

# Starting again from Marx

Antonio Negri

Let us start again from Marx.\* Why? Is it because we are communists? No, this answer is not convincing. We could start again from somewhere else, from Lenin, or Mao; or, we could believe that current feminist or anti-racist struggles have no need for Marx; we could even think that Marx's Eurocentrism makes him an enemy. Writing an apology for Karl Marx is not what I wish to do here. It is not my style. For too long I have hated tenured Marxists and every call for a reading of Marx that turns him into a closed system, so closed that to put it forward in its perfection one has to engage in nonsense in-fighting with other communists. Instead, here I would just like to clarify why, in my view, if we are communists we cannot do without Marx – and, in fact, why Marx can be a formidable means of promoting communism. Communism sustains the belief that this world is intolerable because it forces us to work in order to enhance the power and wealth of a master, and shows us that the contradictions of capitalist expropriation can never be 'fixed', and ultimately lead to war, environmental destruction and the misery of workers. But it also sustains the belief that it is possible to subvert this world, to liberate the productivity of workers from the slavery of labour, create common institutions of freedom, peace and wellbeing.

Let us begin with the argument of *why* and *how* one starts again from Marx. First, one must do so because too many people who used to call themselves Marxists have repented and, turning coat, now declare Marxism *passé* [*inattuale*]. It is obvious that the Russian Revolution has been defeated and that social democracy is in agony; but the problems that made Marx construct a communist perspective are still be-

fore our eyes, aggravated by scandalous neoliberal policies and bourgeois hypocrisy. As such, Marx's teachings, and debate with Marx, seem to me still essential for three reasons.

The first reason is *political*. Marx's materialism helps us to demystify all progressive and consensual notions of capitalist development, and affirm, in opposition to them, its antagonistic character. Capital creates an antagonistic social relation. A subversive politics lies *within* this relation and involves the proletariat, the militant and the philosopher, in equal measures. The *Kampfplatz* [battleground] is 'within and against' capital. This 'within and against' means that we are inside a power relation, an asymmetrical and irreducible relation of two forces, capital and labour power; and, because of this, capital is defined not only as an object of study but also as an enemy confronting us. A political reading of capital requires that research and knowledge are expressed as a class 'standpoint', as the knowledge and the power of the class standpoint, and thus that *class is affirmed as a subject*.

Many comrades are, quite understandably, upset by the terrible effects of exploitation. In the course of the crisis that has been upon us since 2007, we have been witness to such a degradation of the conditions of the reproduction of life, and to such a worsening and shrinking of 'necessary labour', as to render plausible a protest against the suffering and misery imposed on the proletariat and the working class. This protest or denunciation is certainly not one that we reject. However, given these conditions, it would be easy to forget Marx's teaching that the worker is always powerful. Without the worker's activity, there

\* This is a translation of the paper, '*Ricominciare da Marx, sempre di nuovo*', presented at, 'The (re)Birth of Marx(ism): Haunting the Future', Maynooth University, 4 May 2018. A video of Negri's original presentation is available via the conference's website.

is no production of value. Capitalism does not exist without workers' productive power. I am not saying this to deny the suffering of labour and of non-labour, but to emphasise the force that the proletariat is, even in the worst conditions of its exploitation. The fables being told about the worker reduced to 'bare life' are gloomy; yet every inquiry, every moment of participation in workers' lives, every struggle, furnishes the opposite image: an image of resistance, antagonism and hatred for the enemy. To affirm the *class as a subject*, to build it in a process of subjectivation, is the first and most important of Marx's contributions, to anyone becoming aware of exploitation and who is willing to fight it.

