Lavaert, Sonja. "Instituting the common: the perspective of the multitude." *Perspectives on Commoning: Autonomist Principles and Practices*. Ed. Guido Ruivenkamp and Andy Hilton. London: Zed Books Ltd, 2017. 107–152. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350221741.ch-003>>.

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Chapter 3

Instituting the common: the perspective of the multitude

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Introduction

In this chapter, the theme of the common(s) is discussed from the perspective of the multitude. As Negri played a key role in the reintroduction of the concept of multitude, using the term in his first book on Spinoza, the focus is on his texts and the context of the Italian revolutionary movement of the *operaismo* (workerism). In the content, form and production process of his texts, it is argued, Negri illustrates the creative, participatory logic of the common that he is attempting to invent, realise and theorise. This means that his ideas and concepts are not just individual imaginings, but the result of a collective work. There are many who apply the theoretical praxis, or who are practising the theory and instituting the common. I try to visualise this collective work of the multitude, presenting the genealogy of the concept in two steps: going back in history to the two authors who inspired Negri, namely, Machiavelli and Spinoza, and referring to two contemporary philosophers, Agamben and Virno, who were inspired by Negri but also, in turn, inspired him, who shared thoughts but also presented particular points of view.

In *Commonwealth*, the conclusion of their trilogy, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri develop the political project of instituting the common. Finding a new space for politics in our

globalising world ravaged by war, misery and exploitation is a necessary and urgent task; Hardt and Negri seek this new space for politics not outside but within our shared experience, across the false divides of private/public and capitalist/socialist. We need new forms to overcome the false progressivity, which assumes a hierarchical conservatism and furthers rather than eliminates oppression and social inequality. A reflection in terms of the common promises an ontology that not only enables analysis of the present but also prepares fertile ground for real emancipatory thought and democratic politics.

By 'common', Hardt and Negri mean the common wealth of the material world that is not made by humans (the air, water, natural resources) and also, more significantly, the results of social production ('such as knowledges, languages, codes, information, affects, and so forth'); instituting the common, then, becomes a project of democratic action investigating the art of self-rule of the 'multitude', within and against the 'empire', relying 'entirely on the immanence of decision making within the multitude' (Hardt & Negri, 2009: viii, xiii). The ultimate core of the project is not the production of objects but the production of subjectivity, which consists precisely in the construction of knowledge, affects, linguistic expressions or signs.

Prior to *Empire* and *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri's *Labor of Dionysus* (1994) can be considered as a preparatory outline treating all the major issues of the trilogy: labour, state institutions, the immeasurability of human practice in the production sphere and in politics. For Negri, however, the project of instituting the common within the multitude was initiated already in the early 1980s with the publication of his book on Spinoza and has been developed throughout in his philosophical research.

Although the theme of the common is widely discussed in the trilogy, in this article the focus is on the emergence of the concept of multitude in Negri's oeuvre. Paradoxically, this will allow a shifting from individual identities to the political space and forms of the multitude, which is what 'common', 'the common' and 'commons' is about. The problem with an immanent analysis – as attempted by Negri – is that means and aims coincide, that content and form are inextricably related and subjectivity attains reality only in the process of becoming: when fixed – for instance, as an object of representation – it disappears. The production of subjectivity is therefore only available for scrutiny while it is being practised. This is not an argument against the experiment – on the contrary – but it does have consequences for the method of research and of exposition. Focusing on the emergence of the concept of the common will enable us to contextualise the issues in play here as a historical materialist discussion.

In order to institute the common, or, in other words, to achieve real democracy, we need a production of subjectivity or forms of the multitude characterised by a network structure and a different view of the logics of causality. To understand what these forms are, I will also focus on how the perspective of the multitude is proposed by Paolo Virno. Both Negri and Virno lived through the experience of the *operaismo* and the Italian revolutionary movement of the 1970s. For a number of contextual reasons, and to the extent that he expressed his thoughts as fitting for a preoccupation with the common, Negri took up a key position. He appropriated, in an anomalous, subversive way, concepts of the cultural tradition and linked criticism and resistance to the imagination and invention. As a result, his method became exemplary for a range of contemporary

thinkers, including Virno. But this also worked the other way round. Confirmed in his approach by the use of the concept of the 'multitude' by thinkers like Virno, Negri, in turn, was influenced. In the variations of the concept, as well as in the shared modalities, lies great significance.

As the perspective Negri developed is connected to contextual, historical factors, his ideas will be considered here in the context of his life and the *operaismo*. Negri questions objective knowledge and advances both the ethico-political and epistemological effectiveness of perspectivist knowledge. In light of the multitude as a restless expression of the entirety (the collective as a whole), this raises the question of how a partial and antagonistic perspective can pretend to universality, a question that foreshadows Virno's analysis (see below). Negri's terminology derives from the works of Spinoza and Machiavelli; engagement with these authors, therefore, facilitates enumeration of the crucial topics of a non-hierarchical, non-exclusive, creative vision of the common: namely, the antagonism between power of resistance and institutional power, the procedure of reversal, the cause as a convergence of factors, the role of the imagination, a materialist view of time, the profanation of religion and the junction of love and art with politics (see Mack, 2010: 3–5).

Virno's attention, meanwhile, shifts towards art, knowledge and language. He adopts Negri's paradigm to include a historical materialist point of view on matters of experience and temporality. This leads to a critique of teleology, which is explored in some of its applications. Virno launches the concepts of 'transduction' and 'trans-individuality' while looking for the multitude in the ambiguous, undefined nature of human beings and in the phenomenology of current forms of labour. The pluralistic

‘multitude’ is understood in opposition to the one ‘people’; the singular ‘universal’ is replaced with the embracing ‘common’.

Through a presentation of these major issues in Negri’s and Virno’s thoughts, I will also show some structural similarities and analogies with the work of Giorgio Agamben, who can be seen as a link between the two and clarifies various methodological aspects of the common. Agamben is also interesting because he underlines another textual source for the emergence of the multitude concept, namely the Averroist philosophy and particularly Dante (see Casarino & Negri, 2008; Lavaert, 2011).

Why philosophy, biographies and words?

In recent times, the concept of the multitude first emerged in *L'anomalia selvaggia* (*The Savage Anomaly*), Negri’s book on Spinoza published in 1981. From that moment on, the immanent perspective began to appear in texts of political theory and epistemological and ontological matters in terms of ‘multitude’ or ‘common’. For Negri, the book on Spinoza marked the start of a new style of writing – a philosophical one – and of a new type of enquiry – also philosophical. What does this mean? When he wrote this book, Negri was in prison. This was a traumatic experience with which he felt he could only cope by writing and, more particularly, by writing this book. Deprived of his freedom, independence, time and work, and to endure this without losing his sanity, Negri focused on philosophical questions (Gielen & Lavaert, 2011: 189). The search for multitude forms, the investigation of Spinoza, the struggle to maintain his self-integrity against the unjust deprivation, and the immanent perspective all come together and consistently reappear together in the philosophical oeuvre of Negri, from his earliest to his most recent work. In this

context, three elements need to be emphasised as hypotheses motivating the present text.

First, philosophy is not a science accessible only to specialists and scholars, nor can it limit itself to treating specific matters in a particular domain. On the contrary, it belongs to everyone, can be practised by everyone and comprises a questioning of issues that concern everyone at the general level of principles. Philosophy goes beyond time and does not depend on specific contexts – although it does deal with particularities of the present and the ordinary life, which means that it features a tension between the universal and the singular, and also between critical analysis and the synthetic, or even artistic, approach. Philosophy searches after the neutrality of knowledge, which is useful for the many and, precisely for this reason, has to consider subjective experiences. The tension proper to philosophical research is the same tension that characterises the quest for the common. In this ordinary sense, philosophy is already and pre-eminently connected to the common and the multitude.

