

## The Antagonistic Ground of Constitutive Power: An Essay on the Thought of Antonio Negri

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Discontinuity and untimeliness are the soul of theoretical practice, just as the crisis is the key to the development of the real.

—Antonio Negri, “Notes on the Evolution of the Thought of the Later Althusser”

The thought, the word, or the figure of antagonism is critical, perhaps even central to the writings on philosophy, history, and politics by Antonio Negri. The use of antagonism across the confines and borders of these disciplines would seem to give it the status of something like a foundational concept. The invocation of antagonism in the context and development of an ontology of power would, according to this reading, provide the foundation for an investigation of social and political antagonisms. This could be what is at stake if we assume and take for granted not only certain protocols of concept production and interpretation, but also an entire series of presuppositions regarding the possibility to think, to engage in a thought of politics, and the relation between thought and praxis.

What if antagonism and its related problematics and thematics functioned otherwise? What if (and I can only offer this as something of a provocation and the opening of further questions) it is precisely the standard presuppositions of thought, and of thought’s relation to something called society, or politics—thus, the relation between thought and praxis—that Negri’s use of antagonism serves to disrupt and trans-

form? The centrality and the repetition of antagonism within the texts would not be that of a concept, at least in the conventional sense, but the displacement or the destabilization of the concept. As Negri writes, “reality is not linear”; thus, the movement from speculation to practice, or from ontology to politics, must trace this displacement (1991a, 55). It is this destabilization that antagonism exposes—a destabilization which is perhaps necessary to a thought of materiality as power, and a thought of the social, as relationality and praxis.

### *Pars Destruens/Pars Construens*

Michael Hardt has suggested that materialism designates not so much a philosophical position, or a philosophical tradition based on accepted axioms regarding the nature of reality (although this is in part unavoidable), but rather a constant struggle against the priority that thinking establishes for itself (1993, 107). This would make materialism as a philosophy proper, or as a system of concepts, impossible, or at least a paradox; but it is through this paradox that it becomes possible to open the question of another relation between thought and the materiality of its praxis, of the praxis of thinking, other than the articulation and the maintenance of concepts. This space between the impossibility of materialism as philosophy, and the possibility of another praxis of thinking, and another thought of praxis, is at the center of Negri’s reading of Spinoza.

The gap, or the disjuncture—that is, thought’s relationship to praxis—is articulated by Negri through a reading, and a rearticulation, of the relation between the destructive, negative, or critical moment of thought (*pars destruens*) and the creative or affirmative moment in the praxis of thinking (*pars construens*) in Spinoza. The relation of a simultaneous destruction and creation, maintained in their paradoxical unity, is the unstable maintenance of thought at the limit of the concept and at the edge of praxis, or invention. *Pars destruens* is a total destruction, an interruption, of the presuppositions of the concept as a unified and given object of thought, but it is through this that thinking can engage with *pars construens*, a creation, or invention, and thus a praxis and poetics without guarantee.<sup>1</sup> Developing a link between the seventeenth-century practice of critical doubt and social practice that is being explored here, Negri writes: “Doubt is a social practice destructive of things, not simply of spectres and unreal ideas—destructive to the extent that it affirms liberty” (1989, 160). It is a praxis, a tension of thinking that risks itself in the creation of the new (Negri 1991b, xv).

The relation of *pars destruens* to *pars construens* is not something that Spinoza’s thinking or texts directly offer to a casual or passive reading; it demands a strategy

1. William Haver (1997) has suggested that the conjunction of *pars destruens/pars construens*, or a doing that necessarily exceeds knowing, in the thought of Negri and Hardt should be understood as a practice of invention.

of reading, and an engagement with the limits and divisions of the text. Negri's reading of Spinoza combines a complex conjunction of interpretive practices. Negri investigates both the historical conditions and the textual articulation of Spinoza's writing, but not through the conventional dialectic of historical context and hermeneutically recuperated meaning. Central to Negri's reading is that Spinoza's thought cannot be reduced to a simple reflection of the historical period of its articulation, that in some sense it is a "philosophy of the future," but that this irreducibility is not a matter of a simple transcendence of those conditions or Spinoza's "discovery" of some "universal" truth. The irreducibility of Spinoza's thought to its conditions is founded on its relationship to what Negri identifies as the "crisis" (1991b, 266). Historically, at the time of Spinoza's writing, the crisis is the tension between the emerging developments of scientific and productive forces, and the emerging organization of the "market" as the organizing and mediating force of the social (20). This crisis is more than a precondition for interpreting Spinoza's thought, thus more than a simple context for at least two reasons. The first is the complexity of Spinoza's response to this crisis: the manner in which the historical antagonism of productivity and order becomes a problem and a tension internal to Spinoza's project. The second reason is that this "crisis" is not a totally discrete event limited to the time of Spinoza's writing but is extended and displaced, in its repetition, to include the present. The relation, division, or even antagonism between the multiplicity of immanent relations of constitution and production, and the mediating orders of law, state, and market (or what Marx [1970, 20] called the forces of production and the relations of production) is the crisis without stasis that is history and historicity.

