Five Theses on the Common

Gigi Roggero

I present five theses on the common within the context of the transformations of capitalist social relations as well as their contemporary global crisis. My framework involves “cognitive capitalism,” new processes of class composition, and the production of living knowledge and subjectivity. The commons is often discussed today in reference to the privatization and commodification of “common goods.” This suggests a naturalistic and conservative image of the common, unhooked from the relations of production. I distinguish between commons and the common: the first model is related to Karl Polanyi, the second to Karl Marx. As elaborated in the postoperaista debate, the common assumes an antagonistic double status: it is both the plane of the autonomy of living labor and it is subjected to capitalist “capture.” Consequently, what is at stake is not the conservation of “commons,” but rather the production of the common and its organization into new institutions that would take us beyond the exhausted dialectic between public and private.

Key Words: Common, Class Composition, Cognitive Capitalism, Financialization, Operaismo

Discussing the common, it is unclear whether we can say: one year before was too early, one year later will be too late. Yet, the question of the common must be historicized and situated—that is, located within the transformations of social relations of labor and capital as well as within their contemporary crisis. My analysis proceeds from the framework some scholars refer to as “cognitive capitalism” (Vercellone 2006). I approach cognitive capitalism as a provisional and exploratory concept. While I am not interested in delving too deeply into the debates surrounding this term, a brief clarification is necessary. Cognitive capitalism does not refer to a supposed disappearance of manual labor. Nor is it synonymous with other categories (for example, the knowledge or creative economy). Contrary to the approach that focuses on a central “post-Fordism” and a peripheral “Fordism” (Harvey 1989), I concentrate here on the tension between the individuation of specific workers in the labor market and the wider process of the cognitization of labor, which provides a “watermark” that allows us to read and act within the contemporary composition of living labor as well as forms of hierarchization and exploitation at the global level.

Historicizing the common is a matter of methodology. From my perspective, there is no production of common knowledge that is not situated knowledge. In other words, I am not interested in a dead philology of what Marx or other revolutionary thinkers “truly” said about the common. My concern is rather to interrogate what
these thinkers have to say to us now, in the present historical conjuncture. This provides my starting point in analyzing the conflict between the production of the common and contemporary capitalist forms of accumulation and crisis. Let me clarify that I do not intend to oppose philology and politics. Rather, I am proposing that there can be no living philology if we do not situate the reading of Marx and other militant theorists in their historical conjuncture, based on their tactical and strategic aims. There must be a process of translation to move such strategies and tactics onto our peculiar battlefield.

Mario Tronti wrote, “Knowledge comes from struggle. Only he who really hates really knows” (1966, 14; translation mine). Operaismo and Marx assume this revolutionary viewpoint on the partiality of knowledge and the radical conflict that is part of its production. Using Deleuze’s terms, we must distinguish between a school of thought and a movement of thought. The former is a set of categories that are produced and defended in order to patrol the borders of an academic, disciplinary, and/or theoretical field: it is the way in which the global university works today to depoliticize thought and reduce living knowledge to abstract knowledge (edu-factory collective 2009). In contrast, a movement of thought aims to use categories as tools to interpret reality and to act within and against the political economy of knowledge. It is a theoretical practice immanent to the composition of living labor and based on militant inquiry and co-research (Roggero, Borio, and Pozzi 2007). In other words, it is only by taking a partial position that it becomes possible to understand the whole and to transform it—that is, to organize the common.

**Thesis 1:**

The common has a double status

When knowledge becomes central as a source and means of production, the forms of accumulation change. For Marx, knowledge was crucial in the relationship between living and dead labor but, due to its objectification in capital, it became completely separated from the worker. The incorporation of the knowledge of living labor into the automatized system of machines entailed the subtraction of labor’s capacity, its know-how (Marx 1973). Today the classical relationship between living and dead labor tends to become a relationship between **living** and **dead knowledge** (Roggero 2009). In other words, the category of living knowledge refers not only to the central role of science and knowledge in the productive process but also to their immediate socialization and incorporation in living labor (Alquati 1976). The composition of cognitive labor has been shaped by the struggles for mass education and flight from the chains of “Fordist” factories and wage labor (Vercellone 2006). In this process, on the one hand, the cognitive worker is reduced to the condition of the productive worker, and, on the other, he tends to become autonomous from the automatized system of machines. This leads to a situation in which the general intellect is no longer objectified in dead labor (at least in a stable temporal process). That is, knowledge can no longer be completely transferred to the machines and separated from the worker. The previous process of objectification is now overturned as the worker incorporates many of the aspects of fixed capital. He incessantly produces and
reproduces, vivifies and regenerates the machine. At the same time, a permanent excess of social and living knowledge continuously escapes dead labor/knowledge.

