

Books for Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s Italy, Antonio Negri, London: Verso Books, 2005

The current neoliberal wave of capitalism poses problems for radical theory in a number of ways.¹ The previous Fordist/Keynesian phase had involved an attempt to moderate social struggles through incorporative and bargaining structures. Since the 1970s, such structures have been dismantled globally. A new social authoritarianism has grown up within the bowels of ostensibly liberal-democratic societies. Alongside these changes, the traditional working class of factory workers has been marginalised, at least in the core countries, with flexibility and service-sector work becoming *leitmotifs* of the situation. Theoretically, the predominance of Marxism in radical theory has been challenged by the rise of poststructuralist perspectives. How are these changes to be theorised and responded to?

This article examines these issues with reference to Negri's recent publication, *Books for Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s Italy*. This book is a collection of essays by Antonio Negri from the 1970s, when he was intimately connected to the movements known as *operaismo* and *autonomia*. The title is somewhat misleading; the essays contained here refer only rarely to either democracy or civil war, and while a historian studying the crisis of Italy in the 1970s might certainly make use of these essays as source-material, they are not primarily political commentaries. Rather, they are dense works of Marxist theorising about the structures of postmodern capitalism and the possibilities for revolutionary responses, understood in terms broadly consonant with those of classical Marxism (as opposed to the extensively revised transformative frameworks of most Western Marxisms).

These are basically a *What Is to Be Done?* for the postmodern era. They can and perhaps will be read for many purposes, some more fruitful than others. These texts are vital for locating Negri's more recent work, useful for examining the history of radical activism, and important as analyses of developments in contemporary capitalism and the state. Indeed, they are perhaps more useful for people interested in transformative politics than Negri's more recent work; they are certainly more radical, and lack the reformist/liberal inflections of the political agenda of *Empire*. This is not to say that Negri is always right in what he says or that his work from the *autonomia* period is without weaknesses. However, as an exercise in political radicalism, it can be questioned whether Negri's later trajectories are necessarily for the better.

In these early texts, Negri's approach is an exercise in Marxist social analysis, from its reliance on an antagonistic model of a revolutionary future as a resolution of a confrontation between adversaries driven by social crises and conditions (rather than as a moment of flight), to the attempt to locate social changes in economic terms and to make sense of them by reference to the law of value, the composition of capital and the conditions of economic crisis. The struggle is not from the margins, which no longer exist; it is to take place at the core of capitalism itself (p. 108). As for Marx, so for Negri, living labour is

1. The author wishes to acknowledge Leverhulme Trust funding for research in the form of an early career fellowship for research on oppressive discourse, everyday life and political theory, during the period of time this article was finalised. This article forms part of the research carried out through this fellowship. The author wishes to thank Matteo Mandarini for extensive engagement with earlier drafts as part of the review process, and Ian Childs for assistance in preparing the manuscript.

social creativity, struggling for freedom against an imposed, alienating system of needs (p. 152). This said, the theory advanced is, in some respects, far from orthodox. It presents the reader with a paradox as to whether to read the theory contained here – and the traditions of *autonomia* and *operaismo* more broadly – as ultra-orthodoxy (as the regular exegetical references to Marx and the conventionally Marxist theoretical vocabulary would suggest), or as a kind of poststructuralism *avant la lettre* (as the distinct concerns of the text, such as the emphasis on fragmentary power in everyday life and the force of everyday resistance often suggest). Certainly Negri is not a ‘neo-Marxist’ in the usual sense, and happily poses as a defender of orthodoxy against Eurocommunists and other ‘revisionists’; yet his own views, while rooted deeply in Marxism, are highly innovative and not at all what one would expect from a classical Marxist. Even more paradoxically, this is combined with a theoretical rigour and consistency far greater than that shown in Negri’s more recent work (though this too may seem easier to make sense of methodologically once the earlier work is understood).

The apparent contradiction is resolved if the texts are viewed less through a contemporary lens than in their context. Autonomism as a theoretical and political movement stands at the borderline between a period when Marxism dominated European radicalism and a period where decentred struggles become the norm. And, like situationism, it can be viewed as bridging the gap between the two, showing a means by which one discourse of resistance transmuted into another. In this respect, these texts offer vital living record of a moment of discursive transition, for those able and ready to read them in the context of what came before and after. The change runs through the texts themselves, which become more ‘unorthodox’ and poststructuralist as one proceeds through the book. The first text, for instance, is harshly Leninist in its hostility to subcultural resistances and pre-figuration and its preference for a classical vanguard model (pp. 38–9, 47). But, by the time of the next text, the class struggle is taken to include the struggle for individual liberation (p. 112), and by the time of the final essay, everyday resistances outside the workplace are an inherent part of Negri’s project to create a new society made up of ‘diffuse networks of power’ (p. 279), while the vanguard model is criticised as tendentially authoritarian (pp. 283–4).

Despite these changes, Negri never manages to resolve the tension between a desire for a social struggle based on totalities and a desire for fragmented, decentred, directly autonomous exercises of power in everyday life. Throughout his *autonomia* period, Negri insists on a need for organisation, authority, centralisation and common expression,² while at the same time as insisting that social movements are diversifying³ and also that they tend to spontaneously unite.⁴ Even today, as exemplified in his introduction, Negri seeks a ‘political representative of those who are exploited’ (p. xlv), in spite of his Foucauldian/Deleuzian heritage which would deny any such representation. The messianic call for ‘renewal’ (p. 180) is also echoed in his more recent work.

