

Do You Remember

Counterrevolution?

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What does the word *counterrevolution* mean? We should not understand it as meaning only a violent repression (although, certainly, that is always part of it), nor is it a simple restoration of the ancien régime, that is, the reestablishment of the social order that had been torn by conflicts and revolts. Counterrevolution is literally *revolution in reverse*. In other words, it is an impetuous innovation of modes of production, forms of life, and social relations that, however, consolidate and again set in motion capitalist command. The counterrevolution, just like its symmetrical opposite, leaves nothing unchanged. It creates a long state of emergency in which the temporal succession of events seems to accelerate. It actively makes its own “new order,” forging new mentalities, cultural habits, tastes, and customs—in short, a new common sense. It goes to the root of things, and works methodically.

But there is more: the counterrevolution enjoys the very same presuppositions and the very same (economic, social, and cultural) tendencies that the revolution would have been able to engage; it occupies and colonizes the territory of the adversary; it gives different responses to the *same* questions. In other words, it reinterprets in its own way the set of material conditions that would merely make imaginable the abolition of waged labor and reduces these conditions to profitable *productive forces*. (This hermeneutical task was facilitated to an extent in Italy by the use of maximum-security prisons.) Furthermore, the counterrevolution inverts

the very mass practices that seemed to refer to the withering of State power and the immanence of radical self-government, transforming them into depoliticized passivity or plebiscitory consensus. This is why a critical historiography, reluctant to worship the authority of “simple facts,” must try to recognize, in every step and every aspect of the counterrevolution, the silhouette, the contents, and the qualities of a potential revolution.

The Italian counterrevolution began in the late 1970s and continues still in the mid-1990s. Contained within it are numerous stratifications. Like a chameleon, it has several times changed its appearance: the “Historic Compromise” between the Christian Democrats and the Communist Party, the triumphant socialism led by Bettino Craxi, and the political reform of the system that has followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the other regimes in Eastern Europe are some of its guises. It is not difficult nonetheless to recognize with the naked eye the leitmotif that runs throughout these phases. The unitary nucleus of the Italian counterrevolution of the 1980s and 1990s incorporates several elements: (1) the full affirmation of the post-Fordist mode of production (electronic technologies, decentering and flexibility of laboring processes, knowledge and communication as principal economic resources, and so forth); (2) the capitalist management of the drastic reduction of socially necessary labor time (through a labor market characterized by structural unemployment, part-time employment, long-term job insecurity, forced early retirements, and so forth); and (3) the dramatic crisis, which is in several respects irreversible, of representative democracy. The First Republic, which was established after the Second World War, has come to a close. The Second Republic sets down its roots in the material foundation of these new elements. The Second Republic must attempt to make its form and procedures of government adequate to the transformations that have *already* come about in the sites of production and the labor market. With the Second Republic, the post-Fordist counterrevolution finally finds its own constitution and, thus, reaches its completion.

In the historical-political theses that follow, I will attempt to extrapolate some salient aspects from the Italian developments of the past fifteen years—specifically, those aspects that offer an immediate empirical background to the theoretical discussions presented in this book. When, during this historical analysis, I find a concrete event to be exemplary (or, really, when I find it makes foreseeable an “epistemological break” or a conceptual innovation), I will pause to explore it through an excursus, the function of which will be similar to the foreground of a cinematographic scene.

Thesis 1

Post-Fordism in Italy was given its baptism by the so-called movement of '77. In those social struggles, a working population characterized by its mobility, low job security, and high student participation, and animated by a hatred for the "ethic of work," frontally attacked the tradition and culture of the historical Left and marked a clean break with respect to the assembly line worker. Post-Fordism was born of this turmoil.

The masterpiece of the Italian counterrevolution was its having transformed these collective tendencies, which in the movement of '77 were manifested as intransigent antagonism, into professional prerequisites, ingredients of the production of surplus value, and leavening for a new cycle of capitalist development. The Italian neoliberalism of the 1980s was a sort of inverted 1977. The converse, however, is also true—that old period of conflicts continues still today to represent the other face of the post-Fordist coin, the rebellious side. The movement of '77 constitutes (to use Hannah Arendt's beautiful expression) a "future at our backs," the *remembrance* of the potential class struggles that may take place in *the next phase*, a future history.