This thought of the crisis frames the various textual tensions and divisions that Negri explores and articulates in his reading of Spinoza. For Negri, Spinoza's text is divided in both its metaphysics and politics between a neo-Platonist tendency toward the affirmation of a transcendent order in the first foundation of the *Ethics*, and a materialist philosophy of constitution as organization in the second foundation.<sup>2</sup> The development of the relationship *pars destruens/pars construens* has as its enabling condition this crisis, and the destruction of any transcendent mediation of this crisis, and transcendence altogether. If the "crisis" makes possible a reading of the tensions and divisions of Spinoza's text, then Spinoza also makes possible a reading of the crisis; that is, Spinoza makes possible a reinvestigation and a rethinking of the ontological, subjective, and political dimensions of the contradiction between "relations and forces of production" (Negri 1991b, 223).

According to Negri, Spinoza's *Ethics* opens onto a fundamental paradox, one that stems from the absolute affirmation of substance as infinite being and as the power

2. A note on the distinction between "order" and "organization": As Hardt indicates, order of being, truth, or society is a structure that is always above, prior to, and in part exterior to the material relations it organizes while organization is the development of the accidental and immanent relations between various forces and relations (1993, xv). However, these definitions are meant only to provide the starting point for investigations and developments of the relation between order and organization on the terrain of metaphysics, politics, and so forth.

of existence. The paradox is the tension between two grounds of ontology: two ways of conceiving the relation between unity and multiplicity, or between substance and the modes. “In Spinoza a decision is never made between two perspectives: the dynamic one, for which substance is a force, and the static one, for which substance is pure linear coordination” (79). This paradox is at once the central question of any reading of Spinoza in that it poses all the old questions of the relation between the infinite and the finite, the substance and the modes, or of what Negri calls the organization of the infinite; but it is also, at least in Negri’s reading, the question of the very grounds of thought and practice. The paradox is the division between order and organization: between emanation, which proceeds from substance to the modes, and constitution, which proceeds from the modes to substance. The first foundation of the *Ethics*, which Negri locates in parts 1 and 2, is not only the exposition of this paradox but its partial and incomplete resolution through the mediating order of the attributes. The attributes, thought and extension, are what the intellect perceives as the essence of substance (*Ethics* ID3).<sup>3</sup> The first foundation tends toward emanation rather than constitution; emanation is not just a relation of priority or degradation between substance, mode, and attribute, but the harmony or linearity of this relation (59). For Negri another name for this first foundation, displaced to the political register, is “Utopia,” or the preexistent rationality of production and its ordering.<sup>4</sup>

The second foundation, or at least the problem of the second foundation, is developed at the point where the paradox of the mode/substance relation is brought to its extreme point, thus to the destruction of any pregiven mediation. It is not simply a question of the resolution of a paradox, but of the refusal of any mediating ground of consciousness—any finalized, or pregiven, order of being. Negri locates the beginning of this foundation, which is also a destruction (a *pars destruens* of the last remnants of the idealism of emanation), in Spinoza’s development of the relationship between power, conatus, and corporeality. This later part of the *Ethics*, which makes up parts 3 and 4, develops the double exigency of the *pars destruens/pars construens* relation. First, it constitutes the destruction of any ontology as static, concealed, and grounding in the strong sense. This destruction is necessary for any rigorous thought of constitutive power—which is to say, a thought of praxis that is anything other than an actualization of nature, the forms, the Idea, or some other presupposed ground or foundation. The disjunctive conjunction of *pars destruens/pars construens* is also a

3. B. Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *The collected works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, trans. E. Curley (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985).

4. Pierre Macherey has indicated that Negri makes the same interpretive mistake as Hegel in interpreting the attributes as the “mediation” and “degradation” of substance; such a reading misses the “force” of Spinoza’s concept of substance as “self-caused” (1983, 16). While Macherey’s reading offers criticism which in some sense cannot be refused, any thorough response (and there is neither time nor space for one here) would have to return to what Negri means by “crisis” as the starting point for his reading of Spinoza and the manner in which this “crisis” is at once political, ontological, and epistemological. The intersection and overlap of the “first foundation” and the “ideology” of utopia would already indicate the complexity of ontological and political questions that Negri’s reading of Spinoza both presupposes and develops. This complexity, which at times is presented as a simple homology of attributes and the market, would mean that there are always more than interpretive questions at stake in Negri’s reading and refusal of the attributes.

critical engagement with the priority of thought as primary and prior to the body and its activity. These two demands converge in relation to the problem of the attributes, which install the primacy of thought in the order of being.<sup>5</sup> According to Negri, the veritable elimination of the attributes in parts 3 and 4 is part of a destructive and critical movement. *Pars destruens* is the destruction of ontology as a reification of the world as order, and the priority of thought as knowing over doing (Negri 1989, 160).