We inhabit capitalist despotism as it unfolds both in the factory and society, yet capital cannot eliminate the use value of workers' labour, of labour power – even less so as the social character of the productive power of labour increases. Because of this, the capitalist relation is always subjected to this contradiction, one that can explode at any time, one that confronts us every day, in a banal but effective way, in the wage question. As soon as the process of buying labour power on the capitalist market is determined, it is immediately obvious that there is no equal exchange: the exchange is antagonistic. We are all familiar with the moment in the first volume of *Capital* where Marx describes the shift from absolute to relative surplus value and analyses the formation of large-scale industry. This shift is punctuated by workers' struggles around the 'working day' and gives rise to a veritable antinomy: 'right against right'. As Marx concludes: 'Between equal rights, force decides',<sup>1</sup> and that is class politics. Said in the even stronger and more precise terms of his critique of political economy,

With the division between surplus-value and wages, on which the determination of the profit rate essentially depends, two quite different elements are involved, labour-power and capital. It is the functions of two *independent variables* [emphasis added] which set limits to one another, and the *quantitative division* of the value produced emerges from their *qualitative distinction*.<sup>2</sup>

It was in seeing the wage as an 'independent variable' within the capitalist relation that I learned to do politics, as did many others also. The discovery of this

ever more invariable and ever less docile antagonism, of this contradiction without reconciliation that could nonetheless be actualised from the standpoint of labour power as a whole, the working class – it was this that represented the necessary instrument to carry out political research, or rather, co-research with the exploited, capable of branching from questions of the organisation of struggles in the factory to struggles in society at large, from the objectives of wage demands to the fight for welfare, from protests against the curtailing of freedom imposed on workers' struggles to the revolution in the conditions of the reproduction and freedom of life ... There were no objective laws to abide by, but there was to be developed that independent variable (both material and political) which was determined by the subjectivation process of revolutionary struggle: constituent projects to be realised always in the context of a liberation *of/ from* labour, which in itself constitutes society and history.

The second reason we cannot give up Marx is *critique*. Marx carries forward his critique of capitalism in a historical ontology that is construed and always renewed by class struggle. Critique takes on the standpoint of the oppressed working class and puts it in *motion*. Thus, the critical perspective is necessary as an analysis of the relationship between capital and labour power / the working class in movement. It makes it possible to follow the capitalist cycle and grasp its development and crisis, so as to help us comprehend the metamorphoses of capital and working class, to describe, in unique temporal and spatial contingencies, the 'technical composition' of the exploitative relation of the oppressed working class and, eventually, to help us organise its 'political composition' from the perspective of resistance and revolution. The autonomy and transformations of the working class standpoint are central to critique. Critique puts forward the class standpoint as movement.

At this point, I would like to tell you of 'another time' when we decided to 'restart with Marx'. In the 1960s and 1970s [in Italy], faced with the opportunism of trade union confederations and the dogmatic decadence of the communist thought of the Soviet Union and the International, we began to attack, from a working class standpoint, the corporative enclosure of the worker under the command of the trade union

in the factory. We had already realised whilst reading *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* that working class labour was twofold, and consisted in two activities, one opposed to the other: it was exploited labour power (as *variable capital*) and *living labour* creative of value. In order to free labour from exploitation, the struggle needed to begin in the factory against the oppressive regime that the master imposed and that social democracy legitimated. It was from there, in industrial relations, in the immediacy of working conditions that a constructive form of resistance had to emerge. We detested the apologies of suffering and piety that induced solidarity, mere solidarity, and, although we too were poor, we wanted to make the wealth of the worker, the surplus [*eccedenza*] of productive labour, visible. This was a discovery of living labour as a force, a power, a subjectivity, as the only chance both for productivity and for revolution. The discovery allowed us to provide the bases for, and carry out the beginnings of, a working class insurrection. Later, when in the 1970s new industrial relations policies aimed at emptying out and destroying industrial sites and displacing the working class, building industrial districts based on family labour and the near-enslaving conditions of the exploitation of migration, we were confronted with a process similar to another 'primitive accumulation' in Marx's terms. It was this shift from a formal to a real subsumption of society under capital that prompted us to start broadening our notion of the working class. Again, this was always done in Marx's terms, because the concept of 'class' and it alone could represent the point of rupture, where capitalist valorisation took place. It was necessary to define both its place and its reach, its temporality and intensity. Now, as exploitation became social and spread to services, the reproduction of life and the circulation of commodities, as the extraction of surplus value no longer occurred only in the factory but spread throughout society, the concept of working class had to be broadened; we created, then, the notion of the 'socialised worker'.