In this framework, the necessity to reduce living labor/knowledge to abstract labor/knowledge—that is, the imperative to measure work despite the objective crisis of the law of value—forces capital to impose completely artificial units of time. To use the words of Marx, it is a “question de vie et de mort”: the law of value does not disappear, but it becomes an immediately naked measure of exploitation: that is, law of surplus value. The capital has to capture the value of the production of subjectivity “in both senses of the genitive: the constitution of subjectivity, of a particular subjective comportment (a working class which is both skilled and docile), and in turn the productive power of subjectivity, its capacity to produce wealth” (Read 2003, 102). In this way, the common is not a mere duplication of the concept of cooperation: it is simultaneously the source and the product of cooperation, the place of the composition of living labor and its process of autonomy, the plane of the production of subjectivity and social wealth. It is due to this fact that today the plane of the production of subjectivity is the production of social wealth that capital is less and less able to organize the cycle of cooperation “upstream.” The act of accumulation, the capture of the value produced in common by living labor/knowledge, takes place more and more at the end of the cycle. From this standpoint, we can conceive of financialization as the real and concrete, though perverse, form of capitalist accumulation in a system that has to place value on what it cannot measure. To use the words of some authors close to The Economist, financialization is the “communism of capital”—it is the capture of the common.

In the context of the common as just discussed, the classical distinction between profit and rent becomes quite problematic: when capital appropriates cooperation that to a large extent takes place without the presence of direct capitalist organization, these two terms assume similar characteristics. Today, rent is the form of capitalist command that captures the autonomous production of living labor. This does not mean that capital is exclusively a parasite: it has to organize this capture. The corporate figure of the “cool hunter” is illustrative in this regard. In the 1920s Henry Ford said: “Buy any car, on the condition that it is a black Model T,” summarizing the (however unattainable) capitalist dream to push needs “upstream.” Today, in contrast, the cool hunter acts “downstream,” capturing autonomous life styles and subjective expressions. The “center” goes to the “periphery” in order to capture its common productive potentia.

This analysis helps to answer a central question for those familiar with the literature on networks and the Internet: why is it that neoliberal scholars exalt the characteristics (free cooperation, centrality of non-property strategies, horizontality of sharing, etc.) highlighted by critical theorists and activists with regard to the production of knowledge? Starting from the description of the cooperative and self-organized practices on the Web, Yochai Benkler (2006) hypothesizes the rise of a horizontal production based on the commons. In this way, Benkler describes

1. While by “upstream” I refer to the organization of social cooperation and relations by and through capital, by “downstream” I refer to the organization of capitalist capture of social cooperation that exists in a partial autonomy of capitalist relations.
a movement from a system based on intellectual property to a system based increasingly on open social networks. From Benkler’s analysis we can see that the commons are at the same time becoming a mortal threat to, and a powerful source for, capitalism. Due to the fact that in the context just described, intellectual property risks blocking innovation, capitalism tends to become “capitalism without property.” We can follow this development not only in the case of the Web 2.0 but also in the clash between Google and Microsoft and the alliance between IBM and Linux. We can say then that command is now based on a sort of capitalist “common right” which is beyond the relationship between private and public right and which today is the central axis of normative development.

Take as an example the on-line client assistance of many software companies and cell phone providers, which is based on the “free” and “open source” cooperation of the “consumer” or “prosumer,” to quote the widespread rhetoric of the “information society.” This cooperation of the “prosumer” is directed toward the zeroing of workforce costs, which is offloaded onto clients. In this way, free software means free labor; the “prosumer” is in fact a worker without wage. The only waged workers of the companies are the people who control what the “prosumers” are allowed to write. Capitalism might be able to give up property, but never command! Given this context, in order to recompose command and govern cooperation “downstream,” capital is now forced to continuously block the productive potencia of living labor with intellectual property and with precariousness. This is the contemporary expression of the contradiction between forces of production and relations of production and the basis of the contemporary crisis: that is, the crisis of the “communism of capital” (Fumagalli and Mezzadra 2009). Therefore, since capital cannot organize social cooperation “upstream,” it has to remain content with simply containing the latter’s dangerous power and retroactively capturing the value of cooperation. Today capital takes the figure of the katéchon, restraining the “evil” of living labor potencia.