Another way the texts can be read is as a series of engagements with contemporary capitalism, and hence as something politically vital today. The descriptions of the functioning of capitalism are in many ways profound, even prophetic; Negri discusses

2. Negri 1996a, p. 173; Negri 1998a, pp. 179–80, 194–5; Negri 1998b, p. 206.

3. Negri 2003, pp. 45, 97.

4. Negri 2003, p. 103; Negri 1998b, p. 210.

changes in the world economy which it took the rest of academia another twenty years to recognise – as, for instance, when he writes of the rise of transnational corporations and the resultant crisis of the nation-state (pp. 24, 166–7). He also offers a new framework for conceptualising these changes, offering a theory of what he calls the ‘material constitution’ (as distinct from the formal constitution), which is to say, the basis on which power operates in a particular social composition. In some respects, Negri is perhaps overly prophetic, describing as present facts various historical tendencies which were only realised later.⁵ If so, this would mean Negri’s early work is more relevant today than in its own day, while the claims in his recent work may still be ‘premature’, perhaps foreshadowing a type of capitalism which might emerge if the world system recomposes itself from its current crisis.

According to Negri, capitalism is becoming an increasingly irrational system of violent domination both in the workplace and in society as a whole (through the state); a social practice Negri refers to as ‘command’ (pp. 32–3). It becomes increasingly totalitarian or fascistic, reconstructing society as a simulation based on itself.⁶ In real subsumption, the collective appears in the form of an analytic whole – indifferent, equivalent and circular (p. 48), an ecstasy of total inclusion.⁷ Command becomes ever more fascistic in form, ever more anchored in the simple reproduction of itself, ever more emptied of any rationale other than the reproduction of its own effectiveness.⁸

The reason for this, according to Negri, is that valorisation of capital is no longer possible. The working class, in its recomposition during the Keynesian period, has made it impossible to extract surplus-value directly from the wage relation.⁹ As a result, the law of value has ceased to function, surviving only as a mystification – the fantastic idea of capitalist progress and development. Real subsumption, the loss of the boundary between capitalism and the society it exploits, creates a problem for value because there is no outside standpoint from which to measure.

Today’s crisis is that ‘value cannot be reduced to an objective measure’ because of real subsumption, which eliminates mediation, because all directly participate in production.¹⁰ Real subsumption is the realisation of the law of value, but also passes beyond it into mere tautology.¹¹ The condition of immeasurability means that real subsumption is a permanent crisis of capitalism.¹² The capitalism of real subsumption and command is in crisis due to its non-separation from society and its loss of consent. It deals with the first problem by simulating society:

[Conflict is] deflected... through the automatic micro-functioning of ideology through information systems. This is the normal, ‘everyday’ fascism, whose most noticeable feature is how unnoticeable it is.¹³

5. See Bologna 2005, p. 42.

6. Negri 2003, pp. 44, 85; Negri 1998a, p. 191.

7. Negri 2003, pp. 48–9.

8. Negri 1998a, p. 190.

9. Negri 1998b, p. 224.

10. Negri 1996a, pp. 151–2; Negri, 1996b.

11. Negri 2003, p. 27.

12. Negri 1998b, p. 221.

13. Negri 1998a, p. 190.

Legitimation is replaced by information, technocracy and a simulation of participation.¹⁴ The second contradiction, the permanence and irreversibility of antagonism, is more crucial.

The mystification of society is sustained by command (pp. 78–80). Hence, the crisis of the law of value leads to its modification in form, so that it is reduced to state command (p. 233). Whereas, in the Fordist planner-state, legitimacy was founded on the law of value and ideas of development and productivity, in the crisis-state it becomes simply a matter of command as the basis for legitimacy (p. 214), and the semblance of democracy is replaced by imposed social participation based on violence (p. 221). Command arises from the self-referentiality of the tautological construction of value.¹⁵ Command involves the exploitation of the whole of social labour without a specific mechanism.¹⁶ It is linked to ‘the substitution of a fictional reality for an unknowable reality’.¹⁷

The state thus ‘frees itself’ from even bourgeois democratic constraints, becoming increasingly arbitrary and despotic and adopting a ‘monstrous role as the technical organ of domination’ (p. 5). As Negri puts it,

[S]tate-restructuring increasingly becomes an indiscriminate succession of acts of control, a precise technical apparatus which has lost all measure, all internal reference points, all coherent internal logic. (p. 245.)

The state gets a new, expanded role; its coercion is strengthened, and relations of obligation are diffused (p. 82). In everyday life, the ‘intensification and extension of state command’ leads to ‘the arrogance of the state, the disintegration of the rights to liberty, the preventative extension and hardening of repression’.¹⁸ A new state-form emerges, the ‘crisis-state’, which depends on ‘an organic capacity-necessity of producing crises at any moment and any place’.¹⁹ This leads to a contradiction between ‘closed time’ of legitimate equilibrium and ‘open time’ of constitutivity, multiplicity and antagonism.²⁰

[Capitalist time has] a necessity of breaking and dissolving every value, so as to reconstruct it only as circular function of command... destroying every productivity of the system that is not reproduction of command and of the possibility of terror. (p. 75.)