With this notion, we also directly took issue with the limitations of the traditional concept of the working class in terms of *race* and *gender*. Comrades belonging to the groups in which I was a militant, *Potere Operaio*, began the movement for 'Wages for House-

work'; the first campaigns to demand a wage detached from factory work. The issue concerned more than a simple polemic against a 'factory-centred' notion of the functioning of the law of labour power: it attacked the relation of production-reproduction as it had been traditionally understood by Marxist dogmatism. This relation needed to be reformed if it was to function. When renewed, it became open to the perspectives of broader social struggles around welfare, and, more immediately, when it came to women, it included, back in the far away 1960s, the issue of abortion, health and children's education.



The same applied to migrants' labour: both domestic migrants and those who integrated the exploitation of industrial, agricultural, or domestic labour with the adventure of continental migrations. We theorised and defended, with the 'right to flight' from misery, the struggles for wage equality between national and migrant workers, the struggles to abolish wage differences between the North and the South of Italy; and we moved on the paths (that would later become motorways) of European migrations. By de-

veloping the concept of socialised worker in this way, we sensed the dangers of seeing a new concept of class become a mere 'container' of different identities, of turning a renewal of the concept of working class into a figure that might function as a mere assemblage of differences that are ontologically fixed in advance. But we soon overcame this danger. In fact, we did not need [new] figures to substitute for the working class, a concept that, though inclusive of differences, remained the same. The forms and objectives of the struggles organised by the 'socialised worker' demonstrated, instead, that the transformation of the concept was neither mystified nor artificial. We were moving from struggles over the wage to struggles over income, from factory strikes to social strikes, to *mareas*, and so on; welfare objectives became more central as a terrain on which both the wage contract and class war would be played out. In that period, between the 1960s and the 1970s, class war was renewed and manifest in the active participation of other classes, beyond the worker, those involved in services and reproduction. In Italy, a ferocious repression annihilated the chance for this shift from mass to socialised worker to take on an organisational form. However, in France it was punctuated, as is customary there, by great episodes of mobilisation and struggle: 1986 in schools; 1990 in hospitals, by nurses; 1995 the railway workers, etc. There was also a manifest transformation of the 'forms' of struggle as they moved from factories to squares and gave power to social movements.

The third reason to stay with Marx, and to start again planning struggles for the present, is that his *theoretical* contribution makes it possible, and has done so for the past century, to follow the deepening of the crisis of mature capitalism and its two-fold form, both liberal and socialist; it makes it possible to trace the emergence of an adequate class opposition and to organise liberation movements against colonial power and imperialism. Thanks to Marx's theory, we are in a better position to build a bridge between the past and the future. Let us use an illustration of this too, or, even better, let me give you two motivations for this. The first is an interpretation of Volume Two of *Capital*, where, through a critical analysis of the circulation of commodities and

the socialisation of the exploitation of labour, Marx foreshadows a concept of the common. The second motivation is to discuss some examples of early developments in struggles for the common.

Let us start with Volume Two of *Capital*. Here, Marx develops an analysis of the conditions of the 'real subsumption' of society under capital, showing how socialised labour can be subsumed by capital not only 'formally' (in the concatenation of structures that maintain their individual specificity) but also 'really' (in the cooperation of a multitude of singular structures that have become unable to reproduce themselves separately). Now, assuming that society has been 'really' subsumed under capital – entirely, and in a manner that does not only change its external form but also the forms of production and reproduction of society itself – these transformations cannot be understood as forms of 'fetishism', as if they were only external, automated and meaningless. We must regard the subsumption of society under capital as real – we must assume that capital functions at the level of the social, and at this level we must identify the forms of production of value, extortion and extraction of surplus; at this level, and on this terrain, we must understand the modes of struggles of labour power against capital.