In the context of the transformations of labor and capitalist accumulation just described, the common assumes a double status: it is both the form of production and the source of new social relations; it is what living knowledge produces and what capital exploits. This tension between autonomy and subordination, between self-valorization and expropriation, takes the form of a transition. Rather than being a linear passage from one stage to another, this transition is an open process of contestation among different paradigms of production, composed of different forces, possibilities, and temporalities, and coexisting in a prismatic battlefield “illuminated” by social struggles. The transition to cognitive capitalism presents itself as a primitive accumulation (Mezzadra 2008) that has to repeatedly separate, as Marx wrote, the workers from the means of production and the conditions of the realization of work. Today these means of production are not land but knowledge. The primitive accumulation of cognitive capitalism separates living labor from the production of the common: its temporality is the continuous re-proposition of its prehistory. But this

2. Katéchon is a concept that Carl Schmitt borrows from Saint Paul to describe a force that restrains evil.
permanent transition is also the continuous reopening of the possibility of a break, of the actuality of communism and the autonomous organization of common production.

Thesis 2:
The common is not a natural good

In the international debate, the common is usually referred to in the plural—that is, as the commons. It is usually identified as something existing in nature (water, earth, environment, territory, but also information and knowledge). We could attribute a theoretical referent to this interpretation of the common: Karl Polanyi’s (1944) analysis of the “great transformation.” Polanyi reconstructs the rise of capitalism along the line of a tension between the expansion of a self-regulating market and the self-defense of society geared toward reestablishing control over the economy. Transformation is premised on the conflict between economic liberalism and social protectionism, between utilitarian principles and communitarian cohesion, between commodification and the defense of natural elements (i.e., the commons). In this framework, capital is represented as an inhuman “Utopia,” an outside that tries to appropriate an otherwise naturally self-regulated society. Consequently, in this formulation, capital is not a social relationship, but a historical accident and a deviation from the self-regulating norm. The great transformation then is a struggle between economic means and social aims.

From the Polanyian perspective, the central site of antagonism is the market and commodification, not exploitation and the social relations of production. In recent years, many “Polanyian” positions have appeared in social movements and among activists and critical scholars—for instance, with reference to networks. In this genre of approach, the struggle is identified between the monopolists of information and the libertarian or neoliberal engagement for the free circulation of knowledge. From this perspective, for instance, Web 2.0 is the affirmation of an alliance between a “hacker ethic” and “anarcho-capitalism.” However, this perspective does not see that the defense of a “virtual community” against monopoly and intellectual property may also mean the continuity of relations of exploitation.

The problem for us is to relocate the question of the common from one centered on property relations to one focused on relations of production. Exalting the importance of “culture” and the “anthropological commons,” many Polanyian scholars conceive the centrality of the concept of mode of production for Marxian and operaista perspectives as a form of “economism” (Revelli 2001; Formenti 2008). But it is precisely their interpretation of this concept, as well as of labor, that is “economistic.” Since for Polanyian scholars capital is not a social relation, it therefore becomes one among the many actors that society must control. However, when we analyze the material transformations of labor and production in recent decades, we could say “culture” and “anthropology,” that is, forms of life and expressions of subjectivity are endlessly captured and assigned a value. There is no longer an outside to the relations of production: they are the site of capture and exploitation, but also of resistance and liberation. They are the location of the double status of the production of the common.
Therefore, in what we have defined as a Polanyian vision of the commons, the subjects are the individual and society, both of which conserve an uncontaminated anthropological and natural space against the external invasion of capital and commodification. The concept of the individual is continuous with the universal subject of Enlightenment modernity, the concept of society is an organic whole: both are bearers of the general interest that coincides with the conservation of humanity in the face of the risk of catastrophe. In instances where the alliance between the hacker ethic and anarcho-capitalism fails, or in cases of the capture of the former by the latter, the same scholars invoke the troubling ghost of the state. For them, the state becomes the guarantor of “society” against “economy,” or rather, a substitute for society’s incapacity to defend itself. From within these parameters, then, community, in a reactionary way, must protect its identity, its mythological commons, from the invasion of globalization. That is, it must protect these commons not only from capital and commodities, but also from labor and its embodiment in the mobility of migrants. As a consequence, politics becomes a negative Utopia and a normative project geared toward avoiding the worst—that is, a katéchon politics. What is at stake is not the organization of the potentia of the common but rather its limitation and the issue of its “de-growth.” Due to the misunderstanding that capitalist development consists of processes of growth and de-growth, the image of the commons is made to mirror the juridical concept, which is based on the principle of scarcity and which stands in sharp contrast with the richness and abundance characteristic of knowledge production. In opposition to this approach, following Marx we can state: capital, rather than the presumed scarcity of the commons, is the limit.