In its attempts to regulate social labour across the entire social space, the state often relies on legal and penal repression because of the diffusion of labour and the working day, turning the welfare state into a tool of repression or production and constructing an internal warfare state.²¹

14. Negri 2003, pp. 90, 111.

15. Negri 2003, p. 27.

16. Negri 1998b, pp. 224–5; Negri 2003, pp. 28–9.

17. Negri 2003, p. 39.

18. Negri 2003, p. 83.

19. Negri 1996a, p. 164.

20. Negri 2003, p. 42.

21. Negri 1998b, pp. 214–15.

Negri thus provides an account of the very arbitrary and despotic state of which he later becomes a victim, and understands clearly the logic driving ‘anti-terror’ laws and the raft of other repressive measures (from ASBOs, Italy’s ‘terrorism’ laws, and the threat of ID cards in Britain, to ‘quality of life’ laws, the Patriot Act and the wave of mass imprisonment in America) which have replaced the welfare state as the state’s main field of activity. Negri links mystification closely to violence and arbitrary power, pointing to an interesting possible line of research – for Negri, mystification has to be imposed socially by means of violence, so that these become two sides of the same coin; mystification becomes ‘bad conscience and mystified will’, and mystified will expresses itself as ‘repression’ and ‘terrorism’ as the only ways in which it can impose itself (p. 257). This insight could form the basis for further research on the relationship between oppressive social relations and the beliefs and attachments of dominant groups.

The state thus becomes a terrible force of arbitrary power and violence. It does so, however, without producing the Eurocommunist ‘autonomy of the political’ which Negri derides. Rather, as a result of the decline of civil society as an autonomous sphere, the autonomy of the state has been reduced to the point of non-existence (p. 141). Thus, while it operates more and more aggressively, it does so in ways which fit capitalist dominance very precisely. The state and civil society are fused in the form of social production, the illusion of equality is lost even as an illusion, and the state loses its autonomy and becomes a direct and conscious agent of capitalist domination and despotism (pp. 208–9). ‘[F]rom the capitalist point of view, the state carries on the class struggle directly’, and the working class ‘recognises in the state its direct adversary, its essential enemy’ (p. 140). In the face of the breakdown of synchrony of capitalist and working-class reproduction and the obsolescence of capitalism in relation to the development of productive forces, capital can dream of self-sufficiency only on the basis of an arbitrary ‘criteria of indifference’ (p. 246).

With mediation increasingly eliminated, class oppression, antagonism and resistance become more direct and clear. A radical antagonism between incommensurable social forces and logics is now the defining feature of the struggle between capitalism (and the state) on the one hand, and the socialised worker on the other. This antagonism is ‘not given in forms that can in any way be recuperated within identity’;²² it is irreducible and insoluble.²³ The proletarian subject is reborn in antagonistic terms.²⁴ The breakdown of measures of value and the imposition of arbitrary command mean there is no possibility of regulated principles or a negotiated settlement.²⁵ The relationship between the proletariat and the state becomes a relation of war.²⁶ This antagonism is entirely the result of the requirements of exploitation.²⁷ Hence,

when the whole of life becomes production, capitalist time measures only that which it directly commands. And socialised labour-power tends to unloose itself

22. Negri 2003, p. 98.

23. Negri 2003, p. 85.

24. Negri 1998b, p. 219.

25. Negri 1998b, p. 227.

26. Negri 2003, p. 124.

27. Negri 2003, p. 99.

from command, insofar as it proposes a life-alternative – and thus projects a different time for its own existence, both in the present and in the future.²⁸

Two opposite temporal codes are pitted against one another – command and liberation,²⁹ social co-operation and command,³⁰ multiplicity against the One of command which tends to become nothingness.³¹

Pluralism within the proletarian matrix thus translates into a dualism between this matrix and the capitalist/command matrix.³² The capitalist reduction of complexity to tautological equivalence leads to crisis as it clashes with plurality in social life and in production.³³ In this structural situation of radical antagonism, dual power thus becomes the normal situation.³⁴ The state now becomes central to capitalist social organisation.

The state bloc must take apart every potentially hostile social aggregation and reassemble it according to capital's overall planned schema of functioning.
(p. 141.)

The capitalist response to working-class sabotage also has the effect of intensifying the state's repression, so that 'capitalism's state-system becomes ferocious, monstrous, and irrational' (p. 242). There is thus an ever-present danger that capitalism will suppress spaces of autonomy and thereby preserve itself (p. 164).

Even the economy is restructured by command. Thus, capital seeks workers' subsumption within capitalist command as an alternative to paid labour (p. 185). Command is combined with divide-and-rule so as 'to render the workers' struggle incommunicable and the socialised workers' struggle headless' (p. 138). Capital restructures labour so it is socialised, tertiarised and flexibilised, in order to undermine the wage rigidity and organisation of mass (factory) workers (pp. 142–3). Co-management and corporatism are central in the establishment of command (pp. 186–7), which is thus identified as not simply a negative relation of violence but also a positive arrangement of social space.