First Excursus: Work and Nonwork, or the Exodus of '77

Like every authentic innovation, the movement of '77 suffered the insult of being taken for a phenomenon of *marginalization*—in addition to the accusation (which is really not contradictory but complementary to the first) of being *parasitic*. These concepts invert the reality in such a complete and precise way that they may be useful for us. In effect, those who thought that the "barefoot intellectuals" of '77 (the student-workers and worker-students, and the part-time and precarious workers of every sort) were marginal or parasitic were precisely those who thought the stable job in the factories of durable consumer goods was "central" and "productive." They were the ones who looked at these new subjects from the vantage point of the cycle of development in decline—a vantage point that today can be recognized as marginal and parasitic. If one looks closely, however, at the great transformations of the productive processes and the social working day that began during that period, it is not difficult to recognize in the protagonists of those street struggles some connection to the very heart of the productive forces.

The movement of '77 gave voice *for a moment* to the new class composition, which had begun to take form after the oil crisis and the layoffs in the large factories, in the beginning of the process of industrial reconversion. It was

not the first time that a radical transformation of the mode of production was accompanied by the precocious conflictuality of the strata of labor power on the verge of becoming the central axis of the new productive schema. Recall, for example, the social danger that in the eighteenth century characterized the English vagabonds, who were *already* expelled from the fields and *on the verge of* being put to work in early manufacturing production. One could also point to the struggles of the dequalified workers in the United States in the 1910s, that is, in the period directly preceding the implementation of Fordist and Taylorist production based precisely on the systematic dequalification of labor. Every sudden metamorphosis of the organization of production is destined in principle to reevoke the pains of “primitive accumulation,” having to transform a relationship among “things” (that is, new technologies, different allocations of investments, and labor power with certain specific prerequisites) into a social relationship. Precisely in this passage, however, there can sometimes arise the *subjective turn* of what will later become the unquestionable course of events.

The struggles of '77 assumed as their own the fluidification of the labor market, making it a terrain of social aggregation and a point of strength. The mobility among different jobs, and between work and nonwork, determined (rather than disrupted) homogeneous practices and common habits that characterized subjectivities and conflicts. Against this background there began to emerge the tendency that in subsequent years was analyzed by Ralf Dahrendorf, Andre Gorz, and many others: the reduction of traditional manual labor, the growth of intellectual labor at a mass level, and increased unemployment due to investment (that is, due to economic development, not its obstacles). The movement thus gave this tendency a sort of *partial representation*: it made it visible for the first time, baptized the tendency in a way, but distorted its physiognomy, giving it an antagonistic face. What was essential was the recognition of a possibility—conceiving waged labor as an *episode* in our lives rather than a *prison*. There followed then an inversion of expectations: refusing to strive to enter the factory and stay there, and instead searching for any way to avoid and flee it. Mobility became no longer an imposed condition but a positive demand and the principal aspiration; the stable job, which had been the primary objective, was now seen as an exception or a parenthesis.

In large part it was these tendencies, and not the violence of the struggles, that made the young people of '77 incomprehensible for the traditional elements of the workers' movement. They made the growth in the area of nonwork and its instability into a collective path, a *conscious migration away from*

factory work. Rather than resisting the productive restructuring with all their might, they challenged its limits and directions, trying to divert it to their own advantage. Rather than closing themselves in a besieged fortress, doomed to a passionate defeat, they tested the possibilities of tempting the adversary to attack empty fortresses, abandoned long ago. The acceptance of mobility was combined with both the demand of a guaranteed income and the idea of a kind of production closer to the demands of self-realization. There thus developed a fissure in the link between production and socialization. Moments of communal association were experienced outside and against the realm of direct production. At this point, this independent sociality came to be recognized also in the workplace, as insubordination. And a decisive element of this was the option for "continuous education," that is, the continuation of school even after having found a job. This fed the so-called rigidity of the supply of labor, but, more important, it created a condition in which the positions of unstable and illegal labor were filled by subjects whose networks of knowledge and information were always *excessive* with respect to various and changing roles. This was an *excess* that could not be taken away from them and could not be reduced to the given form of laboring cooperation. Its investment and its waste were in any case tied to the possibility of populating and inhabiting in a stable way a territory situated beyond the reach of the wage.

This set of practices is obviously ambiguous. It is possible to read it, in fact, as a Pavlovian response to the crisis of the Welfare State. According to that interpretation, old and new subjects who had depended on assistance descend into the field to defend their own enclaves, carving out various pockets of public spending. They would thus embody those fictional costs that the neoliberal and antiwelfare policies sought to abolish or at least contain. The traditional Left can also defend this spurious position, with a certain embarrassment, and condemn this kind of "parasitism." Perhaps the movement of '77, however, can show the crisis of the Welfare State in a completely different light, radically redefining the relationship between labor and assistance, between real costs and "false costs," between productivity and parasitism. The exodus from the factory, which in part anticipated and in part gave a different meaning to the incipient structural unemployment, suggests in a provocative way that at the origin of the bankruptcy of the Welfare State there is, perhaps, a failure to develop sufficiently the area of nonwork. That is to say, *there is not too much nonwork, but too little*. It is a crisis, then, caused not by the assumed dimensions of assistance, but by the fact that assistance was granted, in large part, in the form of waged labor. And it was also caused, conversely, by the fact that waged labor was conceived, from a certain point on, as assistance. After

all, were not the politics of full employment born in the 1930s under the golden motto, “Dig holes and then fill them up”?