From my perspective, it is imperative that we denaturalize knowledge in cognitive capitalism. We must recognize that it is not because it is a preexisting natural excess that knowledge is common; rather, it is common because it is embodied in living labor and its production. Therefore, what singularities have in common is not an abstract idea of humanity, but their concrete and specific relations in the ambivalent and conflictual process of their constitution. Even the life appropriated by “biocapital”—that is, the processes of capitalist valorization invested in the social relations of biotechnology (Rajan 2006)—is not identifiable with a natural element. What is patented is not the genome itself or particular parts of the body, but rather the production of knowledge of these elements. In biocorporations, valorization through knowledge and data takes place at the level of the production of life itself. So the genome, as an abstraction of life created through the deployment of information, is then combined with the abstraction of money in the financialization process. The combination of these two abstractions forms the “capitalist common,” capturing the production of living labor, and is therefore today more important in the valorization process than the intellectual property system itself.

From this perspective, living labor has nothing else to defend apart from the autonomous cooperation, the common, it continuously produces and reproduces. Also, there is nothing natural about the apparently natural commons since they are endlessly produced and defined on the plane of tension determined by the relations between the autonomy of living labor and capitalist command. In this sense, the binary scheme between “Polanyi-type” and “Marx-type” unrest in the history of
workers’ movements, proposed by Beverly Silver (2003), also is unconvincing. For her, Polanyi-type struggles are characterized by a pendulum-like movement between the processes of expropriation and proletarianization and the reaction of workers against these processes; and Marx-type struggles are thought to be inscribed in relations of exploitation that undergo a succession of stages, in which the organization of production changes. But we have to recognize that in cognitive capitalism we run into a situation in which the resistance to the expropriation of knowledge is immediately the struggle against the relations of exploitation because this resistance poses the question of the collective control of the (cognitive) production of the common against capitalist capture.

Thesis 3:
The common is not the universal, it is a class concept

Implicit in the different interpretations of the common and the commons is the question of the subject. The society, the community, the individual, the “prosumer,” all these subjects reintroduce in different ways the idea of the universal that seeks to defend humanity from capital and commodification. Marx splits the historical subject of modernity, the citizen, with the concept of labor power. And yet, Marxist and socialist traditions reintroduced a new figure of the universal through the concept of class as the carrier of the general interest. Operaismo, like Marx, once again splits this subject and proposes that the working class cannot be interested in a general human destiny as it is a partial subject constituted within and against capitalist relations. The abstract One is split into the antagonism of two parts: the working class is the potentia that wants to exercise power; capital, on the other hand, is the power that exploits potentia. The former is the master, the latter is the slave. But there is no dialectical Aufhebung possible between them. In fact the dialectic, which also necessitates the universal subject, dies in the partial insurgence of the workers’ struggle.

In situating the question of the common in class antagonism, I do not refer to a sociological or objective image of class as it does not exist outside struggle. To recall Tronti, “there is no class without class struggle” (2008, 72; translation mine). In a similar way, late in his life Louis Althusser (2006) asserted that struggle should not be thought to arrive retroactively, but rather is constitutive of the division of classes. Based on this idea, we use the category of class composition which, in operaismo, indicates the conflictual relations between the material structure of the relations of exploitation and the antagonistic process of subjectivation (Wright 2002). The operaisti distinguished between technical composition, based on the capitalistic articulation and hierarchization of the workforce, and political composition—that is, the process of the constitution of class as an autonomous subject. Within this framework, there is no idea of an original unity of labor that is then divided and alienated by capital and therefore in need of recomposition, nor is there a concept of consciousness that must be revealed to rejoin the class-in-itself with the class-for-itself. Because class does not preexist the material and contingent historical conditions of its subjective formation, there can be neither symmetry nor dialectical overturning in the relation between
technical and political composition. Subjectivity is at one and the same time the condition of possibility for struggle as well as what is at stake in it.

Operaismo forged these categories (i.e., technical and political composition of class) in a very particular context, marked by the space-time coordinates of the "Fordist" factory and consequently a specific figure of the worker. Today we need to radically rethink these categories due to the fact that the composition of living labor has been unrecognizably transformed by the worldwide struggles of the last four decades. Workers, anticolonial, and feminist struggles have forced capital to become global.

Therefore, there is no more outside nor is there a dialectic of inclusion and exclusion. This is the new time-space plane upon which the formation of class within and against the capitalist relations takes place. The composition of living labor is constitutively heterogeneous as it is based on the affirmation of differences that are irreducible to the universal. Capital commands this heterogeneity of the workforce through a process of "differential inclusion." However, is it only capital that can compose the differences in living labor? Does this heterogeneity prevent the possibility of the common composition of living labor? It is to these questions that I want to turn now while rethinking the concept of class under conditions where the common becomes central to the system of production.

