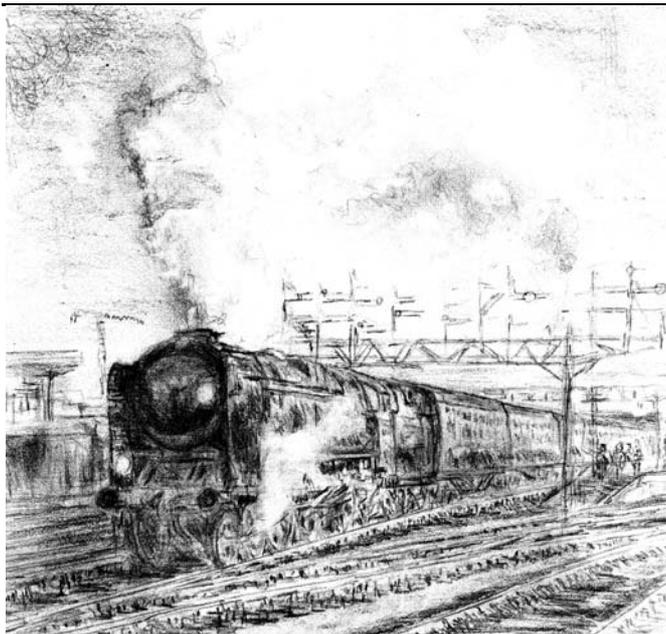


# The language of retreat

Review article: *A grammar of the multitude*, Paolo Virno, Semiotext(e) 2004.



## Introduction

The philosopher Paolo Virno is one of the original Autonomists, having been a member of Potere Operaio from 1968 until it dissolved in 1973. His continued involvement in politics, in particular his involvement with the journal *Metropoli* saw him imprisoned like so many others in the repressive wave which swept Italy in the wake of the unrest known as the Movement of '77. Like his better-known compatriot Antonio Negri he was charged with 'subversive association.' Unlike Negri he wasn't accused of belonging to any particular group that did anything in particular, but nonetheless served three years in prison awaiting trial, then was sentenced to 12 years which was eventually annulled. Virno has written that "the best philosophical seminars that I had in my life were in prison. Never in the university did I find anything similar."<sup>1</sup>

Upon his release he became politically active once more, writing for the journal *Luogo Comune*, whose focus was on the centrality of communication to contemporary labour. In this book, Virno is particularly concerned with so-called 'post-Fordism,' and how it intersects with the fundamental biological faculties of the human species – in particular the capacity for language. It is this intersection he says, which has created the contemporary 'multitude,' a category he sees as a replacement for 'the people' of liberal political thought.

But why review Virno when we have already critiqued Toni Negri and Michael Hardt's far better known theories of the multitude and immaterial labour?<sup>2</sup> There seem to us several good reasons. Firstly, Virno seems to have been a significant influence on Negri and Hardt, and his earlier work on 'mass intellectuality' is an important precursor to their 'immaterial labour' thesis and the associated concept of

multitude. Despite this he is critical of aspects of *Empire*, labelling the central thesis of a shift in sovereignty to the supranational level "premature."<sup>3</sup> Reviewing Virno then seems to offer a route to investigate some of the foundational elements of what remain fairly influential theories.

Secondly, Virno's work has been picked up by others outside of Autonomist/Marxist circles, e.g. David Graeber who sees his theory of 'exodus' as a model for contemporary political action.<sup>4</sup> Finally, Virno's notion of political action defending something already established also resonates with the theories of 'commons' being produced by those around *The Commoner* web journal,<sup>5</sup> in particular Massimo De Angelis, whose new book is also reviewed in this issue.

This article is divided into three sections, dealing with three distinct but inter-related aspects of Virno's book. Section 1 investigates the philosophical underpinnings of Virno's point of departure, an opposition between the seventeenth century philosophers Benedictus de Spinoza and Thomas Hobbes. We show that by returning quite uncritically to the bourgeois philosophy of Spinoza, Virno inherits some crucial assumptions about his social subject, the multitude. Marxians will straight away ask 'if we're returning to bourgeois philosophers, why not Hegel?' We can't read Virno's mind, but we will touch on this question in the discussion of the Autonomist rejection of dialectics in sections 1 & 2.

Section 2 explores the relationship between multitude and class, demonstrating that the multitude is a bourgeois humanist concept that mirrors the ambiguities of the 'anti-globalisation' movement. Section 3 deals with Virno's analysis of contemporary forms of labour. We show that Virno overstates the significance of 'post-Fordism,' and in conjunction with his bourgeois framework this leads him to advocate political action which avoids confrontation with capital *in principle* in favour of attempts to 'exit' the capital relation and live autonomously alongside it. Finally we conclude that by marginalizing class antagonism Virno's multitude represents a theoretical retreat from the Autonomist concept of class composition.

## 1. Spinoza & Hobbes

Virno's point of departure is the opposition between "two polarities, people and multitude, [which] have Hobbes and Spinoza as their putative fathers" (p.21).<sup>6</sup> This return to two seventeenth century philosophers is driven by Virno's suggestion that "today, we are perhaps living in a new seventeenth century, or in an age in which the old concepts are falling apart and we need to coin new ones" (p.24).<sup>7</sup> It is also an unusual pairing of thinkers, not least because the

<sup>3</sup> <http://generation-online.org/p/fpvirno8.htm>

<sup>4</sup> David Graeber, *Fragments of an anarchist anthropology*, Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> [www.commoner.org.uk](http://www.commoner.org.uk)

<sup>6</sup> Hobbes lived between 1588-1679 and Spinoza from 1632-1677.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed "this is a wonderful challenge for philosophers and sociologists, above all for doing research in the field" (p.44).

<sup>1</sup> <http://generation-online.org/p/fpvirno2.htm>

<sup>2</sup> See *Aufheben* #14 (2006).

traditional view is that “Spinoza’s political theory is, in the main, derived from Hobbes, in spite of the enormous temperamental difference between the two men.”<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the novelty (for English speakers at least) of this supposed opposition between Hobbes and Spinoza, people and multitude, is underlined by the fact the translators of the English edition of Spinoza’s main work of political theory chose to render the latin *multitudo* not as ‘multitude’ but as ‘people,’ and occasionally ‘mob’.<sup>9</sup> Therefore in order to properly understand Virno’s reading, it is necessary to briefly survey both Spinoza and Hobbes, focussing on the key points of their political philosophy, the traditional interpretations and the points at which Virno breaks with them.



### 1.1 Bourgeois subversives

Hobbes is perhaps most famous for his notion of *bellum omnium contra omnes*, a war of all against all. For Hobbes, this is what exists in the ‘state of nature,’ logically if not temporally prior to civil society. Without an authority to rule over them, individuals will be in a permanent state of war with one another because each is the judge of his own actions and acts in his own interest. Spinoza agrees, writing that “men are by nature enemies, and even when they are joined and bound together by laws they still retain this nature.”<sup>10</sup>

Nowadays Hobbes tends to be seen as a conservative, but in his day his doctrine was seen as dangerously radical and a threat to the established order. His view that the state was rooted in a social contract to avoid the anomie of the state of nature radically undermined the doctrine of the divine right of kings, and he was widely suspected of atheism. He spent 11 years in exile in Paris, and after his return the storm of controversy following the publication of *Leviathan*<sup>11</sup> (when copies were publicly burnt) meant he was forced to retreat from the public eye and said little more on political matters for the rest of his life.