From the opening of the *Ethics*, the exposition of power is aligned with a destructive movement of *pars destruens*. Spinoza's exposition of power is both a political critique and an ontological transformation. In book 2 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza distinguishes between God's power as *potentia*, inseparable from its actuality, and the legislative power of *potestas*, which is predicated on the separation between will and intellect (*Ethics* IIPr3schl). As Gilles Deleuze writes, Spinoza's directly political critique, a deconstruction of *potestas* as the analogy of divine and legislative power, is interwoven throughout the appendices and scholium of the *Ethics*: "One of the basic points of the *Ethics* consists in denying that God has any power (*potestas*) analogous to that of a tyrant, or even an enlightened prince" (1988, 97). For Negri, this political critique has as its consequence, or perhaps as its precondition, the development of an immanent ontological organization that is directly opposed to transcendent order. As he writes, "*Potentia* as the dynamic and constitutive inherence of the single in the multiplicity, of mind in the body, of freedom in necessity—power against Power—where *potestas* is presented as the subordination of the multiplicity, of the mind, of freedom and of *potentia*" (Negri 1991b, 190). The denial of any speculative priority to *potestas* (or Power) opens the possibility of a new ground of ontology, or what Negri terms the displacement from theology or ontology to politics. It is this new ground that is developed in the "second foundation" of the *Ethics*, in the material and practical horizon of the modes.

As Negri indicates, the transformation of the "second foundation" is in the first instance a radical inversion, or destruction of the metaphysics of emanation, toward a "physics" of the material relations of the modes: an inversion which is made possible by the univocity of being, by Spinoza's refusal to maintain any hierarchy between thought and extension or any teleology or finality to being. "If God is all, all is God. The difference is important: on one side an idealistic horizon, on the other side a materialistic potentiality" (Negri 1991b, 64). Univocity and power (*potentia*) are the conditions for an affirmation of singularity and materiality as the only possible ground.<sup>6</sup> Being is only in its multiple and disjoined organizations.

5. As Michael Hardt (1993) indicates, the attributes pose a problem for any materialist reading of Spinoza in that they would seem to necessitate a priority of thought in their very definition, which makes perception, or thought, the site of the division between thought and extension. As Hardt indicates, Negri's resolution of this problem, which is based on a historical and thematic interruption between the two "foundations" of the *Ethics*, is not without its difficulties.

6. Negri traces a thread of singularity that begins with the opening definitions of part 2 of the *Ethics*. These two definitions begin to unfold an ontology of univocity where the "thing" is defined as an expression of its singular power of acting (*Ethics* IID3). From these definitions, Negri (1991b, 60–3) locates a fugitive thread of singularity working through the *Ethics*.

As the ground of singularity, *potentia* constitutes an essentially different terrain from the ground thought as emanation, or of an ontology of transcendence in the first foundation. It is rigorously materialist in the sense that acting, the body, force, and organization are given priority over reflection, universality, and order. There is no original hierarchy of being, no ideal form, from which to judge the different singular expressions of power (*potentia*). As Gilles Deleuze argues, the horizon of singularity, of power, is anarchic, not only in the sense that there is not ordering prior to its organization, but that difference is originary; the conatus is a striving or preservation that is radically indifferent to the affections that determine it (1992, 261). Thus, there is no natural or predetermined harmony or common sense at the basis of relations but rather, an “ethical difference,” or an anarchy of the social (Haver 1997, 282). Difference, even antagonism, is primary, but from the different strivings and the affects of those strivings (pleasure, pain, love, hate, fear, hope, etc.), sociability is both given and constituted. It is given in the sense that there is no existence without affects and relation (a Hobbesian individualism is ontologically impossible) and it is constituted in the sense that the different affects continually develop antagonisms, identifications, and sociability.

It is from this horizon, this ground of singularity, and the existential horizon of the modes that Negri articulates a thought of constitutive power. What is “constituted” in constitutive power is the mode or manner of sociality itself or, as Étienne Balibar writes in relation to a somewhat different problematic, praxis alters the very mode of communication itself (1985, 115). According to Negri, Spinoza’s “geometrical treatment” of the affects increasingly tends toward a greater and greater complexity and irreversibility of social relations. “Joy,” “sadness,” desire, and the various imitations and antagonism that are involved in the affects begin to encompass and constitute more and more individuals. “The nexus of composition, complexity, conflictiveness, and dynamism is a continual nexus of successive dislocations that are neither dialectical nor linear, but, rather discontinuous” (Negri 1991b, 151). However, as Pierre Macherey (1983) and others have noted, Negri’s reading of the discontinuous tendency of sociality in books 3 and 4 of the *Ethics* risks, or even unproblematically affirms, a telos toward liberation or, in more Spinozist terms, “perfection.”<sup>7</sup> Macherey’s criticism raises a question that is crucial to understanding the intersection of ontology and politics that Negri develops through his thought of “constitutive power.” Is this affirmation of liberation maintained at the level of ontological speculation, or, is it maintained at the level of ethical and historical praxis?

7. Negri’s lapse into a language of teleology is especially problematic for Macherey for whom the central question of the Hegel/Spinoza encounter is one of the possibility of a nonteleological dialectic (1983, 36). Balibar’s reading of Spinoza’s thought of a “mode of communication” is also perhaps a reply to Negri in that Balibar maintains the radical ambivalence of sociability—that is, there is no tendency or guarantee that the “common notions” will ever overcome the ambivalent affects (1985, 105). Since the question and critique of telos (especially as a telos of “liberation” or progress) is a philosophical and political question that must be asked after Marx, or after a certain reading of Marx has collapsed, I will return to this in the next two sections.

This question is important. An affirmative answer to the first part returns us to a purely ontological teleology (perfection in the strong theological sense) while an affirmative answer to the second renders perfection, or more exactly liberation, a problem that can be responded to only on the terrain of political and social praxis.