Differences are articulated in a disjunctive sense as the singularities are fixed in their supposed origin and category of belonging (ethnic, gender, communitarian, territorial, occupational, of social group, and so on). We can say that this is the technical composition that sustains the mechanisms of segmentation and differential inclusion in the labor market—that is, capital’s response to govern the crisis of living labor determined by a specific political composition. Without putting this hierarchy into question, however, claims for recognition of particular positions and differences risk being transformed into identity politics. In contrast, we could redefine political composition as a process, to use a concept of Jacques Rancière (1999), of "dis-identification" from the positions naturalized through the mechanisms of differential inclusion. It is the disarticulation of the technical composition and recomposition in a line of force that has its definition in the production of the common. Class is this line of force. In this sense, we cannot talk about class as a being, but as a becoming.

Nevertheless, the asymmetry between technical and political composition does not suggest that these two categories are dissociated. Rather they are open processes in continuous formation within tension produced by the multiple forms of subjectivity and mechanisms of capitalist valorization. It should be noted then that technical composition is not solely composed of capitalist domination; rather, it is the snapshot of a conflictual dynamic and it is endlessly open to subversion. Similarly, it should not be thought that political composition is somehow external to corporative claims or

3. Here I refer to the historicist understanding of universalism: that is, the mainstream interpretation of the concept within modernity. However, we can state that the common is related to a not-transitive relation between partiality and universal. That is, the universal does not determine partiality, but the insurgence of partiality continuously creates new universalism.
new closures of identity politics: rather, like technical composition, it should be thought of as a marker of a new field of power determined by struggles over the production of the common. So the crux of the matter is to situate and historically determine the open and reversible relation of these two processes. On the one hand, this relation is complicated by the end of the space-time linearity of the relationships between workers and capital based on the “Fordist” factory. On the other hand, this relation is now characterized by the struggle between the autonomy of living labor and capitalist subordination, between the production of the common and capitalist capture.

Taking this perspective, we can then see that technical composition in part overlaps with and in part radically diverges from political composition, making the autonomous organization of the common both close to and far from the “communism of capital.” The possible reversibility among these elements is not meant to imply a dialectical overturning. Rather, it points to the possibility of a break and a radically new line of development immanent to the organization of the potentia of living labor.

Autonomy and the powerful development of singularities are not the outcome of a classless society, but that which is at stake in an antagonistic social relationship. The insurgence of partiality characterizes the composition of living labor, but this does not imply the impossibility of conjoining these partialities into the common. In fact, the common is the institution of a new relation between singularity and multiplicity that, unlike the empty universal, does not reduce differences to an abstract subject (the individual in liberalism and the collective in socialism, each undergirded by a particular relation to the state). A singularity can compose itself with other singularities without renouncing its difference. To summarize, what we are proposing here is multiplicity, not nature; singularity, not the individual; and the common, not the universal.

**Thesis 4:**

The common is not a Utopia: it is defined by the new temporality of antagonism beyond the dialectic between private and public.

We already stated that financialization no longer has the role classically attributed to it by economists. Today financialization pervades the whole capitalist cycle: it cannot be counterpoised to the real economy because it becomes the real economy precisely at the point when capitalist accumulation is based on the capture of the common. Is it possible to apply the traditional schema of the capitalist cycle to the current transition implied by the new time-space coordinates of cognitive labor and global capitalism? Observing the increasingly rapid succession of crises in the last fifteen years (the collapse of the Southeast Asian markets, the Nasdaq crash, and the subprime crisis), the empirical answer would have to be no. That is, the crisis is no longer a stage in the cycle of capital; it is the permanent condition of capitalist development. We have reached a point perhaps best described following Marx’s insight in volume 3 of Capital where he points to the “abolition of capital as private property within the confines of the capitalist mode of production” (1981, 567): today
the “communism of capital” is the capture and transfiguration of the common through rent, where rent is the power of the appropriation of value that is increasingly created by social cooperation without the direct intervention of capital.

From this standpoint, the “communism of capital” goes beyond the dialectic between public and private as these are two sides of the same capitalist coin. As an example, consider the contemporary transformations of the university which are often referred to through the category of corporatization. With regard to the melding between public and private in the development of corporatization, we can refer to the American context in which the public university raises private funds while the private university consistently receives state and federal funds. In Italy, in contrast, the trend toward corporatization is paradoxically enabled by a sort of “feudal power” in the state university system. But there are no contradictions between these two elements as this feudal power is the peculiarly Italian way toward the aim of corporatization. Nonetheless, we should clarify that corporatization does not simply mean the dominance of private funds in the public university, nor does it refer to the university’s juridical status. Rather, corporatization is meant to signal that the university itself has become a corporation, which now, based on the calculation of costs and benefits, the profit logic, input and output, competes in the education and knowledge market. In this context, knowledge corporations—from universities to biotechnology multinationals—are central actors in the hierarchies of global education and knowledge markets that derive a significant proportion of profit, valorization, and measure from the stock exchange and its rating agencies.4