Another part of the system is 'political income' or patronage (pp. 251–2). Capitalism also seeks a new form of social composition based on automation and energy policy. This is, for Negri, a reinforcement of command, especially in the forms of nuclear power, nuclear terror and the vulnerability of energy systems (pp. 263–5). Because technological development is now itself simply an extension of command, capitalism is no longer progressive in the sense of developing the productive forces, and communism can no longer be conceived as an extension of capitalist development, becoming instead a matter of separation (pp. 268–9). Indeed, the accumulated time of machines is well-suited to command,³⁵ and the nuclear state is the realisation of command at its most terroristic and wasteful.³⁶

28. Negri 1998b, p. 220.

29. Negri 2003, p. 93.

30. Negri 1996a, p. 166.

31. Negri 2003, p. 118.

32. Negri 2003, p. 97.

33. Negri 2003, p. 59.

34. Negri 1998b, p. 225.

35. Negri 2003, p. 66.

36. Negri 2003, p. 70.

Negri's approach makes sense through the prism of class composition, though this is only clear when *Books for Burning* is read alongside other *autonomia*-period works. Negri treats Marxism primarily as a theory of struggle as the driving force of history.³⁷ A class composition is the combination of characteristics making up labour-power and the working class at a particular time.³⁸

Labour is the basis of all creativity, change and affirmativity in social life. It is the basis of every society,³⁹ pre-existing and driving political and social antagonisms,⁴⁰ and, indeed, is the essence both of capital and of humanity. In his later works, labour is transformed into affect, *potenza*, and the power to act.⁴¹

The process of class composition is taken by Negri to be irreversible and progressive, leading to increases in the intensity of co-operation, the potentiality and productive capacity of labour, the socialisation of labour, the spread of abstract labour and the threat posed to the ruling class.⁴² Labour or the multitude constitutes itself as a social agent,⁴³ and social changes are always driven by the working-class struggle to re-appropriate⁴⁴ and to make capitalism conditional.⁴⁵

Command and capital, in contrast, is a reactive, destructive, negative logic; it needs productive labour, but only so as to nullify it.⁴⁶ However, resistance comes primarily from within the system, at its productive core, certainly not from marginal spaces.⁴⁷ Capitalism comes into crisis whenever labour-power transmutes into the working class as a subject, because this subject is incompatible with command.⁴⁸ It is in the ambiguous position of being in favour of the structural changes arising through class recomposition, but opposing the subjective attitudes engendered by these changes.⁴⁹

This account is applied by Negri to explain the transition to neoliberalism. At the root of the crisis of Keynesianism and the rise of neoliberalism was the 'irreversible emergence' of a new class composition.⁵⁰ Keynesianism went into crisis due to increases in the demands of the working class due to its increasing political composition.⁵¹ The working class has 'internalized at a social level its refusal to be a commodity'.⁵² Socialised labour-power, with its needs and its mobility, makes it impossible to transform it into a commodity or to extract a surplus via wages.⁵³ In this way, working-class struggle is at the origin of the

37. Negri 1996a, pp. 150–1.

38. Negri 1998b, p. 209.

39. Negri 1996a, p. 152.

40. Negri 1996a, p. 166.

41. Negri 1996b.

42. Negri 1998b, pp. 209, 216, 222; Negri 2003, pp. 125–6.

43. Negri 1996a, p. 163; Negri 2003, p. 72.

44. Negri 1996a, pp. 166–7.

45. Negri 2003, p. 74.

46. Negri 1996a, pp. 166–7; Negri 1998b, p. 226.

47. Negri 2003, pp. 57–8.

48. Negri 1998b, p. 212.

49. Negri 1998b, pp. 213–14.

50. Negri 1998a, p. 189.

51. Negri 1998b, p. 210.

52. Negri 1998b, p. 223.

53. Negri 1998b, p. 224.

transition to neoliberalism, in which capitalism is forced to accept and to try to work with working-class mobility.

At the root of the crisis is the emergence of a new kind of working-class subjectivity. A series of autonomous, spontaneous working-class actions revealed a tactical intelligence contrary to the incorporation of the class in the social-democratic project. These new struggles attacked fixed capital and the status of work, and included new strategies of the kind Negri would later term *exodus* – absenteeism, mobility, socialisation of workplace struggles and so on.⁵⁴ According to Negri, these struggles epitomise a ‘spontaneous negation of the nature of the working-class as labour-power’ (p. 205).

The main tendencies of worker resistance Negri identifies are self-valorisation, sabotage, refusal of work, and appropriation. Though distinct, these concepts all refer to a similar modality of resistance – workers in everyday life take back their lives from capitalist control by asserting their autonomy and acting to undermine the mechanisms of command. Class self-valorisation is about refusing capitalist recomposition by insisting on one’s separateness from it, and from the corporate labour-movement organs which are a part of it.

I am *other* – as is the movement of that collective practice within which I am included. I belong to the *other workers’ movement*... I have the sense of having situated myself at the extreme limit of meaning in a political class debate. (p. 237.)