The central point, which emerged in 1977 in conflictual forms and then during the 1980s continued as an economic paradox of capitalist development, is the following: manual labor, divided in various repetitive tasks, proves, due to its inflated and yet rigid costs, to be uncompetitive with automation and in general with a new sequence of applications of science to production. Labor thus shows its face of *excessive social cost*, of indirect assistance, disguised and hypermediated. Having made physical tasks radically “antieconomical,” however, is the extraordinary result of years of workers’ struggles—and this is certainly nothing to be ashamed of. The movement of ’77, I repeat, momentarily made this result its own, demonstrating in its own way the *socially parasitic character of work under the boss*. In many respects it was a movement at the height of the neoliberalist new wave: it addressed the same problems that neoliberalism would later address, but sought different solutions. It looked for outlets but did not find them, and quickly imploded. Even remaining only a symptom, however, that movement represented the only vindication of an alternative path for the management of the phase of the end of “full employment.”

Thesis 2

After having contributed both to the annihilation (including the military destruction) of the class movements and to the first phase of industrial reconversion, the historical Left was gradually excluded from the political scene. In 1979, the government of the “broad agreements” (also called the government of “national solidarity”), which was supported unreservedly by the Communist Party and its union, came to an end. The power of political initiative returned entirely to the hands of big business and the centrist parties.

As if acting out a now classic script, the reformist workers’ organizations were co-opted in the direction of the State in a transitional phase, characterized by a “no longer” (no longer the Fordist-Keynesian model) and a “not yet” (not yet the full development of the network enterprise, immaterial labor, and computer technologies). The politics of the transition was aimed at containing and repressing social insubordination. Subsequently, as soon as the new cycle of development began, the mass workers of the assembly line definitively lost their weight with respect to both politics and contractual negotiations. The official Left became a powerless shell, to be discarded as soon as possible.

The decline of the Communist Party has its roots in the late 1970s. It is a “Western” story, an Italian story, tied to the new configuration of laboring processes. Only an optical illusion made it seem that this decline, which in 1990 led to the dissolution of the Communist Party and the formation of the Democratic Party of the Left (PDS), was caused by the Party’s conflation with the “real socialism” of Eastern Europe and thus precipitated by the fall of the Berlin Wall. The symbolic sanction of the defeat suffered by the historical Left really occurred in the mid-1980s. In 1984, the government led by Bettino Craxi abolished the “point of contingency,” that is, the mechanism by which wages were automatically adjusted for inflation. The Communist Party introduced a referendum to re-establish this important goal won by union struggles in the 1970s. The referendum took place in 1985 and lost by a landslide. The consequence of this debacle were that from that point on the Party and its union took only “realistic” positions, in collaboration with the government, on wages and the working day. From 1985 on, there was no more “social-democratic” or “trade-unionist” protection of the material conditions of dependent labor. The post-Fordist working class would have to live through its first period without being able to count on its “own” party or its “own” union. That had never happened in Europe since the days of the first industrial revolution.

Second Excursus: Scene Changes at the Fiat Auto Plant in the 1980s

The changes at the Fiat auto plant in the late 1970s and early 1980s demonstrate with exemplary clarity the ferocious “dialectic” at work among the conflictual spontaneity of the young labor force, the Communist Party, and a business about to change its physiognomy. As a sort of microcosm, Fiat anticipated and encompassed the “great transformation” that Italy was about to experience. It was one act, divided into three scenes.

Scene 1: In July 1979 production at Fiat was halted by a violent strike that in many respects resembled a real occupation of the factory. It was the culminating moment in a dispute over a comprehensive labor contract, but above all it was the final large episode of the worker *offensive* of the 1970s. The ten thousand new workers who had begun to work at Fiat only in the previous two years were some of the most active participants. These were “eccentric” workers, similar in all respects (mentalities, schooling, and metropolitan habits) to the students and workers with unstable employment who had filled the streets in 1977. The new workers defined themselves by their diligent sabotage of the rhythms of work: “slow-

ness” was their passion. With the blockade of the Fiat plant they wanted to reaffirm the “porousness” or the elasticity of the time of production. The Communist Party and the union disavowed them, openly condemning their disaffection to work.

