

Acting Up with Hardt and Negri: Capitalism in Biopolitical Context

Abstract

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's late research programme can be described as a philosophical and theoretical-political hybrid that interpolates the central categories of Italian critical Marxism (workerism/*operaismo*) with elements drawn from post-structuralist French political philosophy. This form of fusion directs us towards an intellectually fruitful terrain insofar as the interpretative results are as much open and emancipatory as controversial. The ambition of this short piece is to shed light on some fundamental elements of Hardt and Negri's philosophical and theoretical-political analysis that culminates in a set of promising and revolutionary arguments for the subversive bodies who are eager to act up against the forces of contemporary capitalism and advance alternative forms of organising.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's recent research programme is described by Danilo Zolo as 'a philosophical and theoretical-political syntax ... that trans-figures fundamental categories of Marxism, interpolating them with elements drawn from a broad span of Western philosophical literature' (2008a: 12). Indeed, Negri (2008a: 13) identifies his late research as a 'hybrid' between his workerist [*operaista*] Marxism and post-structuralist perspectives of French political philosophy, where a prominent role is given to Michel Foucault. In our view, this form of theoretical-political fusion directs us towards an intellectually fruitful terrain insofar as the interpretative results are as much open and emancipatory as they are controversial.

In this short piece, it is not my aim to elaborate 'a thousand roads that link the creative review of Marxism to the revolutionary conception of biopolitics elaborated by Foucault' (Negri, 2008b: 231). Neither is it to discuss Rabinow and Rose's (2006), Toscano's (2007), and Lemke's (2011) problematisation of Hardt and Negri's reading of Foucault in general, and of the limits of their translation of Foucault's anti-totalising and anti-universal methodology in particular. My first and foremost ambition is to shed some light on Hardt and Negri's philosophical and theoretical-political hybrid that develops a promising argument for the dissidents who are eager to *act up* against the forces of contemporary capitalism and advance alternative or heterodox forms of organising: 'capital is no longer succeeds in grasping the productivity of labour power; [capitalist] biopower is no longer able to hold back biopolitical productivity' (Negri, 2008b: 43).

Biopower versus Biopolitics

One of the axioms embedded in Foucault's work is that where powers are continually made and remade, bodies resist. Hardt and Negri reveal what they think of remained somewhat implicit in Foucault, that is, the dual nature of power. Foucault's theory of power is largely developed in *Discipline and Punish* (1991) and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1990). Hardt and Negri (2009) interpret that within these texts the power that Foucault develops is always double. First, the reader is given the complex ways in which the disciplinary regimes exercise social command through a diffuse network of *dispositifs*. By *dispositif*, we may think of the material, affective, and cognitive apparatuses working on the production of subjectivity. In addition, secondly, the reader is also provided (in a veiled manner) Foucault's theorisation of *other to power* or even *an other power* which remains categorically unnamed. The latter could be best defined, according to Hardt and Negri, as 'an alternative production of subjectivity, which not only resists power but also seeks autonomy from it' (2009: 56).

Recognising that the notion of power in Foucault has always a dual nature, Negri and Hardt invite readers to re-reflect on the concepts of biopower and biopolitics. Taking up the Foucault's dual power, the authors argue that 'history cannot be understood merely as the horizon on which biopower configures reality through domination' (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 31). There always emerge the spaces of confrontation against the command imposed on subjects, to wit 'power over life' (Revel, 2002). In other words, the power that administers and produces life is continually confronted by aspirations to alternative existence. The latter is a power which is discerned as 'power of life' (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 57). Hardt and Negri thus expose the difference between two powers on the ground that biopower is separate in its form from the power of life with which we move towards emancipation. In order to underscore this essential difference, Hardt and Negri adopt a terminological distinction -argued to be remained unexposed and even imprecise in Foucault¹- between biopower and biopolitics: 'the former could be defined as the power over life and the latter as the power of life to resist and determine an alternative production of subjectivity' (2009: 57).