One’s relation to capitalist development as a totality thus becomes a relation of sabotage and destructuring (p. 238). This is a proletarian counter-power, not a struggle against power (p. 235). Nevertheless, there is no translatability between capitalist domination and working-class resistance (p. 238).

Even at this relatively early stage, Negri is convinced that the rise of complex, networked forms of work is a progressive social factor. Hence, for Negri, ‘[q]ualified, complex, co-operative, technico-scientific labour reveals itself to us as collectively constituted real time’, which is also negative labour versus capital (p. 125). In other words, Negri is still committed to viewing the working class as constituted at present, in labour as productive activity, as the source of radical action and revolution. This leads to a certain ambiguity, since the forms of revolt are mainly those of what autonomists term ‘refusal of work’.

Negri tries to argue that this refusal in fact expresses the creativity of labour. Hence, the only existing labour which approximates the concreteness of capital is the labour expressed in the refusal of work.⁵⁵ Productive rationality is thus a struggle against work in its capitalist form.⁵⁶ Productive co-operation may at first present itself as refusal – the refusal of work as the basis of complexification.⁵⁷ The proletariat is thus engaged in a ‘negative labour of self-valorisation’.⁵⁸ This negative labour is labour in antagonism with command, expressing and containing a potential abundance and a desire for life.⁵⁹ It expresses use-value as the

54. Negri 1998b, pp. 203–4.

55. Negri 1998b, p. 226.

56. Negri 2003, p. 121.

57. Negri 2003, p. 73.

58. Negri 2003, p. 91.

59. Negri 2003, p. 282.

liberation of time from exploitation,⁶⁰ and liberation as ‘non-work’, as the ‘liberation of time from the conditions of exploitation’, from measure and command.⁶¹

Self-valorisation is expressed in sabotage as a positivity establishing itself through separation (p. 259). The mistake of reformism, according to Negri, is that it misrecognises working-class self-valorisation as being a part of capitalist restructuring (for instance, of national development), when in fact it is a matter of destructuring (p. 253). Negri’s text would be livelier if the empirical examples of this praxis (from ‘autoreduction’ of prices through shoplifting and fare-dodging, to wildcat strikes, ‘sickies’, and machine-breaking in the factories) were discussed and demonstrated more directly. Indeed, the English-language material on autonomism is lacking greatly from the fact that the theory is mostly translated but the empirical material remains unavailable, making the theory seem more abstract and detached than was actually the case. For this reason, Negri’s discussion may seem abstract and speculative to many readers, but it is referring indirectly to a very concrete set of social practices which might not even be categorised as resistances aside from the framework used here. Basically, Negri is establishing a theory of the micropolitics of everyday life as a form of class struggle.

Negri goes a long way in conceptualising the political significance of such everyday resistance, which he sees as transmuting into a resistance against the logic of command itself (p. 33). Workers are now (or were in the 1970s) directly struggling for radical goals such as the destruction of the capitalist state and the extinction of reformism (p. 163), revealing themselves to be capable of immediacy at the very time the capitalists could recognise themselves only through the mediation of the state (p. 173). Class struggle now opens up the possibility of a qualitative leap to communism, because it directly takes the form of ‘an antagonistic reappropriation of the productive forces’ (pp. 152–3). ‘Possible consciousness and immediate satisfaction today contain, in themselves, the revolution’ (p. 153).

This revolution is to be a general struggle against capitalist power. ‘Communism is the construction of an armed workers’ society that extinguishes the power of the state by destroying it’ (p. 156). It is to take the form of direct reappropriation by workers (p. 157). In concrete terms, this means constructing autonomous spaces of rebellion.

The spaces opened up in the war between bosses and workers are new and singular: they are liberated spaces where material seized from the enemy gets rearranged, transformed into new offensive weapons, and accumulated as a wealth that destroys the enemy. (p. 200.)

Working-class self-valorisation accumulates in ways which enrich and modify class composition (p. 217), constructing working-class autonomy as a counter-force opposed to capitalist and state command.

This struggle triggers a social crisis. There is a ‘collapse of the very legitimacy of the state to guarantee the reproduction of capital’ (p. 162).

60. Negri 2003, p. 63.

61. Negri 2003, p. 95.

The capitalist world reveals itself to us for what it is: once a machine for grinding out surplus-value, it has now become a net thrown down to block the workers' sabotage. . . . [T]he more the form of domination perfects itself, the emptier it becomes; the more the workers' refusal grows, the more full it is of rationality and value. (p. 285.)

The crisis of the 1970s is thus viewed as not simply an economic crisis in a narrow sense, nor as a crisis of legitimacy on the Eurocommunist model. It is conceived as a crisis driven by social conflicts and class struggle, and one which is apparently without end. Crisis is institutionalised in the form of the 'crisis-state', and capitalist restructuring takes an increasingly desperate and arbitrary form. Crisis thus becomes a normal, not exceptional, social form (what Negri is later to call a permanent state of exception). In other words, crisis has become a permanent feature of the state and of capitalism, answerable not in the form of resolution but only in the form of resistance and overthrow.