Scene 2: In the fall of 1979, Fiat launched a counteroffensive, firing sixty-one workers who had been the historical leaders of shop-floor struggles. It should be noted, however, that the workers were not fired with the pretext of some business reason. The official reason for the measure was the presumed involvement of the sixty-one workers with “terrorism.” It mattered little that the magistrates had no concrete evidence to use in prosecuting the suspects. The company “knew,” and that was enough. This episode of the sixty-one fired workers was in perfect harmony with the government of “national solidarity” and its strategy to equate all extrainstitutional social struggles with armed insurrection. The Communist Party and the union backed Fiat’s decision, limiting criticism to a few formal details.

Scene 3: One year later, in the fall of 1980, Fiat unveiled a restructuring plan that called for thirty thousand layoffs. The Fordist factory was to be dismantled and would become a site for future industrial archaeology. There followed a thirty-five-day strike into which the Communist Party, which was by this time out of the government coalition, threw all its organizational power. The general secretary of the Party, Enrico Berlinguer, held an assembly at the gates of the factory—an event that in the following years was held up for worship by the militants of the official Left. *But it was already too late.* By supporting the expulsion of the sixty-one worker leaders and condemning and repressing the spontaneous struggle of the newly hired workers, the Communist Party and the union had destroyed the worker organization in the factory. In other words, they had sawed off the limb on which they, too, despite everything, were sitting. Only a dishonest or self-deceiving historiography could claim that the thirty-five-day strike was the decisive struggle, the watershed event. Really, everything had been played out earlier, between 1977 and 1979. To win the dispute, Fiat could count on its mass base: the intermediate-level workers, the foremen, and the office employees. In October 1980, Fiat organized a march in Turin against the continuation of the workers’ strike and attracted a large following of forty thousand demonstrators. The Fiat restructuring plan passed.

Thesis 3

Between 1984 and 1989, the Italian economy enjoyed a brief golden age. The indexes of productivity rose continuously, exports expanded, and the stock exchange

showed constant growth. The counterrevolution unfurled the standard that had been so dear to Napoleon III after 1848: *Enrichissez-vous*, enrich yourselves. The leading sectors of the boom were electronics, the communication industry (these were the years in which Silvio Berlusconi's company, Fininvest, grew enormously), the refined chemical industry, "postmodern" textiles such as Benetton (which directly organizes the commercialization of the product), and the businesses that procure services and infrastructural elements. Even the auto industry, once it was slimmed down and restructured, accumulated exceptional profits for several years.

The nature of the labor market changed drastically in these years. Employment was less institutionalized and shorter-term. There was enormous growth of the "gray zone" of semiemployment and intermittent or short-term work. This led to the rapid alternation of superexploitation and inactivity. On the whole, the demand for industrial labor diminished. Marx, when writing about "overpopulation" or the "reserve army of waged-labor" (in short, about the unemployed), distinguished three types: *fluid* overpopulation (today we would call this turnover, early retirements, and so forth), *latent* overpopulation (in which technological innovation could reduce the labor at any moment), and *stagnant* overpopulation (including illegal labor, subterranean labor, and work with no job security). One could say that beginning in the mid-1980s the concepts with which Marx analyzed the industrial reserve army now applied instead to the mode of being of the working class itself. All of the employed labor power experienced the structural condition of "overpopulation" (either fluid, latent, or stagnant). Labor power was always potentially superfluous.

The concept of "professionalism" was thus radically redefined. What is valued in and demanded of the single worker no longer includes the "virtues" traditionally acquired in the workplace as a result of industrial discipline. The really decisive competencies needed to complete the tasks demanded by post-Fordist production are those acquired outside the processes of direct production, in the "life world." In other words, professionalism has now become nothing other than a generic sociality, a capacity to form interpersonal relationships, an aptitude for mastering information and interpreting linguistic messages, and an ability to adjust to continuous and sudden reconversions. The movement of '77 was thus *put to work*. Its nomadism, its distaste for a stable job, its entrepreneurial self-sufficiency, even its taste for individual autonomy and experimentation, were all brought together in the capitalist organization of production. It is sufficient, for an example, to point to the massive growth in Italy in the 1980s of "autonomous labor," or rather, the set of microbusinesses, which were sometimes little more than family enterprises, estab-

lished by those who had previously been dependent workers. This “autonomous labor” is indeed the continuation of the migration away from the factory regime that began in '77, *but* it is strictly subordinated to the variable demands of big business—or, more precisely, it is the specific mode in which the largest Italian industrial groups managed to escape from part of their production costs. Autonomous labor almost always coincides with extremely high levels of self-exploitation.