Let us take the related question of debt, a central source of the contemporary crisis, and a great example of the intimate intertwining of the “knowledge economy” and financialization. It would be a mistake to think that increasing university fees indicate a return to the classical mechanisms of exclusion. Rather, a more careful analysis will demonstrate that these increases are accompanied by a simultaneous rise in rates of enrollment. The debt system is rather a selective filter to lower the wage of the workforce before that wage is actually received. Due to the fact that education and knowledge are irreducible social needs, the financialization of this social good is a way to individualize this need and facilitate the capture of what is produced as common. But financialization is also a symptom of the permanent fragility of contemporary capitalism. In fact, the increased defaults on debt repayment stand as one of the central subjective causes of the global economic crisis.

If financialization as the “communism of capital” is the overcoming of the modern dialectic between private and public, then the mobilization against the corporatization of the university cannot be a defense of the public model.5 The opposition to corporatization must pose the question of how to go beyond the alternative between

4. It is also within this context that we can interpret the theory of New Public Management, which is a movement, “thought,” and “philosophy” that has sought to justify the introduction of corporate means and logic into the public sector, receives its valence.
5. The latter has been put in crisis not only by neoliberal capital, but also by social and political movements. Actually, the Italian Anomalous Wave and transnational student movement slogan “we won’t pay for your crisis” also means “we won’t pay for the public university crisis.” See www.edu-factory.org
public and private, between state and corporation. That is, the mobilization must provide an alternative within, and not against, the historical development of capital. Indeed, the appeal to the public is based on the restoration of the figure of civil society and the supposed general interest, which necessitates the reduction of differences (especially class difference) to the empty image of the universal. To reclaim the public in this fashion means to reclaim the state, the transcendental recomposition of a supposedly original unity coincident with the modern figure of political sovereignty. The common, in contrast, has no nostalgia for the past. Rather, it is collective decision and organization immanent to the cooperation of living labor, the richness of collective production. To recall Marx, “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery” (1966) (i.e., the public); “all revolutions perfected this machine instead of smashing it” (1963, 121–2).

In these transformations of global capital, I would like to highlight the issue of temporality in order to identify the new quality of antagonism beyond any illusory appeal to the public against the private. Contemporary temporality is ambivalent. On the one hand, this temporality collapses on a sort of endless present in which the precariousness of life dissolves the “space of experience,” compelling us to continuously reinvent ways of living to survive in the present (Koselleck 2007). On the other hand, this temporality opens a new space, no longer marked by the linearity of historicist narration. In fact, it is the conflicts and claims over the new living labor composition that foster the shift in the temporal framework and accelerate the collapse of the normative relationship between the past and the future, reopening history infinitely in the present.

Let us look at this more closely. Within historicism, the immutable value given to the past as well as the passive longing for the future and its supposed progressive destiny—condensed in the eschatological perspective shared by both the Catholic and socialist traditions—have served to stabilize and conserve the existing institution. There is an evident similarity between this and, quoting again Koselleck (2007), the “iterative structure of apocalyptic waiting”: the end of the world and the “sun of the future” are continuously postponed, neutralizing the conflicts and claims for liberty in the present. Therefore, nostalgia (both for the past and the future) risks being reactionary, or, at the very least, ineffective. In the new temporality, in contrast, the concept of politics finally assumes a new quality. Indeed, this relation between temporality and politics is already identified by many postcolonial scholars as a field of radical challenge to historicist thought: to the traditional progressive model of time that has confined “subaltern” subjects to the “ante-room of history” (Chakrabarty 2000). The “stage” of this pre-politics, or impolitic, to use a rhetoric widely used by those who think that the only form of politics is the representational one, is irrevocably pierced by the insurgence of the “now” as the time of subjectivity and of its political constitution. Without the necessity of waiting for the “not yet” and for the teleological arrival of their moment of action, and without being forced to delegate their action to representational actors or to state sovereignty, the contemporary figures of living labor are in a position to overturn the absence of the future in the fullness of the decision in their present. In their breaking of the normative relationship of the future to the present, the last idealistic remainders of consciousness also dissolve. The social transformation is no longer the linear
progression of historical necessity and consciousness: it is entirely immanent to the production of subjectivity and the common, happening along the tension between the autonomy of living labor and capitalist capture. So the common is not a Utopia: it is not a place that is yet to exist or that will exist in the future. The common exists here and now, and it is striving for liberation. In this context, what we refer to as “the event” is never an origin: the beginning is always the organization of the present and its power to make history. This is a reverse pathway with regard to some contemporary radical philosophers—for example, Alain Badiou or Slavoj Žižek—who dream the theological event of an abstract and metaphysical communism, without subject and process, that is, deprived of bodies, conflicts, and potentia.