According to Negri, the radical potentiality of the proletariat, and its current practices of refusal of work, is based on the possibility it embodies to produce co-operatively, free from command.⁶² Negative labour reaches towards but is not yet quite communism; it will become communism only when it has its own form of production.⁶³ Revolution comes into being where real subsumption is achieved.⁶⁴ The negation of command emerges as multiple tendencies opposed to it.⁶⁵ It is based on reimposing the reality principle,⁶⁶ the reassertion of the structural contradiction against its functional distortions in capitalist managerial theory and practice.⁶⁷

On this account, a 'communist perspective' is one which 'anticipates a communist future'.⁶⁸ Today, Negri argues, communism means the extension of this 'proletarian institutionality', which is practically emerging in struggle, seeking its own order and values.

The concept of proletariat is becoming an institutional reality. Not lifeless, but living. . . . An institutionality, thus, which seeks order and a systematization of its own values and with a 'centripetal impulse'.⁶⁹

The proletariat presents itself as the sole rationality and 'institutionality'.⁷⁰ This vision of institutional change implies the formation of a new social order, and veers towards a repressive collectivism founded on the realisation of a human 'essence' as worker. Hence, social liberation is also the liberation of 'productive forces',⁷¹ even against the 'fetters' of

62. Negri 2003, p. 93.

63. Negri 2003, pp. 104–5; Negri 1998b, p. 226.

64. Negri 2003, p. 120.

65. Negri 2003, p. 45.

66. Negri 1998a, p. 192.

67. Negri 1998a, p. 197.

68. Negri 1998a, pp. 194–5.

69. Negri 1998b, p. 227.

70. Negri 2003, p. 95.

71. Negri 2003, p. 115.

individuality.⁷² Negri criticises theorists such as Walter Benjamin and Gilles Deleuze for downplaying the collective dimension and seeking instead lines of flight and the destruction of the unity of the system.⁷³ The construction of a single alternative system, ‘communism’, is central to Negri’s project.

For Negri, the role of revolutionary organisation is to engage with, express or develop tendencies immanent in the class struggle and the class composition of society. A revolutionary organisation or ‘party’ cannot, Negri insists, play a representative role (p. 109), nor can it be a managerial body or a special violent body. Instead, violence must be simply a part of self-valorisation, not something special (pp. 283–4), and the organs of direct workers’ power are given a crucial position which the party is not to usurp. Nevertheless, the party has a crucial role for Negri.

The state is the party of capital, and similarly, the party is the anti-state of the working class (p. 215). Its role in these texts is to organise working-class counter-violence in order to prevent the everyday resistances from being suppressed by means of command (p. 88) and, hence, to ‘open spaces for the growth of workers’ power’ (p. 97). Its role is ‘rupturing capitalist restructuring, command, and stabilisation’ (p. 156), and defending the frontiers of self-valorisation (p. 276). It is thus not a party in the classical Leninist or social-democratic sense, though it is still far closer to these models than would fit comfortably with new social movements which are increasingly based on network models, circles of affinity, and a refusal of ‘organisational’ forms. In many ways, however, these movements – or at least the more militant among them – have taken on the very tasks Negri assigns to the party. The functions Negri identifies for the ‘party’ are certainly important, given the role of state power, but it is not clear that a ‘party’ – as distinct from a network of resistances – is necessary to carry out these functions.

These essays, carrying as they do a strange meld of several theories and the impact of events, are not without substantial weaknesses. One problem with the texts, arising from their residual economism, is that Negri massively exaggerates the degree and intensity of working-class radicalism. Negri has enormous faith in the power of class composition to produce a corresponding ‘consciousness’, or even to produce subjectivity without ‘consciousness’.⁷⁴ He implies that everyday acts of refusal are motivated by a thoroughly anticapitalist, or even communist, awareness, and that they are escalating into a confrontation with capitalism itself. He thus underestimates the extent of continued reactive attachments on the part of the exploited and excluded, and the extent to which these can be mobilised around issues of ‘crime’, the ‘anti-social’, ‘terrorism’, immigration, and social disorder to recuperate much of the working class into the project of command, so that, far from viewing the state as a direct adversary, workers attach themselves to the state as a bulwark against disorder and a guarantor of their in-group identities and attachments. Today, it is often the worker, in the role of ‘decent hard-working citizen’, who is at the forefront of the war against oppressed minorities, the precariat, and the ‘underclass’ of socially-excluded.

72. Negri 2003, p. 72.

73. Negri 2003, pp. 112–13; Negri 1996a, p. 179.

74. Negri 1998b, pp. 212, 223–4.

There is a limit to how far Negri can be criticised for failing to foresee this development,⁷⁵ but it renders his work unduly optimistic about the possibility of social change, and leads him to put too much faith in social groups which are extensively integrated into capitalist discourse on an interior level. This renders revolutionary theory and practice more difficult than Negri imagined, throwing up a whole set of problems regarding the rearticulation of desires and attachments, as well as throwing doubt on the continued emphasis on the working class as revolutionary agent.

Furthermore, while Negri's discussion of separation implies an emphasis on dimensions of flight, his theory places an excessive emphasis on the moment of rupture thereby ignoring the discursive and articulatory subversions and ambiguities which construct the possibility of flight at the level of subjectivity. By locating flight in a schema retaining aspects of historical teleology, Negri downplays or ignores the importance of the active construction of revolutionary subjectivities,⁷⁶ as well as the multiplicity of projects which can emerge from the negation of a specific system of oppression. Indeed, the 'middle level' of the ethico-political – the articulation of existential and libidinal nodes into political and ideological movements – is almost entirely absent from Negri's account, which short-circuits between politics and class composition without considering the complex questions of identity-formation, 'common sense', libidinal microfascism, populism, epistemological privilege, and all the other socio-cultural issues which prevent the direct translation of class structures into political subjectivities.