In my view, one can find more sophisticated approximation to biopolitics in Negri's *Reflections on Empire* (2008a) and *Empire and Beyond* (2008b). Negri (2008a: 70-71) affirms evidently in the former text that he is well-aware the way in which Foucault approaches the notion of biopolitics, namely as a technology of power, through localised biopowers, concerns itself with governing the health, hygiene, nutrition, sexuality and fertility of a 'population', understood as 'an ensemble of living beings who present particular ontological/biological traits and whose life is susceptible to be controlled with the purpose of insuring, together with a better management of labour-power, and orderly growth of society' (2008a: 71). In the same text, nevertheless, Negri underpins and justifies his own interpretation of biopolitics (and biopower) by underlining a tension he captures within the works of Foucault.

Negri argues that biopolitics within the early texts of Foucault (where the term at first appears) is delineated as a police science [*Polizeiwissenschaft*], the science of the maintenance of social order of populations. It afterwards, on the contrary, seems to 'mark the moment of surpassing public law, and therefore every political function that lies within the traditional state-society dichotomy' and hence comes to denote 'a political economy of life in general', 'a general fabric that covers the entire relationship between state and society' (Negri, 2008a: 72). Consequently, this second formulation drives us to a T-junction: 'should we think of biopolitics as an ensemble of biopowers that derive from the activity of government or, on the contrary, can we say that, to the extent that power has invested the whole of life, thus life too becomes a power [*potere*]?' (2008a: 72).

Negri explicitly turns to the second reading of Foucault and 'lends the analytic of biopolitics the full ontological weight' (Toscano, 2007: 118). In Negri, that is to say, biopolitics is no longer viewed 'as an internal articulation of the governmental practices and rationalities of biopower' (Toscano, 2007: 114). On the contrary, biopolitics is recast as 'a power expressed by life itself, not only in labour and language, but also in bodies, in affects, desires and sexuality', and the power of life as 'a sort of counter-power, of a *potenza*, a production of subjectivity that exists as a moment of de-subjectification' (Negri, 2008a: 72). Allow me to quote a short passage from *Commonwealth* to make the (Hardt and) Negri's position lucid:

Our reading not only identifies biopolitics with the localised productive powers of life –that is, the production of affects and languages through social cooperation and the interaction of bodies and desires, the invention of new forms of the relation to the self and others, and so forth – but also affirms biopolitics as the creation of new subjectivities that are presented at once as resistance and de-subjectification. (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 58-59)

In this way, Negri and Hardt bring forward a quite polemical thesis that biopolitics and biopower are actually within an antagonistic relationship, or better biopolitics is biopower's antagonist: 'history is determined by the biopolitical antagonisms and resistances to biopower' (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 31). In other words, the entire development of humanity 'is dominated by this insubordination of life (the power of life) against Power (the domination of life)' (Negri, 2008c: 207). What we have here then a distinction between the analytical categories of biopower and biopolitics at a level which is not close to Foucault's own now. Negri (2008a: 73-4) speaks of biopower as 'the big structures and functions of power' imposing 'command over life its technologies and its mechanisms of power [from the top]'. And, he speaks of biopolitics 'when the critical analysis of command is done from the viewpoint of experiences of subjectivation and freedom, in short, from the bottom'. In brief, as Toscano summarises, 'biopower is on the side of subjection and control, while biopolitics is rethought in terms of subjectivity and freedom' (2007: 118)².

Capitalism in Biopolitical Context

Hardt and Negri's late research collaboration has primarily been oriented towards locating the transformation of capitalist production following the industrial period on biopolitical horizon. The key aspect of his project has been contained in the subjectivation of Foucauldian concepts

through their interpolation with Marxian concepts, i.e. *living labour's* infusion into biopolitical labour and *real subsumption's* infusion into biopower. Yet, first and foremost, what does the idea of *capitalism in biopolitical context* or horizon mean?