The concepts, and the ontology that is being articulated here through a reading of the relation of *pars destruens* to *pars construens*, cannot be completed in a moment of speculation. The questions and tensions briefly noted above, between irreversibility and teleology, cannot be answered speculatively, but this is not a fault or a drawback. As Negri writes:

After the development of such a radical *pars destruens*, after the identification of a solid point of support by which the metaphysical perspective re-opens, the elaboration of the *pars construens* requires a practical moment. The ethics could not be constituted in a project, in the metaphysics of the mode and of reality, if it were not inserted into history, into politics, into the phenomenology of a single and collective life: if it were not to derive new nourishment from that engagement. (1991b, 84)

*Pars destruens/pars construens* must be opened to the difference between thought and its occasion. This difference, this exposure to historicity and the social, is what the affirmation of *potentia*—power in its practical constitutive moment—demands. This displacement, or shift, is not exterior to the relation *pars destruens/pars construens*, as in an application, nor is it entirely interior, as its speculative foundation, but it is the movement where the practice of thinking finds itself intersected with and transformed by its encounter with the materiality of power and desire. The displacement and destabilization of the concept of antagonism are not simply negative gestures, instances of the humility of thought, but positive effects: indications of a dynamic relation between the demands of ontological speculation and political activity (55). Negri finds support for this praxis of thinking in Marx's reflections on research.

At a crucial point in the *Grundrisse*, Marx insists on the difference, perhaps irreducible, between the appropriation of the world in thought, and a practical material relation to that world (1973, 101). In Negri's reading this difference has as its consequence a continual shifting, or displacement, of the terrain of research, what Marx describes as the difference between research (*Forshung*) and presentation (*Darstellung*) (Marx 1977, 102). This difference is the movement from the difference between *potestas* and *potentia* as a difference of ontological ground, and the difference between *potestas* and *potentia* as they relate on the social historical terrain of antagonism and constitution. This shift of terrain involves an apparent inversion of priority between *potestas* and *potentia*; while it is possible to reduce transcendent order to immanent organization on the terrain of ontological speculation, to locate the immanent articulations of bodies and desires at the points where transcendence and order reign, the social-historical political world seems to resist such a reduction and inversion. The texts of history, and our own daily existence, would continually remind us of the practical and material primacy of constituted or instituted power (*potestas*) over constitutive power (*potentia*) (Hardt 1991, xiv). Consti-



tutive power seems blocked at every point by the dead weight of constituted or instituted power, by capital and the state. If the logic of *pars destruens/pars construens* is the destruction of ontological transcendence and the image of divine *potestas*, a destruction that makes possible a recognition of constitutive power, antagonism is the movement of this logic and critique into the practical social world.

### Antagonism

The development of a thought of constitutive power opens the possibility of a rigorous exposition of antagonism as the historical and social ground for power.<sup>8</sup> The distinction between *potentia* and *potestas* internal to power provides the ontological ground for a rigorous exposition of antagonism as the conflictual composition of power in the world. The thought of antagonism begins to articulate the historical, technological, and political mediations and conditions of constitutive power. These conditions and mediations push a thought of constitutive power beyond any sort of residual teleology in the terrain of speculation and place it in the conflictual terrain of the antagonisms and struggles within the “real subsumption” of society by capital.<sup>9</sup>

Negri develops a thought of antagonism through a reading of the *Grundrisse*, which is not to suggest that it is clearly a matter of philology or of an intellectual history of Marx’s writing. As with the reading of *Capital* conducted by Althusser, Balibar, and Macherey in the late 1960s, philological questions and questions of interpretation are inseparable from the polemical and finally political terrain of their articulation. According to Michael Hardt, Negri’s textual practice is framed by the political practices and historical events of the Italian political left in the 1970s (1990, 223). Like Marx’s *Grundrisse*, Negri’s writing is a “double work” framed by both a philosophical and political conjuncture (Hardt 1991, 2). These double exigencies converge around “antagonism” in terms of the ontological and political conditions for a thought of

8. This statement, which establishes a certain logical priority between the works, may sound a bit odd given that Negri’s work on Spinoza was written after his work on the *Grundrisse*. However, there are several mitigating circumstances which make this counterchronological presentation possible. First, Negri seems to rely on many of the important conceptual distinctions (between the two types of power, etc.) already in the work on Marx. Second, Michael Hardt has argued that Negri’s work on the *Grundrisse* is an investigation into the ontology and politics of constitution; thus, the two works are perhaps part of the same trajectory (1990, 224). Finally, this trajectory is actualized by such later works as *The Politics of Subversion* and *Labor of Dionysus*, which explicitly draw from both the analysis of antagonism in Marx and the ontology of constitutive power.