Second, Negri's imprisonment has to be considered in the context of the declaration of the state of emergency in Italy and the introduction of exceptional measures. Negri was arrested because of his participation in the *Autonomia* (autonomism) movement. His arrest and imprisonment did not take place within the normal frame of justice and constitutional civil rights. I am not just referring to his innocence concerning the charges levelled against him (terrorist acts, murder, leading a widespread criminal organisation, etc.), but rather to his sense of his imprisonment as an unjust, constitutionally illegal, in fact criminal attempt by the state to reduce him to silence, negate his will and destroy him as a human being.

Negri was one of 1,500 people arrested in Italy on 7 April 1979, while, according to Virno ([1986] 2011: 5), some 5,000 political activists passed through Italian prisons between 1979 and 1985. Negri's individual experience was thus part of the persecution suffered by the entire revolutionary movement; he underwent an experience shared by many and also functioned as an example in the production of philosophy (or subjectivity, to use his term) for a range of authors, especially those who were undergoing the same experience, and particularly Virno. Related to the historical context and biographical experiences, their shared intellectual space becomes all the more interesting and demonstrates the underlying logic of networking that is characteristic of their approach. Life narratives can illuminate complicated theoretical issues, such as, here, the tension between particularities, (the) common(s), generalities and the universal – or at least they can illustrate what the production of subjectivity is about.

Third, in this study, attention will be directed to methodological questions, forms and words. This means that we first have to determine how to consider the linguistic term 'common'. Following the 'most comprehensive attempts to produce a concept of the common', namely Hardt and Negri's *Multitude* and its successor *Commonwealth*, the word will be considered 'in terms of communication rather than in terms of community ... For the common is that which is always at stake in any conversation: there where a conversation takes place, there the common expresses itself'; in other words, the common is considered linguistically and 'relatively' – that is, deriving meaning from and giving meaning to other words and signs with which it is connected (see Casarino & Negri, 2008: 1, 12, 14).¹

This linguistic approach suits the philosophical categories used in the texts from which the term has emerged, going from Hardt and Negri, Virno and Agamben back to Spinoza, Machiavelli and even Dante. The linguistic reflection on the semantic fields of the languages themselves – Latin, but far more the vernaculars, Italian and Dutch – in which the concept emerged (eventually translated), reveal additional meanings. Finally, it also suits the transposition operated – again, following the authors mentioned – of the concept of ‘common’ with the perspective of the ‘multitude’.

The context

The contemporary concept of the multitude emerged in a nexus of events and readings: Negri’s thinking is intimately linked with the revolutionary movement, the *operaismo*, with Marx, Spinoza and Machiavelli and with the traumatic events in his personal life. This combination led him to discover analogies and to opt for a discontinuous, historical materialist approach. His theoretical research is always situated in the current context, upon which it focuses in a realistic way – it is ontology – and yet by doing so it changes the context – it is revolutionary. Here, I shall try to clarify just how and where this all began.

The Italian Communist Party (PCI), in which many critical intellectuals with links to the resistance movement sought refuge after World War II, was not only characterised by an authoritarian structure and subservience to the Soviet Union, but in the 1960s it also abandoned the idea of revolution and opted for the path of governmental participation. It failed to understand that the concrete situation of the workers and production had changed (see below), and as a consequence of this failure it

had no response strategy. This led to a rift within the party and the birth of a new movement. The *operaismo*, in contrast to the PCI, remained focused on revolution and made the interrelated nature of theoretical research and political struggle central to its programme. For the movement and for Negri, the search for knowledge is situated in the context that one seeks to change. Negri wanted to know what was really happening in the factories and, to this end, he adopted the subjective perspective of the *operai* (labourers), emphasising an experiential knowledge rather than abstract production. The school of phenomenology played a significant role in the formation of this unique form of perspectivism or collective subjectivity.

As a student of Enzo Paci, who had reread Husserl and Heidegger in the light of Marx, Negri in turn read all texts through a phenomenological lens and criticised scientific or positivistic objectivism.² In *Marx oltre Marx* (*Marx Beyond Marx*), Negri ([1979] 1998) wrote a commentary on the *Grundrisse*, arguing that this sort of active, collective subjectivity was precisely what Marx had also aimed at. In the chapter on the machines in the preparatory outline to his famous critique of political economy, Marx (1983) had observed that the 'general, social knowledge' becomes the immediate force of production.³ Human potentiality itself falls under the control of general knowledge. As Negri ([1997, 1977–78] 2006: 6) asserts, from the very moment the *Grundrisse* was translated into Italian in 1970, the book acquired a paradigmatic value in the movement. But *Marx oltre Marx* also acquired a paradigmatic value: acting/theorising as Negri does means using Marx to go beyond Marx. It also means going beyond Negri.

In the late 1970s, Negri published a series of booklets with publisher Feltrinelli, the famous *opuscoli*, in which he studied

the transition from the hegemony of the Fordist labourer to the hegemony of the social labourer and searched for a social organisation that would correspond to the new class composition and the new reality for the workers.⁴ He interpreted the transition as the replacement of the abstract labour typical of the Fordist period by subjective, particularised and socialised labour (see below). This interpretation was inspired by the distinction made by Marx between abstract and concrete labour, but it also went beyond Marx in that it revived the phenomenology of the labour organisation and the labourer's struggle against labour, which completely overcomes the tendencies analysed and predicted by Marx. This leads to a revision of all the traditional practices of the labour movement, ranging from an attack on the reformism of the party to a critical confrontation with the terroristic tendencies of the movement. The struggle must target administrative and social structures. The workers' autonomy, which Negri translates into 'collective subjectivity', thus moves towards a 'constituent subjectivity', or, in other words, into the 'production of subjectivity' (Negri, [1997, 1977–78] 2006: 13–15).

An illuminating insight into the *operaismo* perspective and proof of what was to become a preferred mode of expression for Negri was provided by his 1978 interview (Negri, [1979] 2007a). As lively interaction and bringing together a multiplicity of perspectives, the conversation emerges as a paradigmatic expression of the common (Casarino & Negri, 2008: 1). The conversation is a natural way of collective writing; indeed, Negri never considers himself the protagonist of an interview, or rather, to him the interviewer is equally the protagonist.⁵ An interview also has the advantage of being read easily and being accessible to a larger public. This must be one of the reasons why

Dall'operaio massa all'operaio sociale (From the Mass Labourer to the Social Labourer), rather than the somewhat tight, highly theoretical and difficult *opuscoli*, became a reference text for the militants of the *Autonomia* movement as well as for their opponents, who soon became the persecutors of the movement.

The story of the transition from the mass labourer into the social labourer begins with the social struggles of the early 1960s, related by Panzieri, first of all, to the reading of the *Grundrisse* of Marx (Wright, 2002; Balestrini & Moroni, [1988] 2005: 128–43; Trotta & Milana, 2008). This history has been described more than once from an immanent narrative perspective – that is, by the people who experienced and participated in the movement.⁶ It can be summarised in the following key moments.

First, the mass worker – who incarnates the abstract notion of labour as a living machine, a ‘biomachine’ – becomes the central figure in production. The mass labourer is operating in exactly the same way as the machines he attends to, without autonomous thoughts or linguistic expression. The machines are the result of technology and science, which are part of capitalism. This means that scientific knowledge is completely subsumed to capitalism and that the struggle against capitalism requires a renewed project, one with a different research agenda and knowledge base. It also means that machines do not emancipate, but, on the contrary, empty work of its content; moreover, the more machines there are, the more the pace of work is forced to increase. Hence, the idea arises of the self-organisation of workers, instead of their representation by party or trade union, and, later on, the idea of the rejection of work and the exodus from the factory.