In the main, it designates the fabric of social production, defining the period of post-industrial capitalism. In particular, it defines 'cognitive capitalism' (Moulier-Boutang, 2011; Vercellone 2007) in which 'capital ... presents [itself] as biopower' (Negri, 2008b: 4). By biopolitical context, it is suggested, on the one side, that 'capitalist power has invested social relations in their entirety' (2008b: 235). This precisely corresponds to 'the total subjection of life to the economic political rules' (2008b: 172). Nevertheless, it is in this very context, on the other side, the totalitarian self-assertion of biopower 'no longer able to hold back biopolitical productivity ... by new subjects and by new social and political configurations' (2008b: 230-243). 'The biopolitical context is thus characterised by capital's wholesale invasion of life but, at the same time, by the resistance and reaction of [biopolitical] labour power against capital' (2008b: 182). The biopolitical context is, then, 'both a mark of the most endemic control and a sign of a new insurgency' (Toscano, 2007: 112). It is precisely in this context that both the impasse and possibility of crossing the threshold of cognitive capitalism are intelligible. Allow me to break this part a little.

According to Negri, capital in biopolitical context expresses itself as biopower, to wit as eugenic command and control upon the entirety of life from top. It increasingly orients itself towards integrating the entire productive potential of subjects into valorisation process. Capital, in other words, 'traverses imperiously (and attempts to configure) all the moments which produce value' (Negri, 2008b: 75) by 'regulating social life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it, and rearticulating it' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 23). By capitalist biopower, then, one might think of 'the power [of capital] that acts to destroy humanity in order to put it at the service of capital and productivity' (Negri, 2008b: 32). In the interest of accumulation-proper, capital 'invests the dimensions of the economic, those of the political, [and] those of consciousness' (2008b: 172, emphasis added). Capitalist biopower thus appears, Hardt and Negri argue, as 'another name for the *real subsumption* of society under capital' (2000: 365).

The fulfilment of *real subsumption of society under capital* corresponds to such a level of invasion that not only do we witness the synchronisation of industrial production with the spheres of social but also capital's attempt to subsume the *social bios* itself as understood the ways of life, the mode of living: 'the entire life made of needs and desires' (Negri, 1997: 37). In other words, all energies and spheres of life tendentially come to be core elements of subsumption under capital. At this level, Hardt and Negri write that 'there is nothing, no "naked life", no external

standpoint, that can be posed outside this field permeated by money; nothing escapes money [read as money-capital]' (2000: 32). The tendency of capital's invasion of bios, the becoming of capitalist biopower, has recently informed the theorists of post-*operaismo*, particularly Morini and Fumagalli (2010), Fumagalli (2011) and Fumagalli and Lucarelli (2011), to introduce the concept of biocapitalism, referring to 'a process of accumulation that is ... founded on the exploitation of the entirety of human faculties' (Morini and Fumagalli, 2010: 235). The characterising feature of today's social production is polemically revealed by these authors as 'the production of money by means of the commodification of bios, M-C(bios)-M' (Morini and Fumagalli, 2010: 239).

At this juncture, we must note that for the workerist mode of thought, constituent power is always anterior; there is a 'primacy of proletarian subjectivity' (Callinicos, 2006: 139). The unfolding of capital as biopower is to be thought as 'a consequence of the potent struggles [of the 1960s and 1970s] whereby insurgent multitudes have forced an increasingly polyvalent and microphysical response by capitalist power' (Toscano, 2007: 199). In other words, the shift of power of capital into biopower is to be contemplated as a direct response to the transformation of social ontology with the rise of biopolitical labour and *'The Monster'*³ as its paradigmatic labouring figure. Capital, in other words, has tendentially come to express itself as biopower in order to command newly flourishing modality of social production, that is, biopolitical production in which labour tends to create not the means of social life but social life itself, namely social relations, forms of life, and subjectivity itself.

Hardt and Negri thus conceptualise biopolitical context as a Janus-faced notion, comprising two unmediateable totalities: capitalist biopower and biopolitical production. When Negri says that 'biopolitical context is an extension of class struggle' (2008a: 74), he does two things: first, he reaffirms that the potent class struggles of the 1960s and 1970s have eventually culminated in a social production operating on the biopolitical horizon. Second, more significantly, he radically offers that the social productive powers of biopolitical production can no longer be contained in capitalist biopower, and hence that there is a growing rupture of the concept of capital into two antagonistic subjectivities. But how does (Hardt and) Negri think that capitalist biopower is no longer able to hold back biopolitical labour?