Forgive me for being a bit pedantic, but it is in order to affirm the *reality* of subsumption that Marx recovers the theories of the economic cycle in *Capital*, Volume Two, so as to make manifest – as cyclical formulae do – the social character of the process of capitalist production. In the formula C'-C' (which is that of individual and collective social consumption), Marx notes that under real subsumption, 'the transformation is not the result of a merely formal change of position belonging to the circulation process, but rather the real transformation which the use form and the value of the commodity components of the productive capital have undergone in the production process.'<sup>3</sup> On this same point, Marx insists that the constitution of total social capital represents an actual 'revolution in value', and that the outcome of this movement affects the constitutive parts of the value of the social product both in terms of exchange and in terms of use. 'Those who consider the autonomisation [*Verselbststiindigung*] of value as a mere

abstraction forget that the movement of industrial capital is this abstraction in action<sup>4</sup> – where by abstraction Marx means the ability of social capital to recompose every revolution in value, each of its violent metamorphoses, and, even more so, all of the attempts of a fraction or part of capital to make itself autonomous. So essential is this shift to enable his analysis of capital to refer the relation between circulation and production back to the matrix of valorisation that Marx claims:

The way in which the various components of the total social capital, of which the individual capitals are only independently functioning components, alternately replace one another in the circulation process – both with respect to capital and to surplus-value – is thus not the result of the simple intertwining of the metamorphoses that occurs in commodity circulation, and which the acts of capital circulation have in common with all other processes of commodity circulation, but rather requires a different mode of investigation.<sup>5</sup>

That is to say, one must consider the analytical categories no longer in their genesis but as a function of antagonism in the social totality. Only at this point does theory become a weapon of class struggle. What immediately follows is that social capital can no longer be regarded as the outcome of a process of ‘competition’ that would determine it, as if the laws sustaining it resulted from the war that small businessmen wage against one another – no, indeed: the laws that govern the total social capital are only those emerging from antagonism, from class struggle. The shift from the ‘formal subsumption’ to the ‘real subsumption’ of the society of the collective capitalist thus entails, as a first and fundamental consequence, that the capitalist ‘despotism’ over the working class in the factory extend over the whole of society, eliminating that ‘anarchy’ that had initially appeared to be hegemonic in the game of the market.

It follows from this that the social labour power internal to this metamorphosis presents itself as an abstraction that extends over the whole realm of subsumption, that is, the whole of society. Our theory is that there is a ‘common’ that, inside the capitalisation of social valorisation, fights against every cage that would be predisposed to enclose it. Why do we regard this abstraction as a common power? Because

it is realised and embodied by workers’ cooperation in the productive process, a cooperation that becomes ever more *extensive* and *intensive* as the productive development of capital advances.

More *extensive* because, as we have seen, the capitalist response to the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s was to flee the factory, or, when the factory was preserved, to empty it of workers. However, for capital, fleeing the factory meant investing in the whole of society with productive services, and putting this to work for the production of commodities. For workers, spatial mobility and time flexibility were forms wherein the *relative independence* of the worker was expressed in new forms of cooperation at the level of society – always *subordinated* but often *independent* from the direct command of capital. Capital managed to constrain this independence in the *precarisation* of wage labour.

More *intensive* because the second capitalist response to the great cycle of workers’ struggles was, beyond the spatial and social extension of working processes, a massive introduction of automation, and the digitalisation / informatisation of labour. The subsumption of realms of social cooperation was thus matched by a subsumption – in the *general intellect* – of new intellectual and linguistic energies (of a newly educated labour power). The general productivity of labour made a huge leap forward, but above all it intensified the social cooperation of productive subjects, because cognitive work thrives thanks to linguistic cooperation, the knowledge that makes it what it is, and of the singular innovation it produces. Thus, the *independence* of living labour grows in the face of the dead labour that wishes to organise it. Thus is imposed *the common* of cooperation.

This radical transformation of living labour creates great problems for capital in controlling labour power. Capital can only succeed in subordinating that relative independence of social and cognitive living labour by means of management from above. The extraction, on the part of finance, of social value by means of an increasingly rigid *governance* of the social labour process thus comes to replace the direct exploitation of individual labour that was typical of the old management techniques, and so the traditional differentiation between the realm of ‘real’ produc-

tion and the monetary management of production no longer applies. This differentiation is now impossible to hold onto, not only politically, but also practically from a standpoint internal to the economic process in general. At this level, capitalism supports itself on *rent*. The great industrialists, instead of reinvesting profit, recycle it in the mechanisms of rent. The circuit, the blood of capital, is now rent; rent plays an essential role in the circulation of capital and the maintenance of the capitalist system: it maintains social hierarchies and the command of capital.