With the riots of Piazza Statuto in Turin in 1962, a new political subject emerged – the immigrant from southern

Italy – and this emergence marked the start of the transition (Balestrini & Moroni, [1988] 2005: 135–6). The unskilled mass workers employed as pure manpower for a high capital return in the lowliest stages of the production process and working at a destructive pace were generally immigrants, mainly recently arrived young men from the south. They emigrated from southern Italy to the north and had no affinity with the organised, collective struggle of the communist tradition formed in the Resistance movement. They were ungovernable for both the authorities and the unions, without pride in their factory or discipline at work. They moved the site of action outside the factory, to the city streets and squares: thus, rather than mass labourers, they were social labourers, and the labour force had undergone a fundamental transformation. Of course, the concept of social labourer has to be connected with production, but in this transition the production was also changed. From a mere economic matter, it now became a biopolitical reality, a form of life, and exploitation became a corruption of the social life.

This brought Negri to the more radical claim of self-organisation and self-valorisation, which informs the principle of autonomist thought. The class struggle has to be fought from within the class of workers just as the search for knowledge has to be conducted from within the perspective where the conflicts or questions arise. The radical claim of self-organisation sharpened Negri's position in the discussion (with Tronti first of all) on the autonomy of the political and on the usefulness of the party, and it finally led to a rift within *operaismo*, which in turn led to a radicalisation of Negri's concept of 'difference'. Moving parallel to the introduction of the concept of the multitude, as Zanini (2007: 97) recounts, the emergence of the revised

concept of difference announced the end of the *operaismo*. The historical moment at which the rift – an end and a new beginning – occurred is not unimportant; it was the point at which the capitalist ‘counter-revolution’ got underway and the state of emergency was declared.

However there is also a clear sense of continuity. It is clear that *operaismo* was the starting point and that the artistic, creative dimension with which, especially today, Negri is experimenting in his search for forms of the multitude, was present right from the start.⁷ There is an overflow and a continuity following from the biopolitical idea of philosophy that has to be practised for a common life. Negri uses exactly the term ‘biopolitical’ to indicate how philosophy must be/is: analysing existential questions and experiences. He uses this term in contrast with that which he criticises, namely the ‘biopower’, which refers to the oppressive power of governments, systems, regimes, institutions, ideologies and capitalism.

Negri's perspective

The continuity inspired by the biopolitical motivation – knowledge research in praise of the common life – unifies the different stages of Negri's work that thus represents a cohesive whole and can only be understood if considered as such. The events of the 1970s are explained through the analysis, and, conversely, the events inspired extension of the analysis. Negri's readings of Spinoza gave a context to the traumatic personal experiences just as much as the reverse. Discovering similarities in Spinoza's fate with his own, Negri began to consider Spinoza as an example and turned to philosophy. Equally, it was prison that enabled Negri to understand the revolutionary content of Spinoza's thought –

namely that there are always two antagonistic perspectives, one related to the institutional power of the authority and the other to the resistant power of the multitude.

Prison helped Negri to understand the Machiavellian idea of time, the changeability of apparent destinies that often ends in tragedy. Prison also gave him a personal experience of the principle of capitalism as existing in the suppression and deprivation of captivity itself (Negri, 1981: 19). Capitalism consists in the robbery of one's lifetime, he realised. Being in prison, cut off from his teaching at university and in the factory, and far from the distraction of social pleasures, Negri thought he would finally have the time to restudy Spinoza.⁸ He felt the need to do so because a lot had been published since the 1960s, and a new, French school of interpretation had presented the author of the *Ethics* as a materialistic, immanent philosopher, as the ground-breaker of democracy in a radical way. However, Negri soon realised that in prison he had as little time as before, an experience that gave him his insight into the real nature of captivity and a society ruled by capitalism. Nevertheless, he did manage to reread Spinoza.

Negri was struck by the anomaly the thinker represented, an anomaly that first appeared to be systematic – still matching the controllable measurability of rationalist metaphysics – and then became wild and immeasurable – transgressing ontology and moving to resistance, politics and change. The ideas of Spinoza went against the major tendencies of his time, against Cartesian rationalism, against the institutionalised academic science and against the Hobbesian belief in the definitive overcoming of the state of nature. But still they were modern, illuminating, emancipatory ideas. Crucially, Negri saw that the history of modernity is not that of a continuous and harmonious evolution rather comprises

the discontinuous result of conflicting perspectives and powers. Spinoza represents an alternative modernity in that he considered the political significance of ideas, which necessarily – to have a common sense and potential/power (*potentia*) – are related to the *conatus*, the life instinct and vitality that we humans carry in us. Connected in each of us through the affects to the imagination, this life instinct is expressed by the production of subjectivity.

The *potentia*, *conatus*, imagination or subjectivity cannot be standardised from the outside. Spinoza's is an immanent perspective, which also features the alternative modernity. His subversion consists in the transposition of the ethical research from the past and inner world of the intentions towards the future of consequences and expressions as they evolve over time, from transcendent ideas towards the immanent world we live in and from the rational calculable measure to the immeasurability of the affects and the imagination. In the difference he demonstrates between established government power (*potestas*) and the power of the multitude (*potentia*), Spinoza illustrates a subversive, underground, anomalous line of alternative modernity that is shaped by the actions of the multitude.

In *L'Anomalia selvaggia*, where he elaborates on this reading, Negri (1981: 217–25) mentions the multitude in the context of this difference. He emphasises the rupture within Spinoza's work between a belief in calculable rationality at first and the wild subversion of the imagination later. This rupture occurs when terrible things are happening around one: war, violence, attacks on the democratic institutions. According to Negri, Spinoza felt impelled to express his indignation and anxiety, to caution about what was at stake, to protect the republican rules that were under pressure, and to prevent the further erosion of liberties. The perspective of

the multitude appears in Negri's text when he is discussing the wild anomaly of Spinoza's illuminating imagination; the multitude appears but at this stage is not further developed.

In *Lenta ginestra* (*Slow Broom*), his commentary on the (early nineteenth century) poetry of Leopardi, Negri ([1987] 2001) traces a line back to Machiavelli in order to formulate a critique on modernity and its faith in technological progress, but also to underscore pessimism with regard to nature. Negri's critique of modernity has nothing to do with a romantic anti-modernity or counter-Enlightenment, but rather with the assertion of historical materialism and even more so with an indignation about the persistence of social inequality and injustice, despite modernity. The point of his critique is to demolish all illusions, because freedom from illusion and insight into the nothingness that surrounds human existence, in other words atheism, creates a space for social solidarity.⁹

With its slow and cautious progression, Negri's essay reads as a literary novel and illustrates the production of subjectivity. Through his analysis, we also discover interesting comments by Leopardi on the metaphorical character of language, the directness of poetry, the political significance of dramatic texts and, within those, the role of the choir. The choir is the voice of the many, the public commenting in third person. It stands for the ethical principle, the voice of conscience, the general and impersonal anonymous. It is the choir that is judging the actions of the actors, and without its approval (or refusal), the play does not even exist. The choir presents the voice of the common multitude.