A second problem is that the residual Leninism of Negri's project leads to an avoidance of difficult questions about postrevolutionary societies and a continued faith in the possibility and desirability of a single, centripetal social system with its own singular 'order' and 'values'. This leads to the usual self-contradictions one can expect from vanguardism. For instance, Negri announces the refusal of work at the same time as insisting that everyone must work in a postrevolutionary society (p. 271), an inconsistent position excused in typically Hegelian terms as a 'necessary contradiction' (p. 278). This inspired fellow autonomist Sergio Bologna to denounce Negri as not really a theoretician of the refusal of work.⁷⁷

Similarly, Negri insists on class dictatorship and a form of social power based on exclusion of enemies, also including an imposition of 'recognition of the centrality of productive labour' on reformist workers (p. 261). That the workers who resist work today would do so also in a communist society, and that they may not see the point in a revolution which continues (albeit 'transitionally') the very social forms they resist, does not occur to Negri. The difficulty here is that Negri is constructing an arborescent structure with a central pole,

75. Sergio Bologna, however, was aware of these pressures, writing at the same time and within the same political framework. In 'Crisis of the Crisis-State', Negri does recognise the rise of anti-crime and related discourses and appears to locate them in the internal management of the system. Bologna 1977, pp. 184–5. This would imply that workers drawn into such ideologies are not displaying working-class subjectivity, which appears only in differentiated actions. If this is what Negri is suggesting, it is basically a repetition of the common sense/good sense dichotomy in Gramsci, but supplemented with a naïve assumption that the structural forces of class composition will win out over ideological decomposition.

76. See my discussions of this issue in Robinson 2004.

77. Bologna 2005, p. 42.

which runs contrary to the logic of refusal and multiplicity of the very social movements he seeks to channel. Similarly, he has little sense of the ways in which discourses of state power become self-preserving and expansive, and in which exclusionary discourses construct reactive forms of desire which resist their own overcoming. He shares the naïve faith of early Marxists that the valour, correctness, and historical destiny of workers and/or the party will guarantee against disaster and against the reproduction of the present out of the new future. This unreflexiveness about his own discourse throws a shadow over his revolutionary problematic.

Both of these kinds of problems reflect an underlying difficulty with the kind of theory deployed here, which rests on heavy ontological assumptions about the nature of social discourses (for instance, that these discourses form a totality, and that productive forces have a certain structural primacy within this totality). Negri's ontological assumptions are often a barrier to asking such concrete questions, serving as a convenient bridge over problems in his arguments. For instance, if the radicalism of the working class is guaranteed by its status as the bearer of living labour, if its existence as 'collective substance' gives it its own temporality and institutionality as Negri claims, it is easy to read such a position into its actions, without asking too many questions about the actual motivations for these actions.

Negri also underestimates the extent to which his political agenda of autonomous spaces is prefigured in earlier struggles: for example, the hush-arbors organised by slaves, *Resistenz* in Nazi Germany, resistance to the Stalinist dictatorship, and medieval millenarian movements reacting against feudal and clerical power. This problematises Negri's historical periodisation and exceptionalism, and suggests that he is discussing strategies of resistance common to many social movements, not a new outgrowth of the latest stage of capitalism.⁷⁸

In these regards, Negri's work would have benefited from an earlier and more comprehensive turn to Foucault. By this I mean that the Foucauldian approach to history, with multiple turns and no single linear path, and with multiple resistances rather than a single revolutionary subject, has more affinity to the multiplicity of social struggles than the unitarising framework deployed by Negri. Even with his turn to Foucault (and Deleuze) in his more recent work, Negri still has not adopted this aspect of their critique of the kind of theory of history he proposes. Richard Day, quoting Colin Ward quoting Paul Goodman states: 'A free society cannot be the substitution of a "new order" for the old order; it is the extension of spheres of free action until they make up most of social life'.⁷⁹ This is also the path increasingly followed by Negri's fellow autonomist John Holloway.

Negri's account of postmodern capitalism mirrors that of Jean Baudrillard in *The Mirror of Production*. The similarities – simulation, information, arbitrary command, hypostasis, radical antagonism – serve to highlight a crucial difference: while Baudrillard's critique attacks the imposition of the primacy of production as such, Negri persists in assuming this primacy, and hence in locating transformative agency within the system and denying the possibility of effective marginal or external agency. Negri may well be wrong that antagonism arises within the production logic of the system.