Spinoza enjoyed a similar relationship with the authorities. Even in the famously tolerant Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century his views were an anathema to established theological doctrines. His refusal to distinguish God from nature saw him excommunicated (and accused of atheism) by the Amsterdam Jewish community where he had been raised, and also drew the ire of the Christian

establishment. Subsequently his major works were either published anonymously (*Theologico-Political Treatise*) or posthumously (*Ethics, Political Treatise*).

Thus the reason both men were seen as radical in their day was because their ideas undermined the power of the Church and the divine right of kings to rule; Hobbes, followed by Spinoza replaced the rule of persons with the rule of law. In other words, they were both philosophical representatives of the nascent bourgeois society that threatened the established feudal order.<sup>12</sup> Hence while “Spinoza is sometimes hailed as a defender of democracy, it would be better to see him as a defender of the liberal constitution.”<sup>13</sup>

Hobbes in particular grasped the logic of emergent bourgeois society, and his political philosophy is best understood as an attempt to reconcile the logic of the market – which is indeed a war of all against all – with capital’s need for social peace and bourgeois equality:

The safety of the People, requireth further, from him, or them that have the Sovereign [sic] Power, that justice be equally administered to all degrees of people; that is, that as well the rich, and mighty, as poor and obscure persons, may be righted of the injuries done them.<sup>14</sup>

Now according to Virno, Hobbes’s people is defined by its composite unity, its coming together in and through the state. This is a somewhat one-sided précis. As the above quote suggests, Hobbes in fact sets up the unity of the people in the state *as the guarantee of bourgeois equality in the marketplace*, thus establishing the familiar market-state pairing. Indeed much of bourgeois politics consists in wrangling over just what balance of the two is best for ‘the economy’ (read capital accumulation).

Spinoza similarly grasps capital’s need for bourgeois equality and social peace. Whereas to this end Hobbes opts for the blunt instrument of an absolute sovereign power, preferring monarchy, tolerating limited democracy, but refusing any division of powers between say, parliament and king (this is why it’s usually Locke who is juxtaposed to Hobbes, as Locke sets out the basis of the liberal separation of executive and legislative powers). Spinoza however anticipates resistance to such blatant absolutism and proposes an altogether more subtle approach:

A state that looks only to govern men by fear will be one free from vice rather than endowed with virtue. Men should be governed in such a way as they do not think of themselves as being governed but as living as they please and by their own free will...<sup>15</sup>

It is interesting that Virno sees Spinoza as the philosopher to decode ‘post-Fordism’ from the point of view of the multitude. However, as the above quote shows Spinoza often reads more like a ‘lean management’ guru

8 Bertrand Russell, *The history of western philosophy*, Routledge Classics, Abingdon, 2006, p.522.

9 Benedictus de Spinoza, *Political treatise*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, 2000.

10 Spinoza (2000), p.101.

11 Probably his most famous work, from which his ideas discussed in this article are drawn. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Penguin Classics, London, 1988.

12 Toni Negri disputes this, arguing the relatively developed capitalism of Spinoza’s native Dutch Republic renders him an anomalous “post-bourgeois” philosopher. This is discussed briefly below. Antonio Negri, *The savage anomaly*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2000.

13 Roger Scruton, *Spinoza*, Phoenix, London, 1998, p.41.

14 Hobbes (1988) p.385.

15 Spinoza (2000) p.132 – Spinoza is a determinist who rejects the concept of free will, so this formulation is explicitly duplicitous and suggests against a reading that he’s obliquely advocating direct democracy of some sort in such a manner as to avoid the censure of the authorities.

than a revolutionary!<sup>16</sup> A few examples from a lean management text should suffice to make the point:

For most people, being given orders feels coercive – an affront to their autonomy. They may comply, but they’ll probably feel resentful, which won’t dispose them to be co-operative in the future.”<sup>17</sup>

“As for the levels of hierarchy, they should be kept to the smallest number consistent with appropriate spans of control.”<sup>18</sup>

Note that the autonomy of the worker in ‘post-Fordism’ is only the autonomy to co-operate in the valorising of capital, subject to ‘appropriate spans of control’. As we can see, both Hobbes and Spinoza are concerned only with the bourgeois individual, the equal citizen existing in the sphere of circulation (the marketplace, public life). The ‘hidden abode of production’ with its workers and bosses is notable only by its absence. Neither thinker could grasp the dialectical relation between these two spheres; how for bourgeois society freedom in circulation needs despotism in production and vice versa. We will return to this point in the following section.<sup>19</sup> But in any case is it really that surprising that the ‘new’ bourgeois strategies of ‘post-Fordism’ are foreshadowed by a seventeenth century thinker? Is it not simply the case that the bourgeoisie have long been aware of both the carrot (Spinoza) and the stick (Hobbes), and have sought to deploy them as necessary?

## 1.2 Spinoza the anomaly?

This is where Virno’s reading of Spinoza departs from traditional understandings. Where it has been held that Spinoza’s “concern for political freedom arose from his suspicion of ordinary people”<sup>20</sup> and that “he is opposed to all rebellion, even against a bad government”,<sup>21</sup> Virno instead asserts that “for Spinoza, the *multitudo* is the architrave of civil liberties” (p.21) and that “those ‘many’ made use of the ‘right of resistance,’ of the *jus resistentiae*” (p.42). This reading seems to owe much to Toni Negri’s insistence that Spinoza is an anomaly of his age and in fact represents “a radical and seminal alternative to bourgeois thought”,<sup>22</sup> whose “subject is the *multitudo*. It is therefore around the issue of the *multitudo* that the problem of the relationship

between freedom and absoluteness should be reconsidered.”<sup>23</sup>

As Virno doesn’t reference Negri, we will deal with his arguments only to the extent they inform the discussion at hand. In short, the problem with Negri’s reading, which is mirrored to some extent in Virno, is contained in the following passage:

In very elementary terms, perhaps a bit extreme but certainly intense, we could say that *in Spinoza productive force is subject to nothing but itself*, and, in particular, domination is taken away from the relations of production: Instead, productive force seeks to dominate the relations of production from its own point of view.<sup>24</sup> (emphasis added)

The appeal of the italicised section should be apparent to those coming from a tradition stressing ‘workers’ autonomy.’<sup>25</sup> It also allows the two spheres of production and circulation to be collapsed into each other; with domination taken away, (bourgeois) freedom reigns.

However, the problem is that a theory cannot simply ‘take domination away’ and thus make it so in reality! Nor is the freedom of circulation an alternative to the domination of production, it is simply the other side of the same coin! Domination is only ‘taken away’ at the point where the proletariat asserts itself as a class, defetishising the commodity form in a naked clash of class forces; in other words at the peak of class struggle, on the eve of revolution. That is to say this ‘positive’ moment of affirmation can only proceed dialectically from the negative moment of proletarian alienation, it does not and cannot stand alone as an autonomous force, it is born in the very daily domination of the capital relation that it seeks to overcome.<sup>26</sup>

Possessing nothing for sale except the capacity to work, the proletarian sells their labour-power (productive force), their subjectivity to capital in return for a wage. Their subjectivity thus becomes objectified in the form of the capital their alienated labour creates, to which the worker stands as a mere object – a ‘human resource’ or even in some of the latest management jargon, ‘human capital.’ For the vast majority of humanity therefore, capital seeks to reduce life to work and the ancillary functions thereof.