In his work on revolution, *Il potere costituente* (*Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*), an alternative line of modern thought (Machiavelli, Spinoza, later Marx) is identified

and contrasted with the modernity of Hobbes, which lays the foundations for state sovereignty, representative institutions and capitalism (Negri, [1992] 2002b). In the years between his 1981 book on Spinoza and the publication of this essay in 1992, Negri had published *Arte e multitudo* (*Art and Multitude*) in which he explicitly focused on the 'multitude' in relation to labour and, of course, art (Negri, 1990). In social or living labour, the same challenges are at stake as in the artistic production and in the search for common forms by the multitude. The question is how, departing from singularities and differences, to achieve generality and validity for the many. This quest has various aspects associated with the political institution of a commonwealth as well as with the construction of an enlightened, emancipatory knowledge. In artistic production, theory and practice concur. Many texts were published in the 1980s and early 1990s accepting the same challenge, and all played a role in the slow genealogy of the multitude, including books by Virno, Vercellone, Piperno, Lazzarato and Illuminati, and journals such as *Futur Antérieur* (edited by Negri) and *Luogo comune* (edited by Agamben and Virno). One could say that in Italy in the 1980s and early 1990s was constituted 'a kind of laboratory for experimentation in new forms of political thinking that help us conceive a revolutionary practice in our times' – and in this was prepared the space for the 'potential politics' of the multitude(s) as common people, both many and plural (Hardt in Hardt & Virno, 1996: 1).

In *Il potere costituente*, Negri asserts that talking of constituent power is the same as talking of democracy, and the problem of the multitude power is now set in terms of the antagonism between the constituted power of state institutions and the constituent power (Negri, [1992] 2002b: 11). The *potentia* of the multitude

is a constituent power. Machiavelli's quest for *verità effettuale* (effective truth) in political matters is conducted explicitly from the perspective of people of lowly origins, the multitude, Negri emphasises. His reflections focus on the formation of new political orders, which, of course, is what a revolution is about. The constituent power is averse to utopia; this fits with the contingency, mutability and material foundation of history. Negri's attention is directed towards the matter of time, the moment of change and its conditions: Machiavelli's significance lies in his vision of time, which he frees from the constraints of continuity, thus allowing for the possibility of change and determination of one's own fate.

The emergence of the multitude in Spinoza

In contrast to the rupture identified and emphasised by Negri, I think it is important to underline the coherence in Spinoza's oeuvre and anomaly. There is consistency in Spinoza's view on cause and experience of time, with implications in the fields of ethics, politics, epistemology and ontology. The theory he elaborates is praxis, and the practice he depicts is theoretical, as in Negri's work, for which it functions as an example. The cause is considered as a connection, a confluence in time of different factors, and it represents a reciprocal movement that affects the encountering factors: it is a bidirectional movement. This cause is at work in all human relations, which means, for example, in the experience of time, knowledge, communication, political and social practice, power and friendship or love. It affects the factors at stake with conditions or consequences, redirecting the attention from the individual terms to the relation or connection.

Of course, the most relevant consequence of this concept of reciprocal bidirectional movement is the idea of the 'multitude'

related to the 'empire', two terms that are introduced explicitly by Spinoza (1677a: 278–9) in the *Tractatus Politicus* (*Political Treatise*). It is not without significance that Spinoza uses the word 'empire' for the rule or dominion, whatever its form (monarchical or regent board). It reminds us of Dante. As says Agamben, the word 'empire' is used by Dante, not specifically for a type of monarchical government but to indicate in a neutral way things related to the world, occurring in the limited arc of time of human life, in other words, the ethico-political. Dante also was the first to use the term 'multitude' in an explicit and significant way (Agamben, 2005a: 249–67; Dante, 1965: 249–67).

At this point, I want to suggest that Spinoza introduces the (not so) new terminology of 'empire' and 'multitude' in two movements: on the one hand, following Machiavelli and the authors who inspired him, especially Dante, in an act of profanation, as Agamben calls it (see below), and on the other, polemicising with Hobbes, in whose terminology one can read the apology of the one sovereign and a theory that tries to eliminate the changeability of time experiences. These two movements are intertwined. Machiavelli, whose major issue was the contingency paradigm of *fortuna* and *virtù*, and whose political message is republican, talks about the multitude in an obvious, self-evident way. For Spinoza this terminology must have suited his anti-Hobbesian vision well.

Spinoza uses the word 'multitude' (Latin: '*multitudo*'), forged by the Italian vernacular of Machiavelli and by the Dutch translations of his circle, to indicate the many 'common' individuals (*gemeen*, *menigte*), and also indicating the many different factors (*veelheid*) at stake in human world affairs.¹⁰ Interesting is Spinoza's attempt to formulate the idea of democracy – equality, material wealth, peace, freedom of thought and expression – not

as a specific form of governance, but as the condition for politics in the general interest, starting from the empire/multitude pairing. The empire depends on the multitude in the reciprocity (albeit asymmetric) between the ruling and the ruled: 'right' is the power of the multitude (Spinoza, 1677a: 278–9).

In the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*Theological-political Treatise*) Spinoza (1670, 2002) relates religion to fear and obedience, which are at odds with democracy.¹¹ Pursuing this line of thought, we arrive at a defence of disobedience and freethinking. The reversals in his work are exemplary. People are part of nature, in which there is no good or evil. They do not strive after anything because they think that it is good but, conversely, think things are good because they strive for them. This relativism is not an obstacle to ethics: on the contrary, it is the basis on which ethical questions can be formulated. In a democracy, people do not transfer their power to a government to such an extent that they are unable to deliberate: those in power are, therefore, always subject to fear.¹² Spinoza polemicalises against philosophers who see passions as defects and thus fail to recognise them as a reality. Political theory must take these passions as its starting point. Thus, he makes an attempt to understand human nature, in order to discover what to do about war, absolutism and people's tendency to act against their own interests, and hence how to fight for freedom and independence.

The role of the imagination is essential to this endeavour. Imagination is not just a negative illusion and the cause of fear. In a neutral way, it is associated with lust, desire and passions; it is part of the human condition. Moreover, it is the basis of hypothetical intuitive thinking, and so has the positive power to inspire change. This threefold function of the imagination is connected

to the three types of knowledge that Spinoza distinguishes in the *Ethics* and to the concept of the multitude he introduces in the *Political Treatise*.¹³ Importantly, the new terminology only makes proper sense when read as a critique of Hobbes' justification of the absolutist sovereign principle and as a resumé of the fresh Renaissance humanism of Machiavelli, for whom the multitude was still a self-evident concept and perspective.

The perspective of Machiavelli

So, it is right to see Machiavelli as the predecessor of Spinoza, and it is also right that Negri claims the core of Machiavellian thought to be the paradigm of 'virtue and fortune', which equates to the experience of time, the changeability of human affairs, and the how-to issue of directing change (or making a revolution) within the order of nature or without violating the laws of nature. One may criticise Negri, however, for not sufficiently emphasising the topic of 'perspective' in Machiavelli's *Il Principe* (although he does rely on its ontology). This theoretical undervaluation of perspective and its consequences, I would argue, induces a loss of concreteness in Negri's reading. The hermeneutics of the virtue-and-fortune paradigm clarifies our historical research of the common, but a more elaborated interpretation of Machiavelli's description of the social revolt in his *Istorie fiorentine* (*History of Florence*) can enrich and bolster this research. Besides, it is Negri ([1992] 2002b) who puts us on this track.

