, "The one or the other particular quality has always been important." He took that which the blacksmith knew how to do, and that which another knew how to do. On the contrary, in the modern workforce that which comes forward is the knowledge of how to potentially do everything. Marx precisely uses an expression that records the Aristotelian definition of power, "The whole of the physical and psychic capacities or potentialities contained in a living body." So this situation is completely undetermined. It is the first time that the notion of the workforce finds its complete realization in the sense that today, for the first time, the psychic capacities are truly put in play while for a long time it has been a privileged system of physical-mechanical capacity, as you said. Only now, only in the last twenty years, the notion of the workforce has its real correspondent. The problem is that if I sell as workforce the pure potentiality (that obviously is not an object that exists in itself) the single thing that it buys me to take into account is the body that hosts this potentiality. So the living body becomes important for biopolitics and not because there is the unexpected will of a power of control over the organic drives, and the living body, any body, becomes like the substratum and explains in this sense the adjective *naked* in reference to any life. That which carries with it what truly matters is this decisive and still unreal merchandise, thinking that it is still unreal the need to point to one's biological bearer. However, it would be an error to believe that the problem is one of control. When a truly new thing happens, as when they began to sell and buy pure potentiality like that of the laborforce, clearly in retrospect, it seems that which had always been true. One must stay attentive, otherwise one exchanges this paradox of the selling a thing that is unreal for a thing that existed from the time of archaic Roman law, and here I am not in much agreement. It seems to me that the head is being placed in the position of the feet and vice versa.

M.S.: With respect to the biopolitical machine, precisely in this relationship between production and life, the exodus becomes for you, and not only for you, the first emancipatory attribute of the multitude.

P.V.: It goes unsaid that exodus is a metaphor, however the Leviathan is also a metaphor, as often happens in political philosophy. After which there is the substance and the substance looks to indicate not a cunning tactic of subtraction from conflict or an exit on tiptoe by the service entrance, but a true political model where the question is no longer to conquer power or to construct a new State. The core is like the same problems that have always been confronted, the great problems of political theory, command, obedience, violence, non-violence, that reconfigure when the conquering of power does not exist, and if the multitude is shattered and broken up. Here, this is the question. The exodus tries to say, let's leave the land of the Pharaoh instead of taking control of the land of the Pharaoh. I am obviously continuing to speak in a metaphorical way. But for this to happen, a lot of initiative is required. While it is not difficult to think of forms of conflict, it is easier to think about the basis for the general intellect and about the basis of linguistic cooperation, intellectual cooperation, etc. There is always a degree of invention with regard to the question. It is not only about saying no with respect to the given state of things, but also to value new avenues and alternative solutions. This is

the typical initiative of those who do not play the game with the given rules, but search to change them some. It takes a strong degree of initiative in order to go away.

Regarding the problem of exodus, to consider it with the eyes of today, there is an interesting anticipation in Marx, even if delimited, when Marx speaks about the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century and says, "Look there, there is a curious situation because the workers work only some years in the factories of the east coast and then they go west where there is land at a cheap price and this created disorder in the laws of the market." In a sense the salaries must be higher or otherwise they do not stay, and there is an element of chronic indiscipline because they catch sight of a diverse possibility. The American working class is analyzed here by Marx as a multitude rather than a populace as in the last capital of the first book of *Capital* that bears the title "The Modern Theory of Colonization." In short, he establishes a dynamic between economics and politics that not even Marx himself understands well, which I would cite as an example of *exodus*. Another example of *exodus* takes place at the end of the 1970's when the young generations preferred, if worst came to worst, temporary employment to the fate of the factory, thus upsetting economic expectations.

Now with regard to today, we must ask ourselves what is the equivalent of land at a cheap price. Obviously, it is no longer a matter of spatial *exodus*, because a political model is in place and the opportunities that give a *social cooperation* are ever wider and richer than that which is capitalist cooperative production. To sum up, the *general intellect*, subtracted from the form of salaried work, is the equivalent of those lands. Therefore, it is a matter of valuing the criterion of excess in political conflict. The only things to lose are no longer, in Marxist terms, our chains. There are some excessive positive elements that can be put in play. To put in play this excess recalls the image of *exodus*. The image raises the problem of the right to resist and to defend. The Pharaoh attacked fugitives from behind the back. Yet, the instance when two armies collide head on according to the civil war model is a different case and an intransigent defense of one's rear zones. It is an attempt, metaphorical and stammering, to respond to a query that is a strategic one instead, which political model and which political, social, and cultural categories now that the problem is no longer a new essence of the state?

M.S.: Do you believe that it could become the umpteenth variant of utopia? Or else how do you consider this a key figure of the tradition of the Modern today?

P.V.: I have the impression that to speak about utopia today in positive terms is a little like living beneath one's means. That is, all of the things are today within arm's reach, beneath our eyes, and within the "here and now" in which we live. Looking more deeply at the thing is as if the elements of this utopia were all visible, but hidden under the slab of ice, like something that participates in some way in our present and that is part of the visible order. The difficulty is rather in acting with a kind of fullness of the times where everything is expanded, where, however, some forces rather than some others prevail. Everything is localized even if poorly guaranteed.

In the *exodus*, you go elsewhere, with actions, praxes, and initiatives. No longer an ideal in itself of an unobtainable utopia, now we live in a time in which if ever we collide with the absolute reality of the ideal and its tangibility. If you want, it concerns the absence of something that also would be within arm's reach.