But capitalist production not only alienates the worker, but also the capitalist, albeit in a qualitatively different way. The capitalist who disregards the imperatives of the market, who does not seek to intensify the exploitation of their workers and expand their capital will not long remain a capitalist, as bankruptcy or hostile takeover will soon enough intervene. Thus the subjective desires of the capitalist are subordinated to the expansion of capital. The capitalist

23 Antonio Negri, *Subversive Spinoza*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2004, p.37.

24 Negri (2000), p.223. Negri has already donned his postmodern lenses here, as the ‘productive force’ he refers to in Spinoza is Being itself. Following Deleuze he takes the fact that Spinoza’s One substance/*Deus sive natura* is *self-causing* to mean that it is *productive* (of itself), and then conflates this ontological constructivism with production in the Marxist sense. You will search in vain for references to forces and relations of production in Spinoza, but never mind, the author is dead!

25 *Autonomia Operaia* – ‘Workers’ autonomy’ - was one of the groups with which Negri was involved in 1970’s Italy.

26 The question of ‘positive and negative moments’ will be taken up again in section 2.

16 ‘Post-Fordism’ refers to the various management strategies that have followed Fordist/Taylorist scientific management, ‘lean management’ being a major component of such strategies. Virno places great importance on ‘post-Fordism,’ as is discussed in section 3 of this article.

17 Drew, J *et al*, *Journey to lean*, Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke, 2004, p.65. A management textbook surreptitiously ‘borrowed’ from a boss’s desk, and so presumably a sufficiently current source.

18 Drew *et al* (2004) p.52 – the logic here mirrors Spinoza, workers must be made to *feel* free – but they must really be kept under control.

19 We will see in section 3 how in *confining* himself to this one-sided bourgeois view of the sphere of circulation to define his subject, Virno can only *collapse* production and circulation into each other when he turns to consider labour as multitude.

20 Scruton (1998), p.41.

21 Russell (2006), p.522.

22 Negri (2000), p.219. In fine postmodern style, Negri’s reading of Spinoza relies most heavily on the two chapters on democracy in the *Political treatise*, which Spinoza left unwritten!

becomes the mere human agent through which capital is set in motion in its circuits of valorisation.

Hence it is not the capitalist that is the subject of capitalist production, but capital itself, which as the subject-object of production seeks to dominate the productive forces and structure them according to its needs. In other words, an *ontological inversion* takes place, as real human subjects become objectified and dominated by an object endowed with subjectivity. Immediately this domination by the subject-object of capital presents itself in the person of the boss, behind him stand the police and the military.

Crucially however, this process is never closed, never complete – *and never can be!* The mere fact of selling their subjectivity to capital never completely reduces the worker to a mere object. This is apparent in the rich history of strikes, occupations and revolutions which all express proletarian subjectivity rejecting the domination of capital, not to mention the unsung everyday resistances. However, the fact that we (the productive force) can and do seek to impose our will on capital does not mean that ‘domination is taken away from the relations of production’ – if that were the case we would be in a permanently revolutionary situation!<sup>27</sup>

Rather, capital’s domination is contested, and necessarily so. However, for Negri all this talk of alienation in production is part and parcel of the “bourgeois ideology” of dialectics,<sup>28</sup> thus he adopts a theory that poses the bourgeois freedom experienced in the sphere of circulation as an alternative to the domination experienced in production (ironically on the grounds that grasping their inter-relation would be bourgeois!). For us though it is impossible to theorise capitalist class relations without an understanding of this alienation in the sphere of production and the ontological inversion by which dead labour (capital) comes to dominate the living, and thus wage slavery becomes the primary means of access to the necessities of life.<sup>29</sup>



However, Virno doesn’t so much as conflate the spheres of production and circulation, but simply confines himself, like Hobbes and Spinoza to the sphere of circulation, at least for the purposes of defining his subject, the multitude. The problems of ignoring production are explored in section 2. However before we can discuss those, it is necessary to briefly consider Spinoza’s metaphysics, which far more so than his politics Virno opposes to Hobbes (since their politics are not all that different, as we have seen).

### 1.3 The One and the Many

Central to Spinoza’s metaphysics is his notion of ‘substance,’ the fabric of Being itself, which for him is necessarily infinite and singular: “except God, no substance can be or be conceived.”<sup>30</sup> (It was Spinoza’s referring to his one substance as “God or nature” - *Deus sive natura* - that had him accused of atheism). Certainly it is easier for modern readers to accept the “substance = nature” equation which is far less theologically charged, and somewhat in line with contemporary scientific views of the universe as a self-causing system (with big bang theory, the cause of the initial singularity is necessarily beyond physics – metaphysical – and thus de facto it is held to be self-causing).

So given as there is only one substance, every finite thing is necessarily a ‘mode’ of this substance. Thus Spinoza’s metaphysics is in essence a (logical if not temporal) progression from ‘the One’ to ‘the many;’ plurality and heterogeneity is premised on an essential unity (in God or nature). Virno juxtaposes this to Hobbes’ view of the social contract, where atomistic individuals in the state of nature must come together in the State for their own protection; the many must become the One. Virno identifies these opposite conceptual movements with the multitude and the people respectively. As he puts it, upon rejecting the liberal social contract theory of Hobbes and his ilk “the One is no longer a *promise*, it is a *premise*”(p.25).<sup>31</sup>

27 In fairness to Negri, he does attribute his ‘return to Spinoza’ to the claim that “*Being* is material, *revolutionary*” – so at least he is consistent (emphasis in original; Negri 2004 p.95).

28 “The dialectic is the form in which bourgeois ideology is always presented to us in all of its variants” Negri (2000), p.20. We don’t dispute that Hegel, so closely associated with the dialectic was a bourgeois thinker. We do dispute that the dialectic itself, having been set upon its feet by Marx is necessarily an expression of bourgeois ideology. To accept the (contested) reality of capital’s domination is not to agree with or apologise for it, hence we have no need for fairy tales about the autonomy of the productive forces.

29 Virno occasionally alludes to alienation, but it is peripheral to his theory as expressed in the book.

30 Proposition 14 of the *Ethics*, p.9 of Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, Penguin classics, London, 1996.

31 Incidentally we are sympathetic to the notion that individuals emerge from society rather than society being the mere aggregate of so many Robinson Crusoes. Whilst this strikes against the *Homo economicus* thesis of bourgeois economics, it says nothing more without elaborating that in capitalist society individuals are divided into antagonistic classes, *despite* this shared humanity. It merely reformulates the bourgeois individual as a derivative of something common (the general intellect for Virno, God or Nature for Spinoza) rather than as an atom from which something common is constructed.

## 1. Multitude, humanism, class

We have seen then how Virno borrows from Spinoza's metaphysics and his concept of multitude, which he places in opposition to 'the people.' Now radical thought is no stranger to criticising the notion of 'the people' as a construct that papers over class difference. Over a century ago the Wobbly folk singer Joe Hill quipped "it's about time every rebel woke up to the fact that the working class and 'the people' have nothing in common." So is Virno's multitude merely a new word for the working class? No, and Virno is explicit on this point, stressing that the working class still exists, only it is a part of the multitude and not the people (p.44).