Thesis 4

The Socialist Party (PSI), led by Bettino Craxi, who was prime minister from 1983 to 1987, was for a substantial period the political organization that best understood and interpreted the productive, social, and cultural transformation taking place in Italy.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Socialist Party, in an effort to guarantee its own survival, conducted a sort of guerrilla war against the consistent policy of the two major parties, the Christian Democrats and the Communists, to seek agreement on major legislative and governmental questions. This is why during the period that Aldo Moro was held captive by the Red Brigades, Craxi opposed the no-compromise line (promoted by the Communists and accepted by the Christian Democrats), supporting instead negotiations with the terrorists for the release of the hostage. For this same reason, the Socialist Party was opposed to the special laws for public order, the logic of “emergency,” and the restricting of civil liberties in order to combat the clandestine armed groups. In order to get out from under the suffocating embrace of its two major partners (the Communists and the Christian Democrats), the Socialist Party positioned itself as a political element that refused to worship the “reasons of State.” The idolators will never forgive them. As a result of these rather liberatarian positions, the Socialist Party gained favor from certain elements who had participated previously in the extreme Left in addition to various other social subjects that had flowered along the archipelago of the movement of '77.

For several years the Socialist Party succeeded in offering a partial political representation to the strata of dependent labor that were the specific result of capitalist reconversion of production. In particular, it influenced and attracted the “mass intellectuality”—in other words, those who work productively with knowledge, information, and communication as raw materials. I want to be clear on this point. There are several examples in different periods and different national contexts when reactionary parties were composed of peasants or unem-

ployed people—consider, for example, the populist movement in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. In the same way, in Italy in the 1980s, the Socialist Party was the *reactionary party of mass intellectuality*. This means that it established an effective link with the condition, the mentality, the desires, and the forms of life of this labor power, but turned it all to the right. The link was real and the turn unmistakable. If one ignores either of these aspects, the entire phenomenon becomes incomprehensible.

The Socialist Party organized the highest elements (in terms of status and income) of mass intellectuality *against* the rest of dependent labor. It articulated in a new system of hierarchies and privileges the preeminence of knowledge and information in the productive process. It promoted a culture in which “difference” became synonymous with inequality, social status, and oppression, nourishing the myth of a “popular liberalism.”

Thesis 5

In contrast to what happened in France and the United States, in Italy so-called postmodern thought has had no theoretical coherence, but rather a direct *political* meaning. More precisely, it has been a kind of thought that is in part *consolatory* (because it sought to demonstrate the “necessity” of the defeat of the class movements of the 1970s) and in part *apologetic* (because it never tired of singing the praises of the present state of things, celebrating the possibilities inherent in the “society of generalized communication”). Postmodern thought offered a mass ideology to the counterrevolution of the 1980s. All the talk about the “end of history” created in Italy a euphoric resignation. The indiscriminate enthusiasm for the multiplication of lifestyles and cultural styles constituted a small metaphysical *prêt-à-porter*, completely functional to the network enterprise, the electronic technologies, and the perennial insecurity of the labor relation. The postmodern ideologues, often operating in the media, took on the role of imposing an *immediate ethico-political direction* on post-Fordist labor power, filling the function to a certain extent played traditionally by party officials.

Third Excursus: Italian Ideology

In the 1980s, the dominant ideas were multiplied, differentiated, and expressed in a thousand and one dialects, sometimes bitterly against one another. The capitalist victory at the end of the previous decade authorized an unbridled pluralism: “There is room in back” as the sign says in the bus. And yet, deal-

ing with “Italian ideology” requires that we trace this self-satisfied fracturing back to a unitary center of gravity, to solid common presuppositions. It means investigating the intersections, the complicities, and the complementarities among positions that are apparently far apart.

How does the Italian culture of the 1980s resemble a manger scene, complete with donkeys, Magi, shepherds, holy family, and so forth—various masks for one single spectacle? One aspect is the widespread tendency to *naturalize* the various social dynamics. Once again society has been refigured as a “second nature” endowed with unnamable objective laws. What is different, and this is the really remarkable point, is that to everyday social relations are applied the models, categories, and metaphors of postclassical science: Prigogine’s thermodynamics instead of Newtonian linear causality, quantum physics in the place of universal gravitation, and the sophistic biologism of Luhmann’s systems theory instead of Mandeville’s “fable of the bees.” Historical-social phenomena are interpreted on the basis of concepts such as entropy, fractals, and autopoiesis. Social syntheses are proposed on the basis of the principle of indeterminacy and the paradigm of self-referentiality.