From Machiavelli's texts, with their concepts of multitude and perspective assumed as self-evident (a self-evidence that surely extends to Negri and explains his vagueness on the subject), we can learn how revolutionary change actually happens; exemplary is his description of the urban social insurrection of 1378,

the Revolt of the Ciompi (Machiavelli, [1525] 2005: 443–6). Machiavelli shows that the content of politics is social, that the form is struggle, and that the subject is the multitude of ordinary people. In the case in question, he identifies with the *populus* through the underclass of (unguilded) wool workers, literally, as the grammatical subject of his narrative recounting the historical event. In Machiavelli's ([1513] 1997) descriptions of the various sociopolitical cases and the many different stories he recounts, I would argue, two thoughts appear which seem to acquire an axiomatic value.¹⁴ First, there are always two perspectives that conflict with each other: the perspective of the 'have-nots' and the perspective of the 'haves', be it wealth or established governmental power. Second, everything is relative and changeable. The second axiom is applicable to the first, which means that the two conflicting perspectives are mobile.

Another Machiavellian insight is that political affairs are not just cognitive but also affective and as an object of knowledge thus require imagination. This is associated with an essential human ambiguity: people are both good and bad, human and animal, and, as animal, fox and lion (roughly, fox for intelligence, lion for force). This is also associated with a historical vision based upon the nothingness of the beyond, an immanent materialist vision. *Verità effettuale* (effective knowledge) concerns finding the opportune moment to enact changes, and then about ensuring that the newly introduced form endures. Whereas Spinoza, with his analysis of the affects, highlights the ambiguity of the multitude, which fails to use its power and is an accomplice to its own servility, we learn from Machiavelli about the revolutionary power, which is unable to maintain itself after the revolutionary moment and or even transforms into its

opposite: the stronghold of established sovereignty, the threats, violence and terror. The story often ends in tragedy, leaving the multitude with only knowledge, love and laughter.

Love, laughter, art and multitude

Laughter has always been extremely important to Negri. He has dedicated an entire chapter to the effect of laughter in *Il lavoro di Giobbe* ([1990] 2002a, 2009b). ‘The theme of laughter as a potency is also very much present in Spinoza’, he says (Gielen & Lavaert, 2011: 191). Laughter is always knowledge and resistance. Knowledge is also potency and resistance when it becomes common or general. And common knowledge is analogous to art, which is always the result of general intellect:

[The general intellect is] a sort of subjective machine in motion, formed through the interaction of a great many singularities, of their ideas and products. It is an active collective, a multitude. Whenever we find a general intellect, we also discover a multitude of subjects who form this intellect, in the immanence or in the historical situation. This is the way in which we have to imagine the general intellect – as a multitude of subjects. (Gielen & Lavaert, 2011: 173)

Negri considers the relation between art, knowledge, production and power in *Arte e Multitudo*. His idea of art approximates to the multitude also with regard to the issue of time, experience and the causal relationship. As he says, art is about a new view on things, but also ‘a genuine insertion, an entering, a connection’; it concerns ‘physical contact, hence the image of entering the water and submerging oneself’ (Gielen & Lavaert, 2011: 167). The artistic

production is living labour, collective, purposeful – the literal meaning of ‘*ad arte*’ being intentionally, knowingly – but, nonetheless, its purpose is general and unfulfilled by a predefined design; its logic is free of teleology. In this sense, it is an open and free activity, and here is another analogy: with love. Negri clarifies that we have to make a distinction between art and non-art. To him,

non-art is essentially seen in the naturalistic and individualistic reduction of the collective working that is produced by art. Non-art is where this naturalistic reduction to the individual takes place. This can be fully compared to the romantic and religious love that is locked up in the family and, as a result, completely reduced to a function and therefore an identity, which equals non-love. Parallel to that, art is reduced to non-art to the extent to which it is reduced to individual, natural identity. (Gielen & Lavaert, 2011: 179)

Art is purposeful, knowing, deliberate, as is love, but it is also an anomaly, an immeasurable resistance, going beyond any fixed identity, natural *telos* or function.

Negri concretises the analogy between the power of the multitude and love in *Commonwealth*, where, with Hardt, he again presents the analogical thought experiment as a critique of identity and teleological thinking (Hardt & Negri, 2009: 179–88; see also Gielen & Lavaert, 2011: 177–9). The artificial common produced by humans is a solidarity that arises from conflict, through and in the clash of passions, a multiple and conflict-laden tendency that he calls ‘love’. This love has nothing to do with religious, romantic or bourgeois love, which are necessarily linked to marriage, family, propagation, calculation

and competition and are based on the idea of exclusivity and thus identity or a union of identities. To clarify what he means, Negri uses Deleuze and Guattari's (1980) imagery of the bees and wasps.¹⁵ Bees make love to flowers for the sake of pollination, with a defined function, as identity, in a fixed pattern of natural efficiency. Wasps make love to orchids without function or identity but simply for the pleasure of the experience. While doing so, because they enjoy it, loving for the sake of the experience of love, the wasps create a 'contra-natural common'.

The philosopher insists upon the non-naturalness, which we have to understand in the Leopardian way as critical both to the romantic vision of a harmonious nature and to the belief in determinist progress. Nevertheless, the non-naturalness represents a problematic theoretical topic in Negri's reflections and leads to polemics with, for instance, Virno (see below). Here, I want to draw attention to the problematic terminology: at this point, Negri is not insisting upon the idea of inserting while resisting, or resisting while inserting, as he does when he speaks about art – one could call this the 'naturalness' of art – but his critique is directed against the teleology and the functional way of social thinking. Negri presents his love reflections as an example of creative hypothetical thinking, but underlines that he is also speaking about common, ordinary love (Gielen & Lavaert, 2011: 178). Everyone understands the idea of love for the simple pleasure of the experience and that love only exists in the shared space of different (human or animal) beings.

Agamben's perspective between Negri and Virno

Despite the fact that the concept of the multitude arrived relatively late in his writings and continued to be voiced only

implicitly in his analysis, Agamben's shift of attention to art and linguistic practices sheds further light on various aspects of the issue. It is even plausible to consider his entire oeuvre as an argument for the thesis that real common thought, and consequently real democratic forms, can be experienced only on the basis of an internally contrasting plurality of elements and on condition that the relationship is regarded as taking priority over the terms – with respect to time, cause and human relationships.¹⁶

In Agamben (2007), the emphasis is on principles and epistemological methods, such as the paradigmatic method, into which he introduces new and critical content. As previously mentioned, Agamben's work occupies a place apart from the radical philosophers, primarily because he did not actively participate in the struggle and so did not have any juridical problems with the apparatus of the state. In the hottest years of the revolutionary movement, having previously graduated in philosophy of law in Italy, Agamben lived abroad. He followed seminars held by Heidegger in France, worked at the Warburg Institute in London and read and studied Walter Benjamin, whom he would later translate into Italian. Nonetheless, he did discuss – at the level of principles – the procedures applied to Negri, Virno and the revolutionary movement, and also the concrete actions initiated in response to the procedures. The analogies between Agamben's reflections and theirs are striking, and the mutual criticism between him and Negri represents a corroborating reflection (Agamben, 1995: 49–51; Negri, 2003: 13, 2007b: 109–26, 2007c: 12).¹⁷ One can find in Agamben's idea of network causality and the importance he gives to early Renaissance humanism the same mixture of Marx, Nietzsche and phenomenology, current events, reflections on juridical forms, an aesthetic

intuition and indignation about state injustice – each of which was deemed essential.