For Virno, the multitude is an alternative concept to the people, *but this 'alternative' is just as rooted into the sphere of circulation*, home of the bourgeois individual, of equal citizens, not bosses and workers. Virno's opposition to Hobbes is essentially this; his overbearing Leviathan state prevents the bourgeois individual from realising his democratic aspirations. However, now that capitalist production requires *everyone* to use their generic human faculties, we have something fundamental in common and so don't need a social contract and Leviathan state – the bourgeois individual is at last free to realise his democratic dreams! In ignoring the sphere of production for the purposes of defining the multitude (except insofar as production requires generic human faculties), Virno views bourgeois society one-sidedly. Whilst insisting the working class still exists, his multitude is defined solely in terms of the bourgeois freedom of circulation, whilst production remains a hidden abode.

This is most apparent when he explains that the One of the multitude is the 'common places' of language, the "linguistic-cognitive competencies which are *generically human*" (p.110; emphasis added).<sup>32</sup> Virno explains that "such 'places' are *common* because *no one* can do without them (from the refined orator to the drunkard who mumbles words hard to understand, *from the business person to the politician*)" (p.36; emphasis added). From this it is apparent that Virno's multitude is essentially a humanist political concept, and thus to talk of *the* multitude is to talk of humanity in general, undifferentiated into classes.<sup>33</sup>

At first glance this seems somewhat at odds with the better-known multitude of Toni Negri, for whom "multitude is first of all a class concept".<sup>34</sup> However, the two multitudes have more in common than this first glance suggests, a commonality rooted in one of the theoretical tenets that runs through much of Autonomist thought, which in our opinion is one of its major weaknesses. As we will explain, this

32 It should be noted that here Virno employs Spinozan metaphysics only metaphorically, unless he is such a hideous idealist to believe human thought (the general intellect) is the cause of everything in the universe!

33 However Virno also sometimes seems to use *the* multitude as shorthand for 'the working class in the mode of multitude', which is discussed in section 3. It should also be stressed that Virno's humanism is *not* a liberal humanism that denies class conflict per se (that would be 'the people'), he just doesn't say much about it.

34 "... then also a political concept" in opposition to 'the people.' <http://libcom.org/library/multitude-or-working-class-antonio-negri> We argued in *Aufheben* #14 (2006) that Negri's multitude also ends up classless, despite his protestations.

weakness is the rejection of a dialectical understanding of the proletariat in favour of a purely positive one.<sup>35</sup>

### 2.1 Be positive!

In order to clearly explain what sounds like a rather abstract philosophical point – and its consequences – a comparison between Virno and Negri's purely positive approach and a dialectical one is necessary. Firstly though, it is worth briefly tracing the development of one of the Autonomists's major theoretical contributions – the broadening of the category of the proletariat from the narrow description of white, male, blue collar industrial workers favoured with differing emphases by both the workerists and the Marxist orthodoxy prevalent in Italy at the time.<sup>36</sup>

This view was a positive definition in that it looked for attributes that the proletariat had – namely producing surplus value – and thus excluded the unemployed, housewives, agricultural and tertiary workers and in fact pretty much anyone who wasn't employed on a production line from possessing any revolutionary agency or antagonistic subjectivity. With the late '60s explosion of struggles outside the factory (particularly by students) Autonomia theorists, and Negri in particular argued against this orthodoxy, contending that the whole of society now constituted a 'social factory' in which all sorts of activities were productive for capital.

Meanwhile theorists like Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James argued that the reproductive labour of housewives (feeding their proletarian husbands, raising the next generation of workers) was also a vital part of capitalist (re)production. From this they managed to redefine the working class on a much broader basis, and as a much more heterogeneous group. This firstly helped explain the revolutionary potential of struggles outside the immediate sphere of production, against narrow workerism, and secondly helped place working class subjectivity at the centre of their theory, where Communist Party orthodoxy had tended to play it down as it sought to reduce the working class to an electorate at the service of the party. These were both significant theoretical contributions.

However, *they had done this by broadening the positive category of the workerists, not by overturning it.* They

35 Harry Cleaver implies that the Hegelian elements in Marx were jettisoned along with Engels's dialectical materialism, which formed a staple of Communist Party orthodoxy from which Autonomia broke. If this is the case it looks very much like the baby went out with the bathwater. *Reading capital politically*, p.47/8, AK Press. Also at <http://libcom.org/library/reading-capital-politically-cleaver> Perhaps similarly Negri rejects Hegel for being a bourgeois thinker (which he was), and shares his friend Gilles Deleuze's visceral hostility to dialectics, even Marx's: "the dialectic is the form in which bourgeois ideology is always presented to us in all of its variants" (Negri 2000, p.20). This help may explain why Hegel is copiously absent from Virno's return to bourgeois philosophy.

36 'Autonomists' covers a very heterogeneous group of theorists here, we follow Steve Wright's terminology. It should be noted that the productivist orthodoxy probably belonged as much if not more to the Autonomists's roots in 'workerism' than the official Stalinist Communist Party, which was more interested in electioneering than struggles at the point of production. Wright's *Storming Heaven* provides a good study of the complex and heterogeneous genealogy of Autonomist Marxist thought [2002, Pluto Press, London; reviewed in *Aufheben* #11 (2003)].

picked up the workerist value production fetish and ran with it, in effect saying 'the working class is those who produce value? Well, housewives produce a commodity, labour-power, so they're also working class, and consumption is in fact the production and reproduction of labour-power, so even peripheral workers and the unemployed produce a commodity – themselves – and so are working class too.' Indeed, Virno's definition of the working class also remains true to workerism; "the subject which produces relative and absolute surplus value" (p.46).

It is this failure to challenge the centrality of value production to the proletariat that is one of the Autonomists's major failings. Why?

### 2.3 What is subversive in the proletarian condition?

So what do we suggest as an alternative to the purely positive definition of the proletariat as "the subject which produces relative and absolute surplus value"(p.46)? In an oft-quoted passage (indeed written in 1972, contemporaneously to *Autonomia*), Gilles Dauvé poses the proletariat as a negative category against those who would see it in positive terms:

If one identifies proletarian with factory worker (or even worse: with manual labourer), or with the poor, then one cannot see what is subversive in the proletarian condition. The proletariat is the negation of this society ... The proletariat is the dissolution of present society, because this society deprives it of nearly all its positive aspects ... Most proles are low paid, and a lot work in production, yet their emergence as the proletariat derives not from being low paid producers, but from being "cut off", alienated, with no control either over their lives or the meaning of what they have to do to earn a living.<sup>37</sup>

By negative definition, we mean that Dauvé draws not on the characteristics that the proletariat *has* (being productive, poor, blue collar...), but from what we are *denied*, what we are cut off from, and that this alienation, this negative moment, is precisely what makes the proletariat a (potentially) revolutionary force. The attentive reader may notice that this definition applies equally to say, first century Roman slaves and so is not adequate to define the proletariat as a historically specific class, for wage-slaves are not chattel-slaves, yet both are alienated in the way described. Thus this negative moment requires a positive moment.

Dauvé elsewhere notes that "everything appears to be the result of a free contract",<sup>38</sup> and it is this freedom which is the only positive aspect of the proletarian condition,<sup>39</sup> and which distinguishes proletarians from serfs or slaves. Proletarians are *free of* property from which to make a living, but they are also *free to* dispose of their labour-power at the dearest price they can get in the market place. As Marx puts it, the proletarian is

free in the double sense, that as a free man he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that on the other hand he has no other commodity for sale, is short of everything necessary for the realisation of his labour-power.<sup>40</sup>

Thus the positive aspect of the proletarian condition (the freedom to sell oneself in the market) rests upon the negative (dispossession and alienation). This anyhow, deals with the proletariat 'in-itself,' as discussed in section one and the review of De Angelis in this issue, the class 'for-itself' engenders a further positive moment, which once more depends upon the negative moment.