Money also turns into the only measure of social production. Thus, we come to a definition of money as form, blood, inner circulation, where the value that is created socially is consolidated in the economic system as a whole. Here we find the total subordination of society under capital. Labour power, the activity of society, is subsumed under this money that is at once measure, control and command. Even the political class is internal to this process, and politics dances on this tightrope. Given the situation, it is logical that rupture – any rupture – takes place within this framework. I say this provocatively, but not merely so: we need to imagine what it would be like to build a *Soviet*, to bring struggle, power, the multitude, the common, into this new reality and the new totalitarian organisations of money and finance. The multitude is exploited, but it is exploited socially, exactly as the worker used to be exploited in the factory. *Mutatis mutandis*, the struggle over wages is confirmed at the level of the social (and in money). Capital is always a relation (between those in command and the workers), within which the subsumption of labour

power under money is established. However, if the capital relation stays unchanged, it is within it that any rupture is determined.

The crisis of 2007, which is unending, can be interpreted starting from these premises. The crisis stems from a need to keep order by multiplying money (*subprimes*, with the completely horrendous mechanism to which they gave rise, served the purpose of a banking system in the process of seizing global command to pay for the social reproduction of a riotous labour power). We need to get our hands on *this thing* in order to destroy its ability to command. Make no mistake about it. Contrary to interpretations of the crisis that see its cause in a detachment of finance from real production, our conviction is that financialisation is not an unproductive and parasitical deviation of growing quotas of surplus value and collective savings. This is no deviation: it is a new form of capital accumulation within new processes of social and cognitive production of value. The financial crisis developing before our eyes is to be interpreted as a response to a blockage in the accumulation of capital produced by living labour on the global stage; and as the ensuing implosive result of capital accumulation, as the difficulty this process encountered in establishing an order for its new forms of accumulation.

How does one exit a crisis of this kind? Only through a social revolution. Today, any New Deal could only amount to new rights to the social ownership of common goods – a right that is evidently opposed to private property. In other words, if up to now all access to a ‘common good’ has taken the form of a ‘private debt’, from now on it is legitimate to reclaim the same right in the form of a ‘social income’.

I promised earlier to give you a second motivation for the third reason, the theoretical reason, why we should start from Marx again – a practical motivation drawn from struggles. The most recent struggles lead to this realm, the *realm of the common*, and its reappropriation on behalf of workers and citizens. I want to remind you that these struggles concern *common goods of nature*, struggles for the reappropriation of water in metropolitan communities, for air quality, for a defence from the chemical and destructive invasion of the *bios* of the earth, struggles for the reappropriation of life, and environmental struggles

in general. Then, there are struggles opposing the capitalist appropriation of the *social production of the common*, the exploitation of knowledge, and capitalist domination over communication and the logistical infrastructures of social production; struggles against the appropriation of intellectual production, against copyright, against the expropriation of patents and for the transparent and democratic use of algorithms. Finally, there are struggles opposing the financial extraction of social surplus value, in defence of an unconditional citizen's income, and struggles that, opposing private property, now identify themselves as fighting for a democracy of collective appropriation of all the products of social cooperation.

Capitalist *governance* has already understood this shift in the forms of struggles. One example is the ZAD of Notre-Dame-des-Landes (an occupation of hundreds of hectares of land to prevent the building of a useless airport). Following the victory of the occupiers, and withdrawal of the project, the State proposed contracts to legalise collective enterprises that had taken shape and consolidated in the ZAD

through the occupation of land and active resistance against projects of speculation. What is the condition of these contracts? That those who agree to sign them do so as individuals, as private persons; in this way, the State refused to legitimise the enterprises that, through a common experience, had collectively emerged and generated a COMMON.

**Translated by Arianna Bove**

*Antonio Negri was a founder of Potere Operaio in 1969. He is author of a series of books with Michael Hardt including Empire (2000), Multitude (2004), Commonwealth (2009) and Assembly (2017).*

### Notes

1. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 344.
2. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 3*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1991), 486.
3. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 2*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1992), 175.
4. *Ibid.*, 185
5. *Ibid.*, 194

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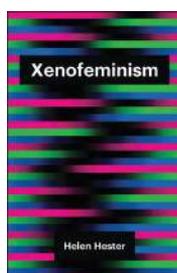
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