Agamben (2007: 19–20) states that paradigms obey the analogical logic of the imagination. His theoretical search for the method of knowledge is itself a work of the paradigmatic method, a methodological reflection that thus reveals the specific nature of the imagination. Paradigms, for their part, are living images proceeding in time. They are examples that isolate a particular case in its context and by doing so make a new totality comprehensible in the revelation of particularity. This means that they are not pre-existing factual similarities, but are self-generated by means of a ‘bringing together’ or ‘showing’. It also means that they are not inductive or deductive knowledge methods: they replace the binary ‘either/or’ logic with a bipolar ‘both/and’ model following lived realities. Thinking in paradigms means not questioning the temporal origins because there is no origin; or, to be more precise, each phenomenon that appears on the surface is an origin and conversely each image is archaic.¹⁸

The *arche* that Agamben tracks down is not an origin in time, but makes both the researcher’s present and the past of his research object comprehensible. Archaeological or genealogical history writing turns temporal categories on their heads. The temporal structure inherent in philosophical archaeology is not a past but a point of emergence or a beginning, which, however, is only found if one goes back to where this point of emergence was covered by tradition. The point of emergence has the form of a past in the future, a *futuro anteriore*. Relatedly, Agamben (2005a: 365–76) sees the concepts *imperium* and *multitudo* proposed by Spinoza and reintroduced by Negri and Hardt as emerging in the texts of Dante.

Situating the emergence of the concept in the Averroist philosophy of Dante, Agamben clarifies modalities of the multitude perspective, namely its immanence, multiplicity and contingency or temporal discontinuity. Going back to the Renaissance texts themselves, we find that (a) the multitude appears as grammatical subject that is semantically mostly agent, always the immanent cause of the story, gender neutral and pluralistic; (b) the multitude appears together with the empire, which, in Dante's text, is not the image of a specific government or governance, but of the contingent temporal character of political matters, in contrast with the universal character of religious matters (for Dante, this did reflect a political choice, namely against papal power). The *imperium* indicates that common matters are proceeding and passing in time. From the perspective of the multitude, in common (read: political) matters this amounts to finding a rhythm, and art plays a role in this, asserts Agamben ([1970] 1994: 143–56).¹⁹ Art is essential, he argues, because it gives people a place in time, inserting and interrupting. It sets a standard. This is connected with Agamben's argument that imagination is ingrained in experience and that pleasure is the most authentic experience.

Virno, the context, work and (general) knowledge

In Virno also, we see a shift of attention towards art, knowledge and language as he follows Negri's example to include a historical materialist point of view on matters of experience and time. This leads to a critique of teleology, which is explored in processes of labour. In the post-Fordist era, the working class expresses itself not as the people but as multitude, which means a sociological translation in terms of classes and then of class

struggle. Also, Virno is searching for 'effective truth'; his aim is a realistic knowledge of current social situations with the potential to change. However, he seems to follow analytical schemes more rigorously than does Negri. This is especially true for *Quando il verbo si fa carne* (*When the Verb becomes Flesh*) (2003) and *E così via, all'infinito* (*And so on, ad infinitum*) (2010) in which the subjects of the analysis are 'trans-individuality', instead of 'collective subjectivity' (Virno avoids the subjective/objective duality), the naturalness of the multitude (seen by Negri as a paralysing determinism) and the ambivalence of the multitude (its impotence before the revolutionary facts, as detected by Spinoza, and its violence after the revolutionary facts, as described by Machiavelli – dangers that are neglected by Negri) (Virno, 2003, 2010). Virno's analytical rigour, related to Kantian and Aristotelian formalism (seen by Negri as determinism), is experienced also in his criticism of 'universality', which he replaces with 'the common'.

Nevertheless, in Virno we see the same contextual nexus as in Negri. On 7 April 1979, he too was arrested, together with other members of the editorial committee of the journal *Metropoli*, of which he was editor-in-chief. He spent three years in prison and one under house arrest charged with further offences, and it was not until 1987 that he was cleared of all indictments, and only in 1988, nine years after his initial arrest, that he was finally acquitted. Virno shared his time in captivity with many friends of the movement, who came together with him to discuss, to think and to write. In *Diario di un'evasione* (*Diary of an Escape*), Negri testifies to these discussions, presenting the article 'Do you Remember Revolution?', co-written by Virno (among others), on the basis of such a collective discussion and published in *Il*

Manifesto on 20 and 22 February 1983, followed by the French translation in 1986, the English in 1988, and after that in various volumes edited by Moroni and Balestrini, Virno and others.²⁰ The struggle did not stop in prison; quite the contrary, in fact. Thus, while we should dismiss the 'aura' that surrounds sacredness, the uniqueness of particular experiences should be conserved.

Building on a thesis from Benjamin, Virno finds a place for uniqueness in the impersonal and serial. This idea undermines the antagonism between the individual and the collective and brings the experience back to the common. It also represents an answer to the aspirations of a movement in search of a space for politics in the entirety of particularities or a notion of the common emerging from the factual plurality of thoughts and imagination.

Paradoxically, the concept of 'general intellect', which was introduced by Marx (1983: 602) in the 'Fragment on Machines', as it is called, of the *Grundrisse*, is very important to such a materialistic theory. General knowledge does not belong to a defined and concrete individual person like Paolo, Giorgio or Antonio, but is, 'like the air we breathe', a sort of common source of the multitude of human beings (Virno, 2011: 13). General thought is neutrally impersonal, argues Virno, a thought in which *I think* must clear the way for *one thinks*. Moreover, general knowledge is public because it settles in the phenomenal world of appearances and acquires the same characteristics of material facts. It can be as incisive as an act of love, like a kiss or a caress, and as incisive as a revolutionary act, such as the occupation of the streets and squares of a metropolis. When one recognises the importance of the general intellect, Virno continues, the traditional analysis of capitalist society loses truth, as also does the rest of modern political theory.

In the late 1970s, the journal *Metropoli* wanted to reflect on post-Fordism, the crisis of a society based on work, the new forms of subjectivity and the fact that linguistic practice had come to be central to work. In *Convenzione e materialismo materialismo* (*Convention and Materialism*) ([1986] 2011), Virno continues this research and focuses on the epistemological categories that characterise modern intellectual work within social production. The autonomy of the general intellect, it was understood, has irreversibly changed the labour process, but it also offers a possibility of emancipation. Work has become immaterial and, at the same time, social. The consequence is a form of production that is far more complex, and so the law of value ceases to be applicable. Like Negri, Virno insists upon the immeasurability of social labour, from the moment that production includes immaterial goods constituted in the minds of and space between humans (knowledge, affects, codes, languages, etc.), the labour process exceeds the limits of place and time, and its value cannot be measured in temporal units.

Virno's analysis leads to the question of whether, in the current circumstances, it is possible to apply a unified notion of production. The answer is negative: a unified concept is associated with a simple, teleological view in which work activities and linguistic interaction are mutually exclusive. The unified view of labour is based on efficient causality, an idea characterised by a mechanical logic taken from nineteenth century industry (Virno, [1986] 2011: 67–75). Virno sees similarities between the logic of the old mass labour, the causal effect of industrial machines, the efficient causality characterised by a teleological view (coinciding with the final cause) as criticised by Spinoza and the causal effect in linguistic enunciations. The linguistic paradigm reveals that in

the efficient (final) cause there are three components: an active agent, a mechanical force and a passive body. These components are completely independent of one another and have no intrinsic features. The operation is silent, and proceeds in one unambiguous direction, which can only be repeated and imitated. There is no reciprocity. This makes the efficient causality unsuitable and unrealistic for post-Fordist production. By contrast, the practice of networking does not seek to replicate the orderliness of machines, but to respond to real effects in order to produce new modes and paradigms. The formal causality is characterised by a formal reciprocity, which is essential for communication, knowledge and language practice. Its components are multiple, various, ambiguous, immeasurable and self-generating. The formal causality matches what is going on in the actual labour processes, from the perspective of the researcher and also from the perspective of the labourer. Thus does the post-Fordist working class express itself as a multitude (Gielen & Lavaert, 2009: 38).