This may seem to establish a figure of a 'pure proletarian,' and thus re-exclude housewives, asylum seekers, prisoners etc. who are forbidden to freely "dispose of their labour-power." However, what distinguishes the capitalist mode of production, which now spans the globe, from pre-capitalist social relations is that the *norm* is for individuals to be free to sell their labour power.<sup>41</sup> This norm is by no means monolithic, but where contradictory tendencies exist - for instance trafficked prostitutes or forced labour in Chinese brick kilns - they represent exceptions to this prevailing norm (often soliciting much liberal outrage as a result!), and they can thus be considered proletarian, much like a slave receiving pocket money from a benevolent master would still be considered a slave.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, capital accumulation in 'developing countries' where social relations most resemble pre-capitalist ones requires the extension of this double-edged freedom through dispossession of rural peasants and the creation of a wage-earning, usually urban proletariat.

The significance of this discussion becomes apparent with regard to Virno's view of social struggle:<sup>43</sup>

safeguarding forms of life which have *already* been affirmed as free-standing forms, thus protecting practices *already* rooted in society. It means, then, defending something positive: it is a *conservative* violence (in the good and noble sense of the word.) (p.43/4; emphasis in original)

As we have seen, the only 'something positive' we have *as workers prior to any struggle* is the freedom to sell ourselves to a boss! Virno states that this '*jus resistentiae*'

37 Gilles Dauvé, *The Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement*, Antagonism Press, London, date unknown, p.30. Also at <http://libcom.org/library/eclipse-re-emergence-giles-dauve>

38 Dauvé (date unknown), p.18.

39 We are talking here of the class 'in-itself' – the class 'for-itself' through the very process of struggle against alienation recomposes itself – see the section of the De Angelis review in this issue subtitled 'The Phenomenology of the Revolutionary Subject'.

40 Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, Penguin, London, 1990, p.272/3 (chapter 6 for other editions). The fact a proletarian *has the right to* dispose of his labour-power does not mean he must, thus the unemployed are included.

41 A good articulation of the norm of bourgeois equality is expressed in Articles 1, 2, 4 and 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>

42 None of this is meant to detract from the fact that half the world's population, that is, women, in practice rarely enjoy even bourgeois equality with their male counterparts. However, Maria Dalla Costa correctly noted that the role of women is integrated into that of their wage-earning husbands, and so their practical inequality exists as a moment of a mode of production whose norm is equality. This can be seen by how painlessly (for it!) capital has integrated women into the labour market in the UK, to the point where it is now unaffordable for many working class couples *not* to both work, while bourgeois EU commissioners lament and legislate against the 'glass ceiling'.

43 He doesn't call this revolution, because he accepts the Leninist definition of revolution as the seizure of the state apparatus. <http://generation-online.org/p/fpvirno8.htm>

(right of resistance) is the strongest similarity between today's multitude and that of Spinoza's Dutch Republic (p.43).<sup>44</sup> Whilst on the one hand Virno is adamant that the concept of multitude does not replace that of working class (calling such a belief "a foolish way of thinking" – p.45), on the other hand his social subject is (positively defined) *the* multitude, which as we have shown can only be read as a humanist concept. Virno's concept of struggle applies best to those bourgeois individuals in the classless sphere of circulation who have something positive to defend – one can only think of the petit-bourgeoisie.

## 2.4 Exit?

It has been said of Hobbes that: "he saw classes, but did not see any politically important class cohesion."<sup>45</sup> Much the same could be said of Virno; the proletariat (or rather the 'labour class') exists as part of the multitude, but the multitude is his social subject. This stands starkly at odds with the notion of the proletariat as the negation of capitalist society; indeed a further example of Virno's petit-bourgeois theorising is when Virno must descend from abstract theoretical discussions into concrete politics:

The European labourers, driven away from their own countries by epidemics, famines and economic crises, go off to work on the East Coast of the United States. But let us note: they remain there for a few years, *only* for a few years. Then they desert the factory, moving West, towards free lands. Wage labour is seen as a transitory phase, rather than as a life sentence ... Marx, in describing this situation, offers us a very vivid portrait of a labour class which is also a multitude. (p.45)

Here, Virno's undialectical approach to the spheres of circulation and production resurfaces. Having defined the multitude solely in terms of the bourgeois freedom in the sphere of circulation, he argues that the 'exit' from wage labour - the movement from factory worker to small frontier landowner represents liberation. The multitude is defined as becoming petit-bourgeois! Embracing the bourgeois freedom of circulation against the despotism of production, Virno fails to grasp how said freedom and unfreedom presuppose each other. Thus we have a model of political action that has far more in common with class mobility - even the myth of

meritocracy and the American Dream - than self-emancipation. But elsewhere Virno has more to say:

I am not referring necessarily to a territorial exodus, but rather to desertion in one's own place: the collective defection from the state bond, from certain forms of waged work, from consumerism ... I am not referring to a form of simplified democracy, of direct democracy, of assemblies. I think for example of the post-Genoa social forums of citizens.<sup>46</sup>

Trapped in his Spinozan framework, blind to alienation in the sphere of production, Virno can only conceive of a 'citizens' democracy.' There is no place for class struggle, simply an inference that one should either drop out – avoiding certain jobs and buying less stuff - or simply become petit-bourgeois – anything to enjoy the bourgeois freedom of circulation (which as we have seen is dependent on the alienation Virno ignores). Steve Wright comments that "the form of flight from the capital relation most commonly held up by the exponents of 'exodus' is that of so-called 'autonomous labour': what in English goes by the name of self-employment."<sup>47</sup> Wright notes that other contemporary Autonomists have taken this even further, praising entrepreneurship "inserted within a market".<sup>48</sup>

Certainly this is where the call for a 'new public sphere outside the state' seems to join up with a kind of Thatcherism, praising the autonomous entrepreneurial initiative of the individual against stifling state authority – though it should be noted that Virno himself does not go so far. Despite the notional 'autonomy' of self-employment, *at best* (i.e. if the self-employment is any more than self-managed, outsourced wage labour) it essentially swaps one form of alienation (that of the proletarian faced with the boss) with another (that of the petit-bourgeoisie faced with a hostile market). It is certainly no threat to capital.

Wright also notes that "a more obviously social approach to the goal of an alternative economy outside capital's sway can be found within Italy's hundred or so social centres."<sup>49</sup> Perhaps these are what Virno has in mind? He doesn't say, but his search for an "exit" which is "the polar opposite of the desperate cry 'there is nothing to lose but one's own chains'" (p.70; i.e. the proletariat as negation) seems to lead him only to advocate lifestyle changes, cross-class discussions and attempts to avoid certain types of wage labour by joining the ranks of the petit-bourgeoisie. Thus, it is in his concrete politics that his adoption of one-sided bourgeois theories reveals itself in a good and noble conservatism indeed!