Thesis 5:
Institutions of the common as a new theory and practice of communism

Due to the parameters of our new context, there is another central category of operaismo that we have to rethink: the *tendency*. More precisely, we have to rethink the category as well as renovate its method. The tendency is the identification of a field of nonprogressivist possibilities within the framework of the heterogeneity of the composition of living labor and the differential temporalities that capital captures, in order to repeat endlessly its origin—namely, primitive accumulation. Everyday capital has to “translate,” to use the language of Walter Benjamin (1995), the “heterogeneous and full time” of the cooperation of living labor into the “homogenous and empty time” of capitalist value. Parallel to Benjamin, Sandro Mezzadra (2008) proposes to use the distinction made by Naoki Sakai between “homolingual translation” and “heterolingual translation” as a political tool. In the former mode, the subject of enunciation speaks to the other assuming the stability and homogeneity of her own language as well as that of the other. She acknowledges differences, but assigns those to a supposed original community. This form of translation functions as a representation and mediation that reaffirms the primacy and sovereignty of the language of the enunciator. In heterolingual translation, in contrast, the stranger is the starting point for all parties involved in speech, making this form of translation independent of all “native language” and producing a language of mobile subjects in transit. In heterolingual translation, differences compose themselves only in a common process: therefore, language is not simply a means, but precisely what is at stake.

Thus the common is always organized in translation, either through homolingual translation—that is, through the reduction of living labor/knowledge into abstract labor/knowledge—or through heterolingual translation, making a class composition possible within the irreducible multiplicity of new subjects of living labor. In a certain sense, the heterogeneity of struggles renders obsolete the idea of their communication; however, it does not suggest the impossibility of their composition. On the contrary, composition takes place in the process of translation into a new language: into the language of common. In other words, the differences are not in themselves vehicles for antagonism: an inevitable antagonism arises when differences are
reduced to identity, to an abstract origin, and consequently when they speak only as difference and only of their difference. In this way, they are successfully decentralized and domesticated (Mohanty 2003), and are consequently accumulated by the capitalist machine and translated back into the language of value. It is the interruption of this capitalistic translation that opens the space for the political composition of the autonomy of living labor. In other words, our problem is to disconnect in a radical way historical materialism from a historicist narration. The critique of capitalist development is not the empowerment of a supposed non-capital (Sanyal 2007); rather, it is based on the autonomous potentia of the cooperation of living labor. In fact, the principle is class struggle. From this perspective, to claim that talking about production relations is economism is precisely to have an economistic viewpoint on production relations. If the tendency is defined in the concatenation of points of discontinuity, which compose a new constellation of elements, then the “general illumination” (Marx 1973) of the tendency and its planes of development are determined by class antagonism and the various dispositifs of translation within common production.

This is the context in which we can pose the question of the institutions of the common, starting from the antagonistic relationship between autonomy and capture. Certainly, these institutions should not be conceived as “happy islands,” or free communities sealed off from exploitative relationships. As already mentioned, there is no longer an outside within contemporary capitalism. Institutions of the common rather refer to the organization of autonomy and resistance of living labor/knowledge, the power to determine command and direction collectively within social cooperation and produce common norms in breaking the capitalist capture. These institutions embody a new temporal relationship—not linear or dialectical, but heterogeneous and full—between crisis and decision, between constituent processes and concrete political forms, between event and organizational sedimentation, and between breaking of capitalist capture and common production. To refer to the well-known categories of Albert Hirschman (1970), exit and voice are no longer mutually exclusive alternatives: exit is immanent to the antagonistic social relations, and voice is simultaneously what nourishes and defends the production of the common. Since they are based on the composition and temporality of living labor, the institutions of the common are continuously open to their subversion. Institutions of the common are not an origin, but the organization of what becomes.

I would like to examine this issue through a couple of examples that have appeared within student movements. The first is the rise of black studies as well as ethnic, women’s, and LGBT studies, all of which are rooted in the movements of the 1960s and 1970s, just as the genealogy of postcolonial studies can be located within anticolonial struggles (Mohanty 2003). Black studies not only signaled the process of massification of the university and higher education; it was also the radical affirmation of the collective autonomy of the black community and of black students within and against the university as expressed through the control of the institutional forms of knowledge production. Beyond repression, power was deployed as a means of inclusion. This is well exemplified in the strategy of the Ford Foundation at the end of the 1960s (Rooks 2006), which provided disparate funding for black studies programs in order to support leading advocates for racial integration and
marginalized the more radical militants of the black power movement. We can see in this example how capitalist institutionalization is a form of capture and domestication of the institutions of the common.