Postmodern Italian ideology presupposes the *sociological* use of quantum physics and the interpretation of productive forces as the causal motor of elementary particles. But where does this renewed inclination to treat society as a natural order come from? And more important, if applied to social relations, of what kind of extraordinary mutations are these indeterminist and self-referential concepts of modern natural science at once symptom and mystification? We can hazard this tentative response: the great innovation subtended by this recent and very specific naturalization of the idea of society has to do with the *role of labor*. The opacity that seems to involve the behaviors of individuals and groups derives from the declining importance of labor (industrial, manual, and repetitive labor) both in the production of wealth and in the formation of identities, “images of the world,” and values. This “opacity” is certainly well-suited to an *indeterminist* representation. While the labor loses its function as primary social nexus, it becomes impossible to locate the “position” of isolated bodies, their “direction,” or the result of their interactions. The indeterminism is accentuated, moreover, by the fact that post-Fordist productive activity is no longer configured as a silent chain of cause and effect, antecedents and consequents, but rather by linguistic communication, and thus by an interactive correlation in which simultaneity predominates and there is no univocal causal direction. Italian ideology (“weak thought,” the aesthetic of the fragment,

the sociology of “complexity,” and so forth) grasps, and also degrades to *nature*, the new nexus of knowledge, communication, and production.

Thesis 6

What are the forms of resistance to the counterrevolution? And what are the conflicts rising from the new Italian social landscape, which the counterrevolution has defined so prominently? It will be useful, first of all, to make clear a negative point: in the list of these forms and conflicts the practice of the Italian Greens is *not* included. Whereas in Germany and elsewhere ecologism inherited themes and issues from 1968, in Italy instead ecologism was born *against* the class struggles of the 1970s. It was a moderate political movement, full of those who had renounced and denounced radical action. Other collective experiences of recent years will be more useful for us here: first, the “social centers” established by young people all over Italy; second, the extrasyndicalist base committees that have been established in workplaces since the mid-1980s; and third, the student movement that in 1990 paralyzed university activity for several months, critically confronting the “hard core” of post-Fordism, or rather, the centrality of knowledge in the productive process.

The social centers, which have grown all over the country since the early 1980s, have given body to a desire for *secession*—secession from the dominant forms of life, from the myths and rituals of the victors, and from the din of the media. This secession is expressed as a voluntary marginality, a self-imposed ghetto, a world apart. In concrete terms, a “social center” is a vacant building occupied by young people and transformed into the site of alternative activities, such as concerts, theater, collective cafeteria, assistance for foreign immigrants, and public debates. In some cases, the centers have given rise to small artisanal enterprises, recalling the old model of the socialist “cooperative” of the beginning of the century. In general, however, they have promoted (or really only alluded to) a sort of public sphere not filtered by the State apparatuses. By *public sphere*, I mean an environment for free discussion of questions of common interest, from the national economic crisis to the neighborhood sewage system, from the wars in the former Yugoslavia to personal drug problems. In recent years, a large number of the centers have taken advantage of the alternative computer networks that circulate political documents, whispers and cries from the social “underground,” news of social struggles, and personal messages. All in all, the experience of the social centers has been an attempt to give autonomous physiognomy and positive content to the growing time of nonwork. The attempt has been inhibited, however, by the tendency to

construct what in Italy is imagined as an "Indian reservation," a sort of separate and isolated community, which, almost always, has marked (and saddened) the experience.

The worker base committees known as Cobas (*Comitati di base*) were first formed among the teachers (whose memorable and victorious labor dispute stopped the schools in 1987), the railway workers, and the public service employees. Subsequently, the Cobas spread to a certain number of factories (in particular, the Alfa Romeo plant, where they undermined the traditional union (CGIL) in the internal elections). The base committees have led several relatively serious conflicts over wages and work conditions. They refuse to be considered a "new union," seeking rather to link themselves to the social centers and the students and thus attempting to sketch an outline of forms of *political* organization at the level of post-Fordist "complexity." They give voice, above all, to a demand for democracy. This democracy is aimed against the legislative measures that throughout the 1980s substantially revoked the right to strike of public workers. It is also aimed at the trade union in general, which, having been displaced by the new productive processes, has redefined itself as an authoritarian State structure, adopting methods and procedures worthy of a monopolistic trust. The fortunes of the Cobas reached their pinnacle in the fall of 1992 during the protest strikes following the economic maneuver of the Amato government (which drastically reduced "social expenditures," pensions, medical assistance, and so forth). In all the major Italian cities there were violent protests against union "collaborationism," and counterdemonstrations by the Cobas disrupted union meetings. It was a little Tiananmen, which began to settle accounts with the "State monopoly union."