## 2. Value & 'virtuosity'

It is only having defined his subject in the sphere of circulation - and thus defined the multitude as a relation among bourgeois subjects (as in those enjoying bourgeois freedom, not those who own/control the means of production) - that Virno ventures into the sphere of production. Taking up the question of labour in contemporary capitalism, which he gives the epochal label

44 Where incidentally "life for the unskilled, and semi-skilled, in Dutch Golden Age society was neither affluent or easy. But the dynamism of the Dutch economy meant that there were good prospects for the highly trained to achieve affluence", p.352, Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, Oxford University Press, 1998. Interestingly in light of this, theories of post-Fordism generally often privilege highly skilled workers, but of course in a 70%+ service economy like the UK for every freelance computer programmer there are many more catering staff (think Gate Gourmet), retail workers or far more mundane office jobs (admin etc). However Virno to his credit doesn't fall into the 'high skill' trap, insisting that it is the *generic capacity* for abstract thought, language etc. which is definitive, not their concrete manifestations; "A good example of mass intellectuality is the speaker, not the scientist. Mass intellectuality has nothing to do with a new 'labour aristocracy'; it is actually its exact opposite." <http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpvirno10.htm>

45 Hobbes (1988), p.60. Quote from C.B. Macpherson's introduction.

46 <http://generation-online.org/p/fpvirno5.htm>

47 <http://libcom.org/library/confronting-crisis-fordism-steve-wright>

48 Lazzarato, quoted in <http://libcom.org/library/confronting-crisis-fordism-steve-wright>

49 <http://libcom.org/library/confronting-crisis-fordism-steve-wright>

the “post-Ford mode of production” (p.49), he makes two inter-related arguments. Firstly, on the basis of a short passage in the *Grundrisse* he argues that with the development of the ‘general intellect’ and automation “the so-called ‘law of value’ [has been]... shattered and refuted by capitalist development itself” (p.100). Secondly, and in apparent contradiction, he argues that,

in post-Fordism, those who produce surplus-value behave - from the structural point of view, of course - like the pianists, the dancers, etc., and for this reason, like the politicians... Labour requires a ‘publicly organized space’ and resembles a virtuosic performance (without end product). (p.55; emphasis in original)

We will deal with these two threads, value and virtuosity, in turn.

### 3.1 Virno & value

The passage in the *Grundrisse*, from which Virno’s contention that the law of value no longer applies to contemporary capitalism, is the so-called ‘Fragment on Machines’.<sup>50</sup> It is curious that whilst acknowledging that in this passage “Marx upholds a thesis that is hardly Marxist” (p.100), he nonetheless offers little argument beyond an appeal to authority that “the ‘Fragment’ is a toolbox for the sociologist. It describes an empirical reality which lies in front of all our eyes” (p.101).

This begs the question, if production based on exchange value has indeed broken down on account of increasing automation (p.100), why more than ever does the present wealth appear as an immense collection of commodities?<sup>51</sup> Virno’s case is not helped by his confusing *value* with the *law of value*, but this is a mere aside.<sup>52</sup> A more serious problem is Virno’s reading of the ‘Fragment’ in isolation, and furthermore his treating of these mere 2½ pages of rough notes from Marx’s oeuvre with such elevated importance. Indeed he is aware it presents a hypothesis “very different from the more famous hypotheses presented in his other works” (p.100). Taken in isolation, Marx was simply wrong: there is no *automatic* undermining of the law of value based on capitalist production itself. However Marx wasn’t as dialectically challenged as Virno. While the ‘Fragment’ explores the logical development of a single tendency, Marx explores other (counter-)tendencies at length elsewhere. As we commented on Nick Dyer-Witford’s similar attachment to the ‘Fragment’ in *Aufheben* #14 (2006), read in conjunction with Marx’s later return to the subject of machines in Volume 3 of *Capital*:

We are no longer presented with an image of technological development producing a capitalist mode of production which has undermined itself. Contradictions and crises yes, but not a technological limit beyond which the relations of production have

become fetters upon the development of the productive forces. Rather the possibility of expanded accumulation of capital and of the wage form.<sup>53</sup>

Virno thinks Marx was right about the undermining of the law of value, but wrong about the resultant crisis. In effect he agrees with us that what we see is the “expanded accumulation of capital and of the wage form”, but wants to have his cake and eat it n claiming that this is happening despite the “so-called law of value” being “shattered and refuted”. So for Virno - blithely unaware of the counter-tendencies sketched by Marx - the coexistence of capitalism and advanced automation is a radical, unexpected scenario demanding radical theoretical comprehension. Thus we read that “post-Fordism is the communism of capital” (p.111), since according to Virno’s reading of the ‘Fragment’ as prophecy, production based on exchange value (i.e. commodity production) has broken down (communism), but we nonetheless still have capitalism.

But is this really the “empirical reality” (p.101)? Not at all, one only needs to note the glaringly obvious fact that firms still produce for the market, i.e. for exchange-value to realise the surplus-value included in the value of the commodities they sell, and thus to accumulate capital. And indeed firms still seek to reduce the labour time necessary to produce their commodities in order to compete and maximise profits (according to the law of value, reports of whose death have been greatly exaggerated); as but one example one need only look at the spread of casualisation, reducing necessary labour with short-term contracts meaning staff are only retained when there’s work to be done. And where some industries have become heavily automated, massively reducing the necessary labour and thus the value of the commodities they produce, newer industries have sprung up which are far more labour-intensive – 70% of the UK economy is now classed as ‘services’ – but which in turn are becoming rationalised in accordance with the law of value. Thus call centre workers increasingly read out what it says on a screen and tick boxes whilst under constant digital surveillance to ensure efficiency is kept up and necessary labour down.<sup>54</sup>

Yet another counter-tendency to the one outlined in the ‘Fragment’ is the flow of capital from capital-intensive (‘high organic composition’) to labour-intensive (‘low organic composition’) regions, as manifested by the shift in British manufacturing jobs to lower wage economies in Eastern Europe and the Far East. It barely needs stating that intellect alone produces nothing, and production in every era, ‘Fordism’ included, has drawn on the general intellectual development of the society in which it takes place, which furthermore is always ‘advanced’ relative to the present. Certainly though, Virno’s assertion following the ‘Fragment’ that wealth is no longer based on “the theft of alien labour

50 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, Penguin, London, 1993, p.704-6. This passage actually has the rather snappy title “Contradiction between the foundation of bourgeois production (value as measure) and its development. Machines etc.”

51 Indeed, increasingly stamped ‘Made in China’ ...

52 Virno’s ‘definition’ of the law of value - “labour time supplied by individuals” (p.100) – is in fact a rough definition of value itself. The *law of value* is the way in which this logic imposes itself (necessitating the rationalisation/intensification/extension of labour) via divergences in values and prices in a competitive market etc.

53 *Aufheben* #14 (2006), p.55.

54 In *The beginning of history* as well as in previous works De Angelis tries to counteract attacks on the validity of the Marxian categories of value and abstract labour which were based on the ‘relevance’ of immaterial/weightlessness in recent production. He stresses that capital finds ways to ‘measure’ immaterial activity, so as to extract value from it. We totally agree with De Angelis’s arguments, which we feel are very close to ours in *Aufheben* #14 (2006).

time”<sup>55</sup> tessellates with his avoidance of a dialectical conception of the proletariat as alienated subjects as discussed in section 2, so he is at least consistent with himself, if not with reality.