The other example is the university movement Anomalous Wave in Italy. Its development is not tied to the defense of the public university, but rather to the construction of a new university based on recent experiences of “self-education” (edu-factory collective 2009) and the “self-reform” of the university, another term that Anomalous Wave mobilizes. It is not a proposal that is addressed to the government or some representative actor, nor does it allude to a reformist practice that tries to soften radical claims. It is precisely the contrary: it is the organized form of radical issues in order to construct autonomy in the here and now.

As in the case of black studies, “oppositional knowledges” (Mohanty 1990) and experiences of self-education are not immune from capture: in fact, academic governance and the political economy of knowledge live on their subsumption. In other words, the problem of governance is not that of exclusion, but rather domestication of the most critical and radical elements. In fact, we might claim that capitalist governance is the institutional form of the capture of the common. From this standpoint, before governance there is resistance. In other words, governance is not based on the fullness of control, but rather it is reproduced in a permanent crisis in that it is structurally dependent upon the creative potentia of its enemy, making governance an open process that is endlessly reversible.

To sum up: in modernity the public was what was produced by all of us but did not belong to any of us as it belonged to the state. The institutions of the common are the organizational force of the collective appropriation of what is produced by all of us. Thus, as Carlo Vercellone (2009) says, we have to in a certain way mimic finance: we have to find how it might be possible to take the state and corporations “hostage.” In other words, how might it be possible to collectively reappropriate the social richness, sources, and forces frozen in the capitalistic dialectic between public and private? This is the question of the construction of a “new welfare,” which would involve the reappropriation of what is captured by capitalistic rent. It is not a coincidence that this is a central topic in the university movements.

Now we can redefine the contradiction between forces of production and relations of production in an antidialectical fashion. When the common is the center of social relations, the distinction proposed by Michel Foucault between struggles over exploitation and struggles over subjectivation has to be reformulated since, from the perspective of the common, struggles over the production of subjectivity are simultaneously struggles against exploitation. It then becomes possible to rethink liberty in a materialist way. When liberty is embodied in the relationship between singularity and the common, in the collective control of the production of the potentia of living labor, it becomes a radical critique of exploitation. This is the liberty of the forces of production that, by breaking capitalistic development, it opens the way for a different becoming: that is, a different tendency. It is a common liberty because it is partial/of part. The breaking of the “capitalist common” and of exchange value does not necessitate a return to the use value contained in the mythological notion of “common goods.” Rather, this break is the construction of a new social relationship that reinvents a radical composition of liberty and equality.
based on and continuously constituted by the common. Therefore, beyond the capitalist dialectic between private and public, to rephrase Marx (1976), the common is “collective possession as the basis of” singular ownership. Beyond the capitalistic dialectic between private and public, there is an autonomous right to and property of the common.

This political gamble might appear too unrealistic for those who in the past three decades have talked incessantly about the passivity of the new subjects of living labor, which were claimed to be dominated by “monological thinking”: that is, by so-called invincibility and the totalitarian aspects of neoliberal capitalism. In the aftermath of the global movements and the onset of the global crisis, this assessment no longer makes sense: neoliberalism is over. This does not mean that the effects of neoliberal politics have disappeared, but they are no longer able to constitute a coherent system. This is the crisis of capitalism as it is openly acknowledged every day by the mainstream media, notable economists, and even moderate governments. In this context it is difficult to remember that just twenty years ago these same actors proclaimed the “end of history.”

With regard to the apparent passivity of subjects, it would be wise to keep in mind Marx’s (1950) reply to Engels on 9 December 1851. In response to his friend, who lamented the “stupid and infantile” behavior of the Parisian people who failed to oppose Louis Bonaparte, Marx replied, “the proletariat has saved its forces.” According to Marx, the proletariat had in this way avoided engaging in an insurrection that would have reinforced the bourgeoisie and reconciled it with the army, inevitably leading to a second defeat for the workers. Similar to the ways in which the operaisti of the 1950s and 1960s found the potential of resistance within the so-called alienation and integration of what would become the mass worker, we have to find the possible lines of reversibility in the apparent passivity of the contemporary subjects of living labor. In order to build up a new theory and practice of communism, we must learn the new language of the common, starting with the optimism of the intellect.

Acknowledgments

My thanks to Anna Curcio and Ceren Özselçuk for inviting me to participate in the symposium “The Common and the Forms of the Commune: Alternative Social Imaginaries”; and to Sandro Mezzadra, Michael Hardt, Brett Neilson, and Alvaro Reyes for suggestions and help with translation.

References