9. “Real subsumption,” or the question of real subsumption as the contemporary articulation of capital, is the historical–political axis of Negri’s thought. The term is drawn from Marx and, in the rather limited and perhaps even disjointed textual space he devotes to it, is characterized as the transition to socialized rather than individual labor and the increasing predominance of science, accumulated knowledge, and “immaterial labor” in the production process. As Marx writes, “The mystification implicit in the relations of capital as a whole is greatly intensified here, far beyond the point it had reached or could have reached in the merely formal subsumption of labor under capital” (1977, 1024). For Negri, the important philosophical and political task is to “demystify” this relation and to recognize the real antagonism and possibilities for liberation in real subsumption (1989, 73).



antagonism and the possibility for recognizing, and acting in, the possibilities of antagonisms within the current conjuncture. Negri's reading of Marx works on these two philosophical terrains at once—ontological and social historical—or rather, it continually attempts to bring the two together, drawing together the ontological investigation of constitutive power with the analysis of “immaterial labor” and “real subsumption.” Here we can see the “displacement of research” at work as concepts from Negri's reading of Spinoza's ontology are augmented and transformed by being displaced onto a historical and social terrain.

As Negri indicates, Marx's method in the *Grundrisse* is to “locate the primary practical antagonism within whatever categorical foundation” (1991a, 47). The various categories and relations that constitute the economic, or the mode of production (such as value or surplus-value, profit, etc.), are “demystified” or interpreted as relations of force. “*The category of production*, in the essential terms which distinguish it, and with it the totality which characterized it—a veritable social articulation of reality—*can only be constituted as a category of difference*, as a totality of subjects, of differences, of antagonism” (44). The seemingly unified categories of “political economy” both conceal and indicate an antagonistic tension. Every category is dual, split between two “logics” and two “subjects.” This “logic” of antagonism can be illustrated with respect to the central antagonistic concept of Marx's analysis: surplus-value. Surplus-value is the difference of surplus labor over necessary labor (the labor necessary for the production and reproduction of the working class) (Marx 1973, 443). Capital struggles to increase surplus labor, whether through absolute or relative surplus-value, while the workers continually attempt to broaden the sphere of the necessary, of need.<sup>10</sup> The objectivity and quantification of value, or surplus-value—in fact, its very unity as a concept—can be only a temporary stability of this antagonistic relation (76). “There is not a single category of capital that can be taken out of this antagonism, out of this perpetually fissioning flux” (131).

To suggest that each category, and the relation it entails, is a relation of force or antagonism, is already to state that “the critique of political economy” in Marx is inseparable from a relation of power, or a political relation. Exploitation, according to Negri, is less a purely economic, hence quantifiable relation than a relation of control (Negri 1996c, 153). Or put differently, the economic is never active in its pure “state”; it is always overdetermined by the political (Althusser 1970, 113). Negri's use of overdetermination is distinct from Althusser's, or rather, the two are related only to the extent that they share a common object of critique—that is, economism. For Negri, “overdetermination” is the inseparability of politics—of political power—from economics. As he argues, part of the benefit of Marx's mode of exposition in the *Grundrisse* is that by beginning with an analysis of money, which is inseparable from its function as a means of command, rather than with the more “economic” analysis of the commodity, it begins with the immediate intersection of ex-

10. Writing along similar lines of inquiry, Étienne Balibar has argued that the movement from “absolute” to “relative” surplus-value necessarily presupposes an irreducible antagonistic element; thus, antagonism is interior to capitalist and technological innovation (1995, 96).

exploitation and subordination, politics and the economy (Negri 1991a, 24). “Money has the advantage of presenting me immediately the lurid face of the social relation of value; it shows me value right away as exchange, commanded and organized for exploitation” (23). The recognition of antagonism “short-circuits” any attempt to maintain the economy and the political as supposedly separate categories of analysis and separate spheres of activity.<sup>11</sup> The “critique of political economy” includes both the effects of the “economic” on the “political,” in terms of the formation of law and the state, and the “effects of the “political” on the “economic,” in terms of relations of power and discipline internal to the production process.<sup>12</sup>

This “short circuit” expands and warps the terms that it continually intersects with. The “political” would include those direct and immediate power relations and conflicts that take place within every work relation as well as those more or less indirect relations between the labor process and the types of law, and ultimately the state form itself. What is essential for Negri’s analysis is that this “overdetermined” intersection of the “political” and the “economic” includes power thought in its materiality; power returns the analysis to the ontological question of the relationship between *potentia* and *potestas*. What Negri calls labor—or “living labor” as something distinct from “abstract labor,” or the socially normalized labor subordinated to the rule of value, the subjectivity and cooperation of the laboring process—is constitutive power (*potentia*) (Hardt and Negri 1994, 7–14). As Marx writes in the *Grundrisse*, “Labor is the living, form-giving fire; it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation by living time” (1973, 361). The subjectivity of this labor is constituted by its position and relations within the labor process and transformed by the history of the labor relation (for example, the necessity of cooperation and knowledge in “immaterial labor”).<sup>13</sup> But living labor is also constitutive in the sense that it does not just constitute, or produce, things or commodities but it also constitutes relations, the sphere of need and desire. Labor—living labor—is both constituted by structures, relations, and assemblages, and constitutive of subjectivity and sociality. As Negri writes: “The abstraction, the abstract collectivity of labor is subjective power (*potentia*)” (70). Living labor is constitutive power (*potentia*).

Capital depends on and develops the power of living labor as the source of productivity while continually subjecting it to capitalist command. Capital continually subordinates the singularity of living labor to the discipline and normalization of

11. Balibar argues that Marx’s “critique of political economy,” because it focuses on the work relation rather than the classical relation between subject and sovereign, proceeds through a short circuit of the realms of politics and the economy, which bourgeois thought has assumed to be by definition separate (1988, 33).