The answer lies in the argument that biopolitical labour exceeds the bounds set in its relation to capital. By *excedence*, we envision two ideas. First, Vercellone speaks of 'the driving role of the production of knowledges by means of knowledges' (2007: 16) in contemporary capitalism, and he argues that 'the labour-force's capacity for learning and creativity replaces fixed capital as the

key factor in accumulation' (2013: 435). The theorist ultimately summarises the great mutation in the following formula: 'we pass from the static management of resources to the dynamic management of [the set of] knowledges' (2007: 33). That is to say, the knowledge mobilised by living labour is now hegemonic with regard to the knowledge embodied in fixed capital. This signifies the increasing importance of living knowledge of labour over dead knowledge of capital. Moulier-Boutang, in accordance with Vercellone's insights, writes that 'the essential point is no longer the expenditure of human labour-power, but that of invention-power: the living know-how that cannot be reduced to machines' (2011: 32). This conveys that the knowledge of living labour has to be constantly impelled and managed by capital. Therefore, on the one side, we affirm that capital desires to set in motion and absorb the living knowledge of labour. On the other side, however, in knowledge-based activities or biopolitical production in general labour is not crystallised in a material product that can be divorced from the producer. A car, for example, which is produced with material labour is immediately divorced from the producer. However, a research article, a code, an affect, an analysis, and so forth cannot be divorced from the producer inasmuch as these products intrinsically reside in the living subjects who produce them in the first place. Therefore, biopolitical labour potentially exceeds; it overflows the subsumption mechanisms set by capitalist biopower.

Secondly, and in a direct connection with the first argument, in industrial capitalism, which finds its fulfilment in Taylorist production process, one's innovative, creative, technical capacities are rigorously confined to a particular site, that is the specific site of material production. Consider, for instance, an assembly line worker working in a cable assembly factory. The whole ensemble of technological and mechanical knowledge the worker has accumulated through her/his lifetime are hardly put into work, and more significantly, those put into work are almost exclusively site (e.g. factory) specific. However, the production of immaterial products or immaterial elements of material products immediately drives workers to actualise and develop their creative, intellectual, communicative, networking, know-how, cooperative etc. capacities. Furthermore, the fruits of biopolitical labour power, not confined by the corporate walls, exceed work and spill over different spheres of life (as economists call externalities), and they begin to produce *the common forms of wealth*. This is point from where one might begin to envision the linkage between the excedence of biopolitical labour power and the accumulation of its fruits in *the common*.

The common, prima facie, makes an appearance both at the beginning -as presupposition- and at the end -as outcome- of biopolitical production. To put it more precisely, the common consists of both the fruits as well as the means of -future- production. In terms of being the presupposition,

it might appear convincingly in mind that biopolitical labour performs, and it can actually perform only on the terrain of the common. One can acknowledge that no one really celebrates all alone but only within and through the spectres of the others' past and present thoughts. Consider, for example, the production of ideas, knowledge(s), words, images, codes, languages, and such products. These products cannot be really produced by such a figure of genius in an ivory tower; by a human who is entirely isolated from the accumulated common intellect, or better to say from the common forms of real wealth. As Hardt and Negri say 'our common knowledge is the foundation of all new production of knowledge; linguistic community is the basis of all linguistic innovation; ... and our common social image bank makes possible the creation of new images' (2004: 148).

Outcome of biopolitical production, on the other side, exceeds and accrues to the common that ultimately becomes an objective condition for expanded production. One can acknowledge that the results of biopolitical production are not identical to material products, for they immediately and intrinsically tend towards being the common via their circulation in the circuits of social, cultural, digital networks. Gorz argues that when knowledge (one may consider other goods of biopolitical production as well) is produced and diffused, 'it no longer has proprietors' (1997: 18). From the perspective of economics, Moulner-Boutang argues (2013) that today scarcity is no longer fatal. What we witness, according to the author, is that 'digital world restores abundance that had been destroyed partly or fully by industrial organisation of scarcity of commons' (Moulner-Boutang, 2013: 86). In other words, inasmuch as the outcome of immaterial production could be coded in the digital media, reproduced, and delivered virtually at zero marginal cost, we may speak of the inversion of scarcity of commons with respect to the immaterial products. Considering technical development, in particular the peer-to-peer protocols, Moulner-Boutang underscores how the digital revolution has challenged, in terms of immaterial products, the status of 'a) reproduction; b) monopoly of circulation; c) authority that tackle with monopoly in interpretation; d) and finally authorship in science and culture' (2013: 86).