Virno's perspective on the multitude

Essentially, for Virno, the multitude is key to every reflection on current social events. In the genealogy of the concept in its political aspects, Virno (2010: 162–75) is engaging with a debate conducted in the seventeenth century, a period in which much of our ethical and political vocabulary originated.²¹ He interprets the assertions of Hobbes and Spinoza as an antagonism between two political perspectives: from the latter, the republican democratic perspective, whilst the former sings the praise of monarchy. According to Hobbes, the natural state is overcome by establishing political institutions and sovereignty. However, says Virno, Hobbes is equally (or even more) concerned with restraining and controlling the use of

words, which is among the major sources of conflict and instability. Furthermore, the general human capacity for creating appearance and secrecy with the use of words is troubling for Hobbes. By contrast, a systematic application of the rules, from the linguistic grammatical to civil law, silences any troubling ambiguity. The linguistic natural state reveals an ambiguous, labile, disquieting openness to the world, whereas the Hobbesian civil state brackets openness and creates an artificial environment in which unambiguous habits prevail. This is why, in contrast to Spinoza, for Hobbes the multitude needed to be transformed into 'one' people.

On this basis, Virno argues that the natural state asserts itself in politics when the people return to being a multitude – in other words, a plurality of individuals who no longer obey but who argue, speak, murmur, protest, refute, discourse, commune and suchlike, just as in the Biblical imagery of the exodus (Gielen & Lavaert, 2009: 37; Virno, [1986] 2011: 160–61).²² However, the natural state also asserts itself in politics when the sovereign suspends the ordinary laws and declares a state of exception (i.e. a state of emergency requiring exceptional measures). The revolt of the multitude, therefore, corresponds to the state of exception: in both cases, right becomes a factual question and the distinction becomes blurred between the level of the rules and the level of the facts to which the rules must be applied. This shocking intuition is contested by Negri as being far too pessimistic and perverted by Virno's reading of Schmitt, although, on the other hand, it is also corroborated by the genealogy Negri presents in *Multitude*.²³ This strange arguing/agreeing seems to be mediated by Agamben's (2003) presentation of the question of modern sovereignty in terms of sacredness and state of exception, a presentation that was also influenced by the reading of Schmitt.

For Virno, the multitude and the state of exception show the need to regard the link between passions and the use of language as something that is both natural and political. Beyond the rules, there is a prior regularity that forms the anthropological background for any positive law. This regularity exists in the unchangeable basic categories and logical structures of the linguistic human animal, which in themselves are empty and indeterminate. Emptiness and indeterminacy are the conditions for the possibility of filling them up with different contents in different concrete situations. A theory, seen from the perspective of the multitude, must express the essence of the three levels of human practice: the common, the invention of a determinate rule and the contingent application of this rule. None of the three levels, and application least of all, is immune to so-called evil.²⁴

Virno criticises the monopolisation of political decision-making in the hands of a single authority, because this functions according to the rule of repetitive compulsion or because imagination and creativity, essential in experience and application, then become impossible. This critique is based on the assumption that people in general are ambiguous, open and indeterminate, good and bad. Political institutions that definitively outlaw the negative, as is the case when a single authority takes the decisions (but also if they are based on an ideal, a religious dogma or a doctrine), do not protect people but create compulsion, threats, fear and violence. The big issue for democracy is how to arrive at decisions and institutions in favour of the general interest based on the factual plurality of differences and singular interests. Virno finds useful components for this in Simondon's individuation theory, which argues that a living individual constitutes itself in interaction with a pre-individual reality, of which an inchoate residue

subsists at any given moment, keeping the process going.²⁵ The pre-individual reality is the common human nature.

Modern representative democracy as it has developed since the seventeenth century is undemocratic in that it has systematically replaced the common, which can be individuated but cannot be given a predicate, with the universal, which can be given a predicate but cannot be individuated. The universal is identifiable with positive characteristics irrespective of the perspective of the identifier, while the common is not identifiable in a strict way and from outside the space or community in which it constitutes itself. Replacing the common with the universal, imagination and creativity are excluded and the multitude is suppressed by fear, or at best, its (their, our) potency is neutralised. An alternative can be found if, conversely, we focus on the immanent perspective and keep on mustering up the courage to engage in disobedience, freethinking and free speech.

(Non-)conclusion

Negri does not agree with Virno's thesis of the naturalness of the common or with his focus on purely linguistic forms or the multitude's so-called evil.²⁶ Their discussion is interesting to review because it reveals a great deal of truth, not in the form of conclusive judgements such as who is right or wrong, but in the arguments that appear in the discussion itself. Indeed, their discussion is a philosophical questioning, criticising and searching, which means that it cannot be concluded: the decisions are to be taken within the practice of the movements. Virno likes to underline the fact that his point of view is pessimistic. Because of the ambiguity and naturalness, the power of the multitude is not a guarantee and the story can turn out sour. In Negri's assertions,

optimism apparently pervades the potency of the multitude, but it is a realistic optimism. Their reciprocal critiques can be used to help understand the question and to become aware of the traps and confusions that lie in wait.

To clarify his position in the optimism/pessimism debate, Negri often uses a witticism of Gramsci in which he reverses the terms. What we need, he says, is 'optimism of the knowledge and pessimism of the will' (Negri, [1983] 2009a: 193–4). Optimism of the knowledge undoubtedly has the advantage of the enthusiasm it can raise, and, with the necessity of an accompanying pessimism of the will, Negri in fact confirms the ambiguity of the multitude. The pessimism of the will is explicitly expressed against the degeneration of revolutions and, more specifically, the comrades of the autonomist movement who chose terrorist violence – a choice he compares with that of the revolutionary governments of councils that became dictatorial in the Soviet Union and the power of the resistance movement that evolved into the authoritarian hierarchy of the PCI.

One could say that the discussion concerning the ambiguity of the multitude runs within the oeuvre of Negri itself, namely where he distinguishes the rupture (where he follows Althusser) in the work of Spinoza, and perhaps even where he sees a contradiction in Machiavelli's writing of history – that is, between an old pessimistic vision and the discovery of a new method.²⁷ What this discontinuity is really about can perhaps best be understood, again, when contrasted with the assertions of Virno. The question of a radical rethinking of the multitude (and of how to achieve democracy, equality, social justice, commonwealth, etc.) is that of how to consider the production of the common if the perspective of the multitude is partial, antagonistic and not to be

determined in a universalistic, scientifically objective way. This seems paradoxical: is not the multitude expressing the potency of the common without a residual? It is, but in an ambiguous, vivacious and mutable way. Placing the multitude at the core of their research, Agamben, Negri and Virno challenge our conceptions of theoretical and political objects: the multitude is an open concept, disposed to being reshaped by political praxis over and over again. This leads to materialistic, ethical, political, critical theorising, not opposed to imagination and affects, but conversely, using imagination and affect in order to build a real democracy, where the abstract universalism of state sovereignty is replaced by the effective construction of common yet multitudinous forms from within. The *potentia* of the multitude in Spinoza has to be carefully confronted and compared with the theory of the two conflicting perspectives of Machiavelli, and the optimism of knowledge to be combined with pessimism of the will, each time again, in every concrete situation – surely a complex and difficult task. But, in Negri's terms, 'the possibility is real' (Gielen & Lavaert, 2011: 184).

Acknowledgements

I want to thank Tuomo Alhojärvi, Andy Hilton, Joost Jongerden, Pieter Lemmens and Guido Ruivenkamp for their constructive questions, comments and suggestions given during the drafting of this article.