12. While the focus of Negri’s reading of the *Grundrisse* is perhaps on the later of these two movements, Hardt and Negri develop the second, a critique of the state from the “critique of political economy” (1994, 139–79). Of course, these two movements are indissociable for any attempt to think politics from Marx.

13. This transition, which is essential to what Negri calls real subsumption, is developed by Maurizio Lazzarato. “Immaterial labor” is generally outlined as either a difference in “content,” information, and communication rather than an object or in the “form” of labor process—that is, activities that deal more with questions of culture, opinion, and taste (1996, 133).

abstract labor: labor that produces value. The foundation of this subordination is the division between labor as abstract labor, defined as that which creates value, and all other activities, which are given the negative definition of “nonwork” or nonproductive work (this includes housework and all other labor defined as nonproductive). As Hardt and Negri write, “If labor is the basis of value, then value is equally the basis of labor. What counts as labor, or value creating practice, always depends on the existing values of a given social and historical context; in other words, labor should not simply be defined as activity, any activity, but specifically activity that is socially recognized as productive of value” (1994, 9). While the distinction between valued labor and labor deemed nonproductive is itself a site of contestation and antagonism, in a capitalist society this division between valued and nonvalued labor is ultimately drawn by the demands of capitalist accumulation.

If in the first instance capitalist command differentiates and separates the sphere of work from nonwork, in the second it establishes a hierarchy and discipline internal to work, which is necessary to the production of surplus-value.<sup>14</sup> As Marx indicated in chapter 13 of *Capital*, the more capitalist production is dependent upon the cooperation and subjectivity of labor (as in the production of relative surplus-value), the more it must impose structures of command and discipline to control the productive forces it requires (Hardt and Negri 1994, 77). It might be possible to say that capital is a kind of worldly *potestas* that functions by separating power (*potentia*) from “what it can do.” Capital continually subordinates the subjectivity and sociality of living labor to the constraints and demands of surplus-value.

The conflict between capitalist command (as a worldly form of *potestas*) and living labor is not limited to the direct and immediate conflict that takes place between worker and capitalist in the labor process. It also includes the political and social effects and mediations of this relation, such as law and state power (Balibar 1988, 33). These “mediations and effects” are transformed by the passage from formal to real subsumption, and the most notable effect of this transformation is a breakdown in the spatial and temporal division between the sites of production and reproduction. The factory as an isolated site of production has given way to the “social factory” in which social cooperation and communication (not to mention the productive forces of immaterial labor such as subjectivity, knowledge, style, and affect) have become directly productive. Production has become coextensive with the social. “If the factory has been extended across the social plane, then organization and subordination, in their varying relationship of interpenetration, are equally spread across the entire society” (Hardt and Negri 1994, 79).<sup>15</sup> This socialization intensifies and multiplies the contours of antagonism. It intensifies antagonism by elevating and

14. Following Deleuze and Guattari, capital can be identified as an “apparatus of capture.” An apparatus of capture is defined by two moments that are mutually constitutive, a direct comparison of activities (the division between labor and nonlabor) and a monopolistic appropriation (surplus labor) (1987, 444).

15. Gilles Deleuze (1995) has developed some of the implications of the breakdown of spatial and temporal divisions between techniques of control.

transforming the stakes; it places cooperation, sociality, and even language and subjectivity at the center of any antagonism with capital (276). All struggles from this point forward, that are against capital, will involve struggles not only over distribution and production, but over cooperation and even communication itself (Negri 1989, 116).<sup>16</sup> This intensification is also a multiplication; the antagonism against capital is removed from a central site (such as the factory) and a central object (the struggle against exploitation), and is made coextensive with struggles which have as their object the production of new subjectivities and relations of cooperation, such as feminism and ecological movements (Guattari and Negri 1990, 106).

From the introduction of socialization and subjectivity as internal moments of antagonism, we can indicate the specific logic of struggle and constitution that underlies Negri's thought of antagonism and chart the distance that separates antagonism from the "dialectic" as a logic of transformation and constitution. To begin with, the socialization of capital locates and dislocates capital and the power relations it implies across diverse and differentiated social practices and processes, making it difficult to locate anything like a singular and central "contradiction." As Negri, as well as other anti-Hegelian readers of Marx such as Louis Althusser have noted, such a thought of contradiction "totalizes" the social into the expression of one contradiction and its phenomenal appearances (Althusser 1970, 111). Negri's reading of the *Grundrisse* refuses an initial methodological opposition between plurality and duality. As Negri writes, "The field of research [of the *Grundrisse*] is determined by the continual tension between the plurality of real instances and the explosive duality of antagonism" (1991, 14). The relation between the plurality of instances and the duality of antagonism is articulated in and through social practice, or in the current conjuncture.<sup>17</sup> As Negri writes in *The Politics of Subversion*:

These social formations can be seen as being simultaneously singular in the accumulation of individual aspects, ideological thresholds and machines . . . Now these alternatives become molar, dualistic, and antagonistic when the conflict is focused on essential aspects of the relationship—i.e. when the conflict is focused on those aspects which force major decisions concerning the existence and tempo of social intercourse. In the present case this means that the alternatives become molar, dualistic and antagonistic when what is at issue is *the problem of the expropriation of laboring cooperation*. (1989, 129)

16. Despite the differences in Balibar's and Negri's readings of sociality in Spinoza, there is perhaps an important convergence in Negri's idea of the antagonistic constitution of communism and Balibar's development of a thought of a mode of communication in Spinoza and, more important, Balibar's idea of a praxis that would be aimed at a transformation of this "mode of communication" (1985, 105).