For Virno, “post-Fordism, hinging as it does upon the *general intellect* and the multitude, puts forth, *in its own way*, typical demands of communism (abolition of work, dissolution of the State, etc.)” (p.111). His claim that post-Fordism puts forward the abolition of work is based on his dubious thesis that “for the post-Fordist multitude every qualitative difference between labour time and non-labour time falls short” (p.102). This may be true for the academic who thinks, reads, writes and discusses at work (drawing on his generic human faculties for language and abstract thought), and thinks, reads, writes and discusses at home (drawing on his same generic human faculties for language and abstract thought), but the rest of us are still somehow miraculously able to discern a qualitative difference between being at work in a call centre and being on the phone with our mates, despite the brave new world of ‘post-Fordism’! However, it’s clear how this denial of the sphere of production’s separate existence fits with his classless definition of the multitude in terms of the sphere of circulation that we explored in section 1; indeed Virno is compelled to either conflate the two spheres or renounce his earlier arguments, and with them the basis of his multitude. Unsurprisingly he chooses the former.

Neither have working hours significantly decreased since the dawn of ‘post-Fordism.’<sup>56</sup> His claim that ‘post-Fordism’ puts forward the dissolution of the state is also dubious; while it’s true the *welfare* state is being dismantled, the state itself remains an essential part of the capitalist structure, and in many ways is being strengthened in the post 9-11 world. However, Virno is not finished. Having claimed that the development of automation has destroyed the law of value, he then turns to deal with the fact we are still nonetheless working, and capital is still being accumulated. Implicitly he accepts that the law of value has not in fact broken down when he turns to consider the extension of work which is far less easily automated, that which is inseparable from the human capacities of the worker, the kind of activity Virno terms ‘virtuosity.’

### 3.2 Virno’s virtuosity

So what then is virtuosity? For Virno, virtuosity is “an activity without an end product” (p.52). Furthermore:

... Virtuosity is twofold: not only does it not produce an end product which is distinguishable from performance, but it does not even leave behind an end product which could be actualised by means of performance. (p.56)

For Virno, virtuosity characterises “the totality of contemporary social production” (p.61). He is explicit that this does not mean material commodities are no longer produced, but that “for an ever increasing number of professional tasks, the fulfilment of an action is internal to the action itself” (p.61/2). He goes on to explain that the actions to which he refers are those aimed at enhancing co-

operation and teamwork etc, in line with ‘post-Fordist’ principles whereby the first-hand knowledge of the worker becomes explicitly requested as part of his allocated tasks (e.g. in Toyotist ‘quality circles,’ DuPont’s ‘STOP’ program etc.). Virno sees this as an extension of the real subsumption of labour under capital; “nobody is as poor as those who see their own relation to the presence of others, that is to say, their own communicative faculty, their own possession of a language, reduced to wage labour” (p.63). He argues that historically this ‘servile virtuosity’ was the terrain of non-productive personal services such as those of a butler, but now it has become the very paradigm of productive work itself.

Furthermore this virtuosity requires a “publicly organized space” (p.53). Virno tells us “this publicly organized space is called ‘cooperation’ by Marx” (p.55). Thus, given as ‘post-Fordism’ is based on cooperation (Virno says), productive labour becomes virtuosic under ‘post-Fordism.’ Before discussing the implications of this, it is worth questioning whether ‘post-Fordism’ is really as cooperative as the management gurus would have us believe. Beverly Silver (reviewed in this issue) distinguishes between ‘lean-and-dual’ Toyotism, which offers job security to a core workforce in return for cooperation while outsourcing everything else, and the ‘lean-and-mean’ ‘post-Fordism’ more often pursued outside of Japan which drops the job security carrot altogether.<sup>57</sup> With regard to the more widespread ‘lean-and-mean’ model, Gilles Dauvé and Karl Nesic note:

There’s a contradiction between having the worker use and valorise elaborate production procedures that require a lot more participation, and treating him as an expendable pawn.<sup>58</sup>

Indeed Silver observes that “without labour guarantees, automakers have found that it is very difficult to elicit the cooperation of the workforce; thus, the dynamic of labour-capital conflict has remained largely the same as in the traditional Fordist model.”<sup>59</sup>

Thus it seems Virno’s “empirical realisation of the ‘Fragment on Machines’” (p.100) has little empirical basis in actually existing ‘post-Fordism’! But Silver was talking specifically of the car industry; perhaps it is different elsewhere, where production is more virtuosic?<sup>60</sup> Silver also shows a substantial growth in service sector labour unrest corresponding with the growth of the service sector, perhaps the most ‘virtuosic’ sector of all.<sup>61</sup> Once again Virno’s “empirical reality of the post-Fordist structure” (p.101) seems out of step with empirical reality itself. Where does this leave Virno’s virtuosity?

Despite the above reservations, there is no doubt some truth in the fact that, in post-industrial countries at least,<sup>62</sup>

57 Beverly Silver, *Forces of Labour*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2003, p.66-7.

58 From the *Troploin* journal, <http://libcom.org/library/whither-the-world>

59 Silver (2003), p.68.

60 Virno actually gives the example of the car industry as virtuosic production (p.61), so we’re being charitable here.

61 Silver (2003), p.98.

62 To our knowledge no-one has yet tried to convince Third World sweatshop workers they’re ‘all part of the team’, though it wouldn’t

55 Marx (1993), p.705.

56 The average working week in the UK has actually slightly increased since 1970: <http://www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/wrkgtime/general/ukworkhrs.htm>

workers are often *required* to self-assess, self-monitor and self-improve. It is not unusual for instance for workers to have regular reviews at which they must show a certain number of improvements they've made to their productivity or working practices, or else be considered not to be doing their job properly. Where this is the case however it is the result of particular management strategies, which are by no means hegemonic – let alone hegemonic to the point that the generic activities of communication and cooperation make work and non-work qualitatively indistinguishable! Virno's book is subtitled 'for an analysis of contemporary forms of life' – certainly much has changed in work over the past three or four decades, and any theory must take account of changing reality if it is to avoid becoming mere dogma. Indeed, if we maintain Virno's Eurocentric<sup>63</sup> focus, traditional manual, blue-collar labour does seem to have given way to more mental labour, and has perhaps itself come to incorporate more mental aspects (or at least capital has tried to make it do so where Toyotist management techniques have been introduced).

Call centres perhaps typify the development of communication-as-production (at least where the call itself is a commodity, e.g. pay-per-minute services, and so the labour is productive labour), but there are a host of other jobs which fit with Virno's assertion that "thought becomes the primary source of the production of wealth" (p.64). What interests us however is not so much describing this situation but drawing out the implications for the class struggle. How do these changes impact on our capacity to resist in work and outside of it, seeing as we can still tell the difference? What opportunities are emerging for a class recomposition, perhaps taking advantage of more casualised employment to create a more immediate 'circulation of struggles' spread by more mobile workers?

However, Virno only draws out the implications for the multitude, as opposed to the class; via "disobedience, exit ... the true *political*, and not servile, virtuosity of the multitude" (p.70; emphasis in original). This 'political virtuosity' is only alluded to and left deliberately open (or non-committal lest his bourgeois politics become too visible when expressed in concrete proposals?). Indeed Virno seems satisfied to focus of the *content* of production rather than its *relations*, and as we have seen, whenever he is drawn on his concrete politics there is little that is a threat to capital, merely suggestions to drop out from 'certain forms of waged work and consumerism,' perhaps trying to become petit-bourgeois. He rejects the direct democracy of traditional forms of organisation thrown up by the class struggle, such as workers' councils and assemblies in favour of discussions by non-class specific 'citizens'.<sup>64</sup> In short, Virno seems less interested in overthrowing capital than, somehow exiting, co-existing, and only then exercising a 'right of resistance' to defend our autonomous virtuosity.

## Conclusions

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surprise us and is really no more absurd than in a Western office, being handcuffed to a sowing machine notwithstanding.