Whereas the social centers and the Cobas embodied, more or less effectively, the virtues of "resistance," the student movement (called the Panther movement because its birth in February 1990 coincided with the felicitous flight of a panther from the Roman zoo) seemed to allude, at least for a moment, to a true and proper "counteroffensive" of mass intellectuality. The conjuncture between knowledge and production, which until then had demonstrated only its capitalist face, was shown suddenly as a lever that could be used to further the conflicts and a precious political resource. The universities that were occupied in protest of the government project to "privatize" instruction became, for several months, a point of reference for that *immaterial labor* (researchers, technicians, computer specialists, teachers, cultural industry employees, and so forth) that in the large cities still only appeared as dispersed in a thousand separate streams, without any collective power. The Panther movement quickly died away, however, constituting little more than a symptom or an omen. It did not succeed in identifying appropriate

objectives that would guarantee the continuity of the political action. It remained paralyzed, analyzing itself, contemplating its own navel. The hypnotic self-referentiality clarified, however, an important point: in order for mass intellectuality to enter the political scene and destroy what deserves to be destroyed, it cannot limit itself to a series of refusals, but beginning with itself it must exemplify *positively* through construction and experimentation what men and women can do outside the capitalist relationship.

Thesis 7

In 1989, the collapse of “real socialism” upset the political system in Italy in a much more radical way than in the other countries of Western Europe (including Germany, despite the repercussions of reunification). This unanticipated earthquake, which coincided with heavy shocks of economic recession, prevented the full emergence of an “antidote” to the capitalist era of the 1980s, that is, a set of social struggles intent on obtaining at least a physiological reequilibrium in the distribution of income. The signals launched by the Cobas and the Panther movement, rather than reaching a critical threshold and spreading out in lasting mass practices, were covered over and submerged by the din of Italy’s institutional failure. Subjects and needs that grew out of the post-Fordist mode of production, far from presenting their demands to the careless sorcerer’s apprentice, had to put on deceptive masks that hid their physiognomy. The rapid undoing of the First Republic overdetermined to the point of making unrecognizable the class dynamics of “business-Italy” (to use an expression dear to Silvio Berlusconi).

The fall of the Berlin Wall was not the cause of the Italian institutional crisis, but rather the extrinsic occasion in which it appeared to flourish and in which it became obvious to every observer. The national political system was suffering from a long-term illness that had nothing to do with the East-West conflict—an illness whose incubation began in the 1970s. The system was wasting away from consumption: *the withering of representative democracy*, the rules and procedures that characterize it, and the very foundations on which it rests. The catastrophe of the regimes of Eastern Europe had a greater effect in Italy than elsewhere precisely because it offered a theatrical costume for a completely different tragedy, precisely because it was superimposed on a crisis of different origin.

The decline of the society of work is what threw the mechanisms of political representation into profound disorder. In Italy, since World War II, political representation had been based on the identity between “producers” and “citizens.” The individual was represented in labor, and the labor represented in

the State; that was the primary axis of industrial democracy (and also of the Welfare State). This axis was already crumbling when the governments of “national solidarity” in the late 1970s wanted to celebrate with intolerant ardor its continuing values. The axis fell to bits in the subsequent years when the great transformation of the productive structures was in full course. The merely residual weight of factory labor in the production of wealth, the determinant role that abstract knowledges and linguistic communication play in it, and the fact that the processes of socialization have their center of gravity outside of the factory and the office—all this lacerated the fundamental ties of the First Republic, which, as the Italian Constitution says, is “founded on labor.” The post-Fordist workers are the ones who first removed themselves from the logic of political representation. They do not recognize themselves in a “general interest,” and they are never willing to integrate themselves into the State machine. With diffidence or hatred, they remain uneasily at the edges of the political parties, considering them nothing more than cheap ventriloquists of collective identities.

This situation opens up two possibilities that are not only different but diametrically opposed. The first is the emancipation of the concept of democracy from that of representation, and thus the invention and the practice of nonrepresentative forms of democracy. This is not, clearly, the false salvation that would follow from a mere simplification of politics. On the contrary, nonrepresentative democracy demands an equally complex and sophisticated operative style. In fact, it directly conflicts with the State administrative apparatuses, corroding their prerogatives and absorbing their competencies. The attempt to translate into political action those same productive forces—communication, knowledge, science—is what carries weight in the post-Fordist productive process. This first possibility has remained and will continue to remain in the background for some time to come. The opposite possibility has instead prevailed: the structural weakening of representative democracy has come to be seen as a tendential restriction of political participation, or rather of democracy *tout court*. In Italy, those implementing the institutional reform have made themselves strong by means of the solid and irreversible crisis of representation, using this for the legitimation of an authoritarian reorganization of the State.