17. As Althusser indicates, the displacements and condensations of contradiction are unified, paradoxically, only within a given conjuncture, or the moment of political practice (1970, 179). While I would not suggest that Negri's thought of the relation between the "plurality" of instances and the "duality" of antagonism is directly influenced by Althusser (in fact Hardt has even argued that Negri's reading of the *Grundrisse* [1991a, 224] has as its object a critique of Althusser and Balibar's *Reading Capital* [1970]), I would suggest that they all are working within the same or at least a similar problematic with respect to the critique of dialectical totality.

The socialization of capital—its placement and displacement in practices and relations—produces multiple molecular antagonisms that become dualistic and molar whenever social life or existence itself is at stake within a given conjuncture.<sup>18</sup>

Subjectivity and political practice also play an important role in the second and most important difference that Negri establishes between “antagonism” and “the dialectic”—that is, the possibility of a radical separation and division of constitutive power and worker subjectivity from capital or, in a word, *autonomia*. Negri rejects the dialectic insofar as it is presented either as the narrative of capital’s command of its own social and political unfolding (capital as spirit) or as the dialectic of the relationship between the working class and capital, which places the working class as always “within” as much as it is “against” capital (1996c, 165).<sup>19</sup> This separation is made possible by constitutive power—by a production process that increasingly depends on laboring cooperation, thus developing subjectivities and relations that expose the hollowness and coercive nature of capitalist command. The development of its powerful force of subjectivity and cooperation apart from capitalist command makes possible a transition or negation without compromise. As Negri writes: “We must immediately underline that in this light the antagonistic logic ceases to have a binary rhythm, ceases to accept the fantastic reality of the adversary on its horizon. *It refuses the dialectic* even as a simple horizon. *It refuses all binary formulae*. The antagonistic process tends here to hegemony, *it tends to destroy and suppress its adversary*” (189). *Pars destruens*—the critique, destruction, or evacuation of capitalist relations—is a form of critique that is both total and immanent (Hardt and Negri 1994, 6). It is total in that it is uncompromising in its critical destruction (*pars destruens*) but, more important, it is also immediately creative (*pars construens*), creating other forms of cooperation and valorization than those maintained in and for surplus-value. It is immanent in the sense that the source and the movement of this critique and critical practice are not exterior to the social relations they act upon (Negri 1996c, 160). Antagonism is not only a force of destruction against the present power structure; it is also internal to the process of constitution. If, as Negri has argued, Spinoza’s thought can be understood as the immediate intersection of *pars destruens* and *pars construens* (of critical destruction and creation), then on the terrain of social practice, “destruction is the internal condition of liberation” (1989, 161).

18. “Life” and “existence itself” should not be understood to have simply a rhetorical significance here as Negri argues that the antagonism against capital intersects with life on at least three points: the first is the intersection of capital with sociality and “forms of life”; the second is the tendency for capital to directly invest itself in “the nuclear state” and massive arsenals of death; and finally there is the antagonistic intersection between capital and ecological struggles (see Negri 1989, 123–6, 191–200; Guattari and Negri 1990, 93–101).

19. It is important to recognize the specificity and, at times, even the limited scope of Negri’s critique of the dialectic. Negri primarily critiques the dialectic as either *the* dialectic between capital and the working class or the Hegelian dialectic as the foundation of the state. In both these cases the multiplicity of constituent forces is made necessarily subordinate to capitalist exploitation or the state (Negri 1997, 230). Aside from this, Negri does at times preserve or acknowledge a loose sense of dialectic in Marx’s development of conceptual determinations (1991a, 58).

### The Untimely Insistence of Communism

The name that Negri gives the sociality constituted by and in this *pars destruens/pars construens*, this simultaneous critique and creation of new values, is “Communism.” Communism is the immanent critical movement or, as Marx and Engels write in the definition which is perhaps closest to Negri’s sense of communism, “Communism is the real movement which abolishes the present state of things” (1970, 57). For Spinoza, the convergence of *pars destruens/pars construens* was power, in the sense of both the destruction of *potestas* and the invention of *potentia*. For Negri, the force of destruction and creation converge on power as well; however, this is not simply the abstract power of ontology but the power of a new social subjectivity and sociality.

Negri inherits the rigorous anti-utopian impulse of Marx; thus, any thought of what constitutes communism must be located in the materiality of existing relations, institutions, and processes that structure collectivity. Negri surrenders any idea that these institutions and processes constitute anything like a telos, dialectical or otherwise, yet he does insist on the fundamental “irreversibility” of certain contemporary socioeconomic transformations. These irreversible transformations—what Negri calls the “prerequisites of communism”—include the centrality of cooperation, sociality, and subjectivity or “immaterial labor” and persist as a kind of latent communism within the real subsumption of society by capital (Hardt and Negri 1994, 272–82). Negri and Hardt’s “prerequisites” include the more recognizable and more frequently discussed social historical transformations such as the passage from Fordist regulations and guarantees to post-Fordist production and the decentralization of Taylorist industrial production by the new “service” or information economy. Rather than see these transformations as simple moments in the seemingly endless transformation and modification of capitalism, Hardt and Negri recognize each as “prerequisites,” as the simultaneous destruction of an old constitution and the creation of a new order. In each case these transformations indicate the persistence of “subjectivity” and cooperation in the laboring process.