63 Silver would say 'core-centric', which perhaps better captures the point.

64 <http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpvirno7.htm>

We have shown that in returning to the bourgeois philosophy of Spinoza to critique liberal social contract theory, Virno adopts a bourgeois humanist perspective at the expense of class analysis. Thus his subject is the multitude, which while including the working class, is not itself a class but humanity in general, consisting of bourgeois individuals or citizens in much the same way as its putative polar opposite, the people.

Having rejected the negative moment of the proletariat as alienated subjects with nothing to lose but their chains, Virno can only seek to explain struggles outside of production, in particular the anti-summit mobilisations, in such humanist terms, and seeks to use the same analysis to explain patterns of contemporary labour. Yet we also showed that his analysis of contemporary labour is based on a Eurocentric management guru's idea of 'post-Fordism,' at odds with the reality that capital-labour co-operation is far less widespread than he asserts. Nonetheless he does spot a trend towards the expansion of mental labour as part of the extension of the real subsumption of labour under capital, but having failed to grasp what is subversive in the proletarian condition he is interested in this only to the extent it allows an 'exit' into some kind of autonomous production. Fetishising the positive moment of capitalist production and ignoring the negative, he laments that "the radical metamorphosis of the very concept of production belongs, as always, in the sphere of working under a boss" (p.101) without grasping that the boss cannot be separated from that positive moment since they are necessitated by the negative one.

But are we really being fair to Virno? Elsewhere he refers to "the multitude of Seattle and Genoa"<sup>65</sup> and that "the revolts of Seattle, Genoa, or Buenos Aires reveal the existence of new forms of life and subjectivity, and challenge us to create new political forms that harmonize with them."<sup>66</sup> Herein lies Virno's problem. Firstly, he sees radical novelty where a more sober analysis sees the re-emergence of pre-existing tendencies (for instance the tendency of the class in struggle to resist political representation is at least as old as the anarchism Virno is so keen to dismiss). Seattle and Genoa, while watershed events of sorts hardly represent 'new forms of life', and as we showed in our article on Argentina (*Aufheben* #11 2003) the reaction to the crisis owed much to the history of working class militancy there. Secondly, rather than casting a critical eye over the anti-summit protests and the financial collapse in Argentina, he seeks to 'harmonize with them'. Thus instead of grappling with the contradictory class interests expressed in these movements and grappling with their limitations, he makes them a muse for his theory. This is essentially the perspective of the sociologist; diligently observing, mapping ... the point is to change it!

If he were simply presenting a theory of the anti-summit movement, this would not be so bad. But Virno can only sustain his meta-theory by suppressing class subjectivity and antagonism for a 'new form of subjectivity,' the multitude, defined in the classless sphere of circulation and so leading him to deny any qualitative distinction between this and the sphere of production at all. Now he can appear to explain so much because he says so little.

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65 <http://generation-online.org/t/republicmultitude.htm>

66 <http://generation-online.org/p/fpvirno5.htm>

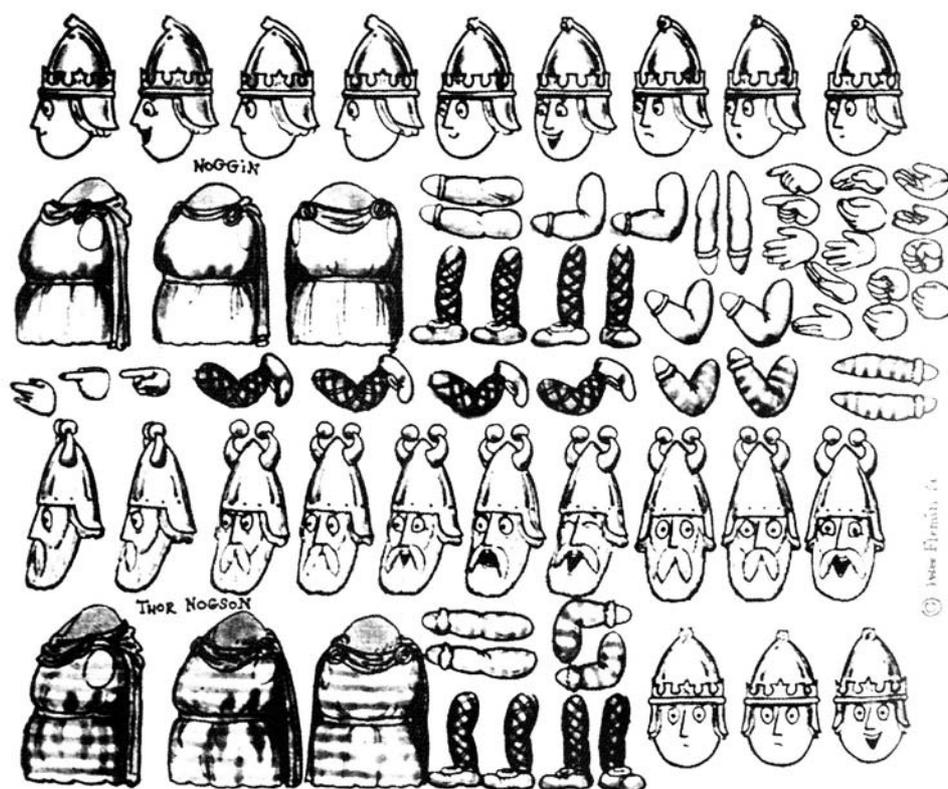
Thus Virno's model of political action consists doubly in a 'conservative violence' preserving 'already existing free-standing forms of life' outside of capital, and 'exit' seeking to get 'outside' to these 'free-standing forms'. This mirrors Massimo De Angelis's ongoing enclosures of the commons as the site of struggle – they both fail to grasp the subversive negativity that drives the revolutionary potential of the proletariat, so they both look to an 'outside' to capital in search of an antagonistic subject defending something positive of its own, which De Angelis would term a common.<sup>67</sup> The proletariat, necessarily 'inside' the capital relation is put to one side by these theories, which thus end up distinctly bourgeois. Thus despite Virno's insistence that the bourgeois declarations of the end of the working class are "a foolish way of thinking", like their authors he nonetheless locates agency elsewhere.

In Virno's defence, could it not be said that having mistakenly identified the working class as only those who produce surplus-value, his multitude is simply, in the best tradition of Autonomia a means to explain the potential of struggles outside the sphere of production? Maybe, but if so he's simply compounding the error by failing to grasp numerous dialectical relations;

the proletariat's positive *and* negative moments, the necessary relation between the spheres of circulation and production, the counter-tendencies outlined by Marx to the 'Fragment on Machines.' Consequently, we find his multitude no improvement on the Autonomist concept of class composition (which already contains within it implicit plurality). In fact in moving away from class antagonism, his theory represents a significant retreat.

### Postscript

*At the time of writing, September 2007, Virno has a forthcoming book due out a month or so after this issue of Aufheben titled 'Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation.' Will he modify his theory in the face of the now-distant anti-globalisation movement? The title suggests he may clarify his relationship to the more 'entrepreneurial' Autonomists and perhaps explain his evasion of dialectics and rejection of the proletariat as negation. But we at Aufheben know better than to judge a book by its title, so we'll have to wait and see...*



The Multitude

<sup>67</sup> One of the main differences between the two being that De Angelis focuses on the alienation of the marketplace, whereas Virno focuses on the alienation of knowledge in the state.