78. See, for instance, Scott 1992; Kotkin 1997; Peukert 1989; Vaneigem 1998.

79. Day 2005, p. 217.

Oppositional formations often operate instead in terms of gift-economy, subsistence, ludic practices, and other forms which escape the problematic of 'production'. In the periphery, indigenous resistance linked to non-capitalist value-systems, and sometimes non-capitalist local economies, is becoming increasingly important. For many anticapitalist critics, including insurrectionists such as Crisso and Odoteo and Alfredo Bonanno (whose work shows some parallels with Negri's autonomist writings even while denouncing the more recent Negri), as well as for radical ecologists, post-left anarchists and indigenous movements, the reduction of life to labour and production is an even more basic alienation and repression than the subsequent exploitation of this labour in the system. Similarly, for Negri's erstwhile collaborator Guattari, the repressed force is not labour but desire, and there is a need to re-singularise, to increase diversity, rather than to subsume singularities in an overall system (*The Three Ecologies*). Resistance to subsumption *in the categories of labour and production* seems a far more viable motive for refusal of work and autonomist types of resistance than the rather upside-down idea that refusing to work is really a kind of work.

The assumption of a progressive character to successive waves of composition, restructuring and recomposition, even to the point where deskilling comes to seem progressive,⁸⁰ leads to the twin problems of implicit cheerleading for what may in fact be capitalist forms, and an unrealistic optimism about the effects of social changes. This persistent Marxian teleology operates as something of a *deus ex machina* as regards questions of the source of future transformative agency and overcoming problems of psychological and ideological integration.

Another problem is that the focus is very narrow. Negri is theorising struggle against specifically Italian capitalist relations, which are either taken as an exclusive referent or taken to be representative of global capitalism as a whole. But certain claims of Negri's do not hold up outside (at most) a Western context. For instance, the elimination of mediation and the near-total capitalist dominance of social space are typical of Western capitalist societies, but do not accurately depict capitalist control at the global periphery, where a fusion with non-capitalist social forms is often still a precondition for capitalist operation.

In 'Value and Affect', Negri goes as far as to assert that while global inequality has increased, the periphery has lost its specificity as capital reabsorbs spaces of autonomous use-value. Indeed, Bologna questions whether the account is adequate even to Italy, where mediations such as the Historic Compromise had not, at the time, died out.⁸¹ Similarly, the theory of political income would have to be extended and deepened to make sense of the complex, often ethno-religious, forms of patronage used to sustain capitalism in much of the global periphery.

The relocation of primary resource-extraction and manufacture to newly industrialising and semi-peripheral countries is largely absent from the account of socio-economic changes. And the energy crisis obviously has very different effects for producing countries than those which are mainly consumers. The absence of an international dimension and a resultant Eurocentric perspective haunt these essays, giving an impression of a partial view which claims totality. This also has implications for issues of resistance, since Negri's political prescriptions arise from his descriptions of class composition. For instance, the emphasis on

80. Negri 1998b, p. 217.

81. Bologna 2005, p. 42.

resisting at the core, the supposed destruction of margins, the dismissal of mediations and partial resistances, are largely inapplicable in a peripheral context, and thus, are based on misunderstandings of capitalism and its others – for instance, as regards the relationship between capitalism, subsistence and petty-commodity economies in some peripheral countries, which continues to allow capital to exploit labour at below reproduction costs.⁸² In pursuing theoretical totalisation, Negri neglects the periphery and ends up with a Eurocentric resistance strategy.

Nevertheless, there is a lot to be learned from these texts, especially for those interested in understanding and resisting the peculiar contemporary fusion of capital and the state and the increasingly arbitrary and despotic forms of state power today. From the earlier Negri of the autonomist period to the later Negri of *Empire* and *Multitude*, a number of changes can be discerned. To begin with, the thesis of radical antagonism is seriously blunted, if not dropped entirely. This is clear from Negri's later discussions of his prolegomena on time, in which he rejects this idea as too reductive and explicitly disconnects from the idea of opposing an enemy.⁸³ Without this trope, Negri's post-Marxism becomes correspondingly more Hegelian and reformist.

The recent Negri has become increasingly concerned with the idea that capitalism itself is made up of networks, differences and autonomy; while these may be still at root attributed to class/multitude composition, they suggest Negri has veered away from his earlier insistence on the oppositional potential of such phenomena against the reductive logic of systemic command. Similarly, command, terror and totalitarianism, so important to the autonomist-era Negri, are played down in his recent work, to the point where Guantanamo Bay appears as no more than an aberration.⁸⁴ Meanwhile, the problematic aspects of his earlier theory – the assumptions of spontaneous unity, the insistence on the internality of resistance, the denial of actualities of mediation and syncretism – are taken to greater lengths.

The importance of everyday refusals and sabotage in preventing the forcible subordination of the whole of society into an overarching apparatus of control is one of the most central lessons of these texts. So too is the awareness that the internal structures of the dominant social forms themselves tend towards disastrous developments happening in the state and in its relation with society. Hence, Negri is right to conclude that responses to these developments cannot take the form of a re-affirmation of earlier, less vicious state-forms or of a more progressive model of capitalist development, but must involve autonomy, separation, and the potential for revolutionary change to overhaul or overthrow the very discourses which construct domination. These insights – shining clearly in *Books for Burning*, sadly weakened by the time of *Empire*, yet utterly relevant and vital for the present – are crucial for resisting a present based on domination. It is here above all that the importance of these texts resides.

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82. Wallerstein 2004, pp. 33–5.

83. Negri 2003, pp. 131, 135.

84. Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 299.

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