At this time these “prerequisites” constitute a “passive revolution” that persists quietly beneath the loud and redundant celebrations of the total victory of capitalism (233). The irreversibility and collectivity of these transformations do not as of yet form the basis for an explicit and manifest politics, at least at the level of “molar” organizations. This new collectivity has up until this point made itself felt only at the molecular level; it has demanded and received a massive restructuring of work, one that has placed subjectivity, flexibility, and cooperation at the center of “immaterial labor.” It has produced new forms of subjectivity and new styles of living. But these transformations are blocked by the force of capitalist command, by the “semiotics of hierarchy” and the ideologies of the market which limit the force of this sociality to a new elite (Negri 1989, 135–6).<sup>20</sup> This “blockage” or limi-

20. What Negri calls the “semiotics of hierarchy” is a bivocal strategy that perpetuates hierarchy and exclusion at the level of both material practices and institutions, and ideologies; the most pervasive of these “semiotics” is the ideology and practice of the market, which disfigures and displaces the material forces of socialization and cooperation (1989, 134).



tation can be removed only when these molecular revolutions become organized and subject to molar organization.

The organization of this new sociality in the transformation from molecular proliferations to molar antagonisms constitutes a different politics from traditional thematics of constitution and legitimation maintained within the “bourgeois tradition.” What Negri would identify as the “bourgeois tradition,” a tradition of political thought that stretches from Hobbes to Rousseau to Hegel, has primarily thought constitutive power from the standpoint of the constituted—from the law, the state, sovereignty, or the necessity of transcendental mediation. The political question has been, in one form or another, what is the legitimate foundation of power (*potestas*) as transcendent authority? Order has been thought and maintained—whether in the form of law, the general will, the state, or the market—as the absolute other of disorder. Communism, defined as the sociality of constitutive power as Negri (with both Felix Guattari and Michael Hardt) has articulated it, develops a somewhat different question in metaphysics, political economy, and politics: What are the possibilities of a sociality of constitutive power? Or as Negri and Hardt write: “How is it possible at this point, once and for all, to abandon the conception of constituent power as necessarily negating itself in posing the constitution and recognize a constituent power that no longer produces constitutions separate from itself but is itself constitution” (1994, 309).

The question of communism, of a politics of constitutive power, exhausts the “bourgeois” or dominant tradition of political thought. As Guattari and Negri indicate, “communism” demands an articulation, or organization between the molecular struggles and molar antagonism, that is different from or opposed to the complete subsumption of the former by the latter (1990, 103). Communism refuses any structure, any party, in which molecular revolutions and antagonism subordinate and alienate themselves to molar ends. It refuses any separation between collective desire and execution; it refuses to erect a new *potestas*. As they write:

From a molecular point of view, each attempt at ideological unification is an absurd and indeed reactionary operation. Why ask a feminist movement to come to a doctrinal or programmatic accord with ecological movement groups or with a communitarian experiment by people of color or with a workers’ movement, etc. . . . Ideology shatters; it only unifies on the level of appearance. On the contrary, what is essential is that each movement shows itself to be capable of unleashing irreversible molecular revolutions and of linking itself to either limited or unlimited molar struggles. (109)

This organization or “linking”—in which molecular struggles come together to form molar and dualistic organizations, in which the “multiple” and the “one” coexist, multiplying and intensifying each other as terrains of struggle—demands the invention of new “social practices” and new types of organization.

Negri has suggested that the seeds of these new practices can be grasped within the history of ontology and politics, within a countertradition that subsists alongside bourgeois thought. Thus constitutive power, or communism, as a problem of organization involves a “genealogy” of a divergent or divergent strands of political and



ontological thought in order to find alternatives to the “bourgeois tradition.” This genealogy is a return to the discontinuity and heterogeneity of modernity, and the different responses to the repetition of the “crisis,” in order to develop these into the future (Hardt and Negri 1994, 283). As Negri has argued, the two figures who stand out on this terrain are Marx and Spinoza. Not the Marx of the inevitable collapse of capitalism according to its laws, the Marx of *Capital*, but the Marx of the *Grundrisse* that recognized the power and subjectivity of “living labor.” And not just the Spinoza of the *Ethics*, but perhaps more importantly the Spinoza of the *Tractatus Politicus*, the incomplete manuscript that ends with the *multitudo* as a thought, barely articulated, of absolute democracy, or the absolute as democracy—what Negri calls “the republic of constituent power.” The pages of this manuscript demand to be filled not simply through some kind of recuperative hermeneutic or textural commentary, however sophisticated, but through the actual practices that will effect and realize the *multitudo* as a project of liberation.<sup>21</sup>

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21. Warren Montag (1989, 102) draws this important parallel between the incomplete *Tractatus Politicus* and the “crisis of Marxism.”

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