What we have here is then a sort of virtuous cycle which is typical of biopolitical production process: immaterial labourers, through working on the accumulated common forms of wealth, create new commons which in turn come to be the base for the expanded social production. From what we have noted until now, can we discern another aspect of biopolitical production? Allow me to consider, for instance, the production of scientific knowledge. The potential outcome in our case might be a journal paper, monograph, conference speech, series of lectures, contributing to the ground basis for the production of further scientific knowledge. Yes, we have already pointed out this. Extending our case, the production of scientific knowledge intrinsically requires a sort

of engagement in social communication, relation, collaboration etc. between researchers, students, supervisors, editors, academicians, and so on. No scientific knowledge, no idea, no computer code, no natural language, no artificial language, no authorship etc. can be produced without a sort of engagement in collaborative, cooperative, communicative social relationship. From this point of view, the common appears in the centre as well. Concisely, the biopolitical production is increasingly conducted in the common (common understood as shared process).

The general outlines biopolitical labour which positions itself hegemonically in cognitive capitalism reveal the growing autonomy of labour process in its relation to capital considering first and foremost that in biopolitical production, living labour tends to get direct access to the common where the raw materials of production are located, work on it with the terms of a shared process and produce a new product that tends to accrue to the common that eventually serves for or facilitates the expansion of production. Thinking of biopolitical labour process, Hardt and Negri state that 'labour itself tends to produce the means of interaction, communication, and cooperation for production directly' (2004: 147). The labourers, in this context, are virtually in no need of a figure of capitalist or/and state representatives or rather a sort of outside such as "managers" that would involve into the surveillance and control of labour process. Production tendentially reveals itself as a sort of common process. The collaboration, communication, and coordination between producers, which are the essential aspects of social production, no longer have to be made available by capital as external constituent insofar as these aspects increasingly flourish internally within the social networks of production (i.e. a by-product).

Conclusion: A Political Opening

There appears a widening breach within capital relation revealing itself as a political opening, or *kairos* (i.e. the opportune moment of breaking the chronological time of repetitiveness). The momentous *kairos* forces us to think of the ultimate project of *exodus*, to wit 'the process of subtraction from the relationship with capital by means of actualising the potential autonomy of labour-power' (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 152). It entails 'a refusal of the increasingly restrictive fetters placed on its productive capacities by capital and transforming the relationships of production and mode of social organisation under which we live' (2009: 153).

However, we must always bear in mind that the politic opening is just signalling the possibility of a new process of political composition of labour. The democratic and political potentiality of biopolitical labour force does never culminate in the organisation of *exodus* in an abrupt manner. In *potentia*, often resting latent, has to be transformed in *actu* by the means of -this is paramount-

political action and organisation. The ultimate desire is human liberation; a process of subtraction from capital in the way of re-appropriating the means of production and reproduction. *Exodus*, in cognitive capitalism, is before our eyes but it is promising only in the protection *the common* and only by the means of *political action and organisation*.

Notes

1. Foucault used biopolitics in some texts as a synonym for biopower; in others he conceived of biopolitics as the opposite of biopower (see. Lemke, 2011)
2. We should note here that the transformation of these categories in this way also confirms Negri's position concerning the end of possibility of any sort of mediation and dialectic under the "real subsumption" under capital. In his 1989 book *The Politics of Subversion*, Negri openly declared that 'mediation is dead. The production of goods takes place through domination. The relationship between ... domination/profit and resistance/wages cannot be harmonised' (1989: 183).
3. The Monster becomes the real political and technical subject of the production of commodities and reproduction of life. The monster has become biopolitical ... He is no longer a margin, a residue, a leftover: he is internal, totalising movement, a subject. He expresses power' (Negri, 2008c: 206-7)

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