Notes

¹ The conversation reported took place when *Commonwealth* was not yet published. My hypothesis is that this conversation between Negri and Casarino, who noticed the absence of the concept of 'communism' in the first two parts of the trilogy, played a role in its translation into the terminology of the 'common'.

2 Antonio Paci, a former disciple of the phenomenologist Antonio Banfi, taught Negri and a whole generation of Italian philosophers, such as Maurizio Ferraris, Pier Aldo Rovatti and Carlo Sini. In 1951, he founded the magazine *Aut Aut*, which was important for phenomenology in Italy. In his Marxist existentialism, we recognise some of the thoughts of Agamben, Negri and Virno, like the status of the principle of relationship and the importance attributed to the negative.

3 We read in Marx's original text a mixture of German and English words: 'das allgemeine gesellschaftliche Wissen, knowledge', the last word translated in the footnote 'Kenntnisse'; and, further, 'general intellect', translated in the footnote 'allgemeinen Verstandes' (Marx, 1983: 602).

4 The *opuscoli* (pamphlets), published by Feltrinelli between 1977 and 1978 (*Crisi dello Stato-piano; Partito operaio contro il lavoro; Proletari e Stato; Per la critica della costituzione materiale; Il dominio e il sabotaggio*), were withdrawn from circulation by the publisher in the early 1980s and for a long time were unavailable. They have since been republished in a single volume, *I libri del rogo*.

5 I experienced myself on the occasion of an interview on art and common that Negri regards interviews as conversations, in which he is as curious to know the ideas of the interviewer as the interviewer is to know his. This reciprocity continues in the stage of writing, which he also considers to be a collective process, as testified by Cesare Casarino (Casarino & Negri, 2008; see also Gielen & Lavaert, 2011).

6 For further sources on the *operaismo*, see also Bori, Pozzi and Roggero (2005), Zanini (2007) and Zanini and Fadini (2001); all these texts were written collectively and present testimonies of the protagonists themselves.

7 See Negri's experimentation with political drama in the three plays of *The Trilogy of Resistance* (Negri, 2009b).

8 Similarly, Negri's focus on Spinoza represented a continuity in his philosophical production from *L'anomalia selvaggia* to *Spinoza et nous* (Negri, 2010b; see also Negri, 1981: 225–37).

9 Talking about atheism, I go beyond Negri; there is a humanistic atheism in all of Negri's thoughts but he rarely expresses it in explicit terms.

10 In the translations into Dutch produced in Spinoza's time by friends of his circle, the Latin '*multitudo*' is translated as '*menigte*' and/or '*veelheid*'. Cf. *Staatkundige Verhandeling in the Nagelate Schriften* (Spinoza, 1677b); *De rechtzinnige theologant, of Godgeleerde staatkundige verhandelinge* (Spinoza, 1693). The dictionaries of the time are even clearer, giving the two terms systematically (see Koerbagh, 1668; Meyer, 1663).

11 In this representation of Spinoza's thoughts, I remain within the scheme of Negri's interpretation but I also go beyond, or in other words, I present my own reading of Spinoza.

12 This idea is developed in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (Spinoza, 1670: 180–205).

13 See Chapter II in the *Tractatus Politicus* on 'natural right' (Spinoza, 1677: 270–84), in which he gives the key to reading the *Theologico-Political Treatise* and the *Ethics*; of course, this is a big thesis, to be argued in an independent study which is the current work in progress of the author and was schematically presented in 'Radical Enlightenment, Enlightened Subversion, and Spinoza' (see Lavaert, 2014: 49–102).

14 I present my own reading of Machiavelli, not as opposed to Negri's but as a going beyond; this is especially the case for the conclusions about what we can learn from Machiavelli and Spinoza on the (im)potency of the multitude.

15 Deleuze and Guattari themselves resumed the imagery launched by Bernard Mandeville in *The Fable of the Bees*.

16 This thesis is largely argued in Lavaert (2011).

17 The criticism of Agamben and Negri is also present in Casarino and Negri (2008).

18 The Auschwitz paradigm, it may be noted, is often mistaken for a hypothesis that explains modernity in an analytical way, and as such, it is criticised as an abuse; the same goes for the paradigms of the bare life, sacredness and the state of exception. Besides *Homo Sacer*, in

which is developed the paradigm of bare life and sacredness, the other works exemplary of this method are Agamben (1998, 2003).

19 Agamben's debut, this was perhaps the most important text in Virno's philosophical formation and is crucial to understand Virno's place in Agamben's oeuvre.

20 'Do you Remember Revolution?' was signed by Lucio Castellano, Arrigo Cavallina, Giustino Cortiana, Mario Dalmaviva, Luciano Ferrari Bravo, Chicco Funaro, Toni Negri, Paolo Pozzi, Franco Tommei, Emilio Vesce and Paolo Virno (see e.g. Negri, [1985/86] 2010: 35–49; Virno, 2005: 639–59).

21 In fact, Virno does not say a lot about Spinoza, but goes directly into discussion with Hobbes. Spinoza is systematically implicit in his discourse, however, in the same way that the antagonism to Hobbes is implicit in Spinoza. Like Negri, Virno also applies reversals and, along with the term 'multitude', he resumes the socio-political necessity of dystopia and the idea that the natural state never ends.

22 In *Exodus and Revolution*, Walzer (1985) reads the biblical Exodus text as a paradigm for revolutionary politics using 'paradigm' in the same way as Agamben, so Exodus is not a theory of revolution but a narrative for common use intended for recurrent re-readings and analogical applications. *Exodus and Revolution* was translated into Italian in 1986, which thus surely played a role in the use that the Italian radical philosophers made of the image (see also Illuminati, 2003).

23 In *Multitude* Hardt and Negri (2004) distinguish the concept of 'exception' in both its German and American origin as a key factor for understanding the current global state of war.

24 Virno (2010: 162–75) gives to these experimental reflections collected in the second part of *E così via, all'infinito* the title 'The so-called evil and the criticism of the state'. Part of the experiment is again the procedure of the reversal: he uses the arguments of Carl Schmitt to construct an argumentation from the politically opposite perspective, to criticise the state form, and consequently reverses the results of Schmitt (see also Lavaert, 2013: 117–40).

25 Simondon influenced Deleuze and, even more interestingly, Bernard Stiegler and Gilbert Hottois, as they identify the pre-individual domain with the human 'technical condition'. This means that there is an intrinsic relationship between techniques and common human nature, and it also endorses Virno's thesis on 'natural history' and on 'creativity' (see Simondon, 1989).

26 Each made clear his point of discussion in the interviews (Gielen & Lavaert, 2009: 34–6, 2011: 170–71).

27 In *L'anomalia selvaggia*, Negri (1981) speaks about the systematic rupture, which at a later stage becomes a wild rupture or 'anomaly'. The idea of a systematic rupture recalls Althusser's 'epistemological rupture' in Spinoza. In *Il potere costituente*, Negri ([1992] 2002b) reads Machiavelli's *Istorie fiorentine* as the result of a tension between two methods related to two views on the capacity to intervene in history, a rather conservative pessimistic view and a positive revolutionary view. I do not completely agree with this presentation of the conflicting theory, and prefer to express the conflict and tensions as belonging to reality rather than to the individual theories of Machiavelli and Spinoza, which would have first been blind and later enlightened. (Insisting on the contradiction between a first and a second Machiavelli or Spinoza, one risks having to discuss less important academic questions instead of the more urgent material issues, capturing history in its past instead of relating it to our present and future.)

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