Thesis 8

In the course of the 1980s there were numerous and unequivocal symptoms indicating the inglorious end of the First Republic in Italy. The downfall of representative democracy was announced by several signs, including the following:

“emergency” (that is, the recourse to special laws and the formation of exceptional organisms for implementing those laws) as a stable form of government, as an accepted institutional technique for confronting, at various times, the armed clandestine struggle, the public debt, or immigration problems;

the transfer of several functions of the politico-parliamentary system to the administrative realm and hence the prevalence of bureaucratic “ordinances” over the laws;

the overarching power of the magistrate (confirmed during the repression of terrorism) and its role as a substitute for politics given by this power; and

the anomalous behaviors of President Cossiga, who in the final years of his tenure began to act “as if” Italy were a presidential (rather than a parliamentary) republic.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, all the symptoms of the imminent crisis were condensed in the campaign (supported almost unanimously by all the institutional parties from the Right to the Left) to gain public support for the liquidation of the most visible symbol of representative democracy: the proportional criterion of elections to the legislative assembly. In 1993, after a referendum abrogated the old norms, a majoritarian electoral system was introduced. This fact, together with the judiciary operation called *mani pulite* (clean hands), which has brought accusations of corruption against a large part of the political class, accelerated or completed the undoing of the traditional parties. Already in 1990, as I have noted, the Italian Communist Party had transformed itself into the Democratic Party of the Left, abandoning any residual reference to a class basis and proposing itself as a “light” party or a party of public opinion. The Christian Democratic Party deteriorated little by little until 1994, when it too changed its name, becoming the Popular Party. The minor parties of the center (including the Socialist Party, which in many respects had anticipated the need for radical institutional reform) disappeared almost overnight.

In any case, the salient aspect of the prolonged convulsion that has shaken the Italian political system in the early 1990s is the formation of a *new Right*. This is not a conservative right by any means, but rather one devoted to innovation, heavily invested in the notion of dependent labor, and capable of giving a partisan expression to the principal productive forces of our time.

Thesis 9

The new Right, which came to power with the political elections of 1994, is primarily constituted by two organizing subjects: the Lega Nord (Northern League), rooted exclusively in the northern parts of the country, and Forza Italia (Go Italy), the party centered around Silvio Berlusconi, the owner of several television stations, publishing houses, construction companies, and large retail stores.

The Lega Nord calls up the myth of ethnic self-determination, of roots refound: the northern population must valorize its traditions and its customs, without delegating any authority to the centralizing apparatuses of the State. Local identity (based in the region or the city) is contrasted to the empty universalism of political representation and the unbearable abstraction implied in the concept of citizenship. The local identity promulgated by the Lega Nord, however, has strongly racist overtones, particularly with respect to southern Italians and immigrants from outside the European Community. The Lega Nord proposes a form of federalism that weaves together the ancient and the postmodern: Alberto da Giussano (a medieval *condottiere* from Lombardy) is combined with ultraliberalism, and the motto "earth and blood" is thrown together with fiscal revolt. This rather strident *mélange* has given voice to the diffuse anti-State tendency that has matured in the course of the past decade in the most economically developed zones of the country. In time, the Lega Nord could become the mass base on which the small and medium-sized post-Fordist businesses could achieve relative autonomy from the national State. In the presence of the new quality of productive organization and in light of imminent European integration, the Italian State machine has shown itself inadequate in many respects: the *subnational* protest of the Lega Nord functions paradoxically as a support for delaying the political decision on *supernational* issues.

Forza Italia, on the other hand, replaces the traditional procedures of representative democracy with models and techniques derived from the world of business. The electorate is equated with a (television) "public," which is expected to give a consensus that is both passive and plebiscitory. Moreover, the form of the party faithfully reproduces the structure of the "network business." The "clubs" that support Forza Italia have grown on the basis of the personal initiative of professionals outside of conventional politics, such as a zealous office manager or a provincial notary who has decided to make a name for himself. These clubs have the same relationship with the party that autonomous labor and small family businesses have to the mother company: in order to market their own political product, they have to rely on a recognized brand, but in exchange they have to follow precise rules of style and conduct, bringing a good name to the company under

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whose label they work. As the Socialist Party did in the mid-1980s, Forza Italia has secured the loyalty of workers involved in computer and communication technologies, that is, among the social sectors that are being formed in the technological and ethical storm of post-Fordism.

The new Right recognizes, and temporarily makes its own, elements that would ultimately be worthy of our highest hopes: anti-Statism, collective practices that elude political representation, and the power of mass intellectual labor. It distorts all this, masking it in an evil caricature. And it brings to an end the Italian counterrevolution, drawing the curtain on this long intermezzo. That act is over—let the next begin!

Translated by Michael Hardt