

Dialogue with Antonio Negri: A Few Thoughts on the Lecture “Metropolis as a Post-Industrial Factory”

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Abstract: On November 27 and 29, 2014, Prof. WANG Hui, the Director of Tsinghua Institute for Advanced Study in Humanities and Social Sciences in Beijing, invited Prof. Antonio Negri, one of Italy's most leading Marxist philosophers and activists, to give a series of lectures. I was invited by Prof. WANG Hui to offer comments and reflections on one of Prof. Antonio Negri's lectures, titled “The Metropolis as Post-Industrial Factory”. *New Bloom* published this article in Chinese based on the transcripts of the above lecture. It was translated into English by Ngai Pun.

Keywords: Antonio Negri, multitude, class, empire, post-industrialism, immaterial labour, China's political economy, post-Fordist capitalism

Acknowledgement: I was invited by Christian Fuchs, the editor of *tripleC*, to publish this Dialogue as a memorial to Prof. Antonio Negri, who passed away on 16 December 2023 at the age of 90.

1. Ngai Pun's Comments

On November 27 and 29, 2014, Prof. WANG Hui, the Director of Tsinghua Institute for Advanced Study in Humanities and Social Sciences in Beijing, invited Prof. Antonio Negri, one of Italy's leading Marxist philosophers and activists, to give a series of lectures. I was invited by Prof. WANG Hui to offer comments and reflections on one of Prof. Antonio Negri's lectures, titled “The Metropolis as Post-Industrial Factory”. *New Bloom*¹ published this article in Chinese based on the transcripts of the above lecture. I then reworked it into English and provided minor corrections.

1.1. Brief Description of Antonio Negri's Lecture

Antonio Negri's lecture on “The Metropolis as Post-Industrial Factory” concisely summarized his foundational theoretical framework, linking several key concepts:

The first concept is “biopolitics”, which refers to the new mechanism of capitalist exploitation in the post-industrial era. After entering the post-Fordist period, the factory became the metropolis itself, signifying that capitalist exploitation now transcends the conventional boundaries of the secondary sector's labour. It encompasses the tertiary industry and immaterial labour, such as intellectual labour. Negri positions these types of labour as domains of the new mechanism of exploitation and diversifying the forms of production, extracting value from social activities in the form of “biopolitics”. In short, the concept of immaterial labour contrasts the industrialised factory and the post-industrialised period's metropole.

¹ *New Bloom* is an online magazine featuring radical perspectives on Taiwan and the Asia-Pacific. It seeks to provide a space that fosters political and intellectual transnational dialogues in the Left.

Another central concept is “multitude”. Negri does not use the traditional sense of multitude or class but uses it in the political sense of a fragmentary amalgamation of diverse forms of labour, a universal collection of the ordinary, disadvantaged individuals at the bottom of the hierarchy. Negri, for example, positioned not the workers in the traditional sense but the urban poor as the most crucial demographic in urban settings. He advocated for the establishment of absolute democracy. He admired Koolhaas’s focus on urban waste, which he deemed vital.

1.2. Four Questions Raised to Antonio Negri

Prof. Negri, your influence extends beyond the insights shared in today’s speech to the diverse roles you have played and reflections you have offered on social resistance movements historically and your activism today. We greatly respect and admire your contributions. I would like to pose four questions to you:

Question 1: The year 1979 was a year of transition to neo-liberalism in Western countries and the beginning of the downfall of the welfare state. It was also a year of brutal repression of the autonomous workers’ movement in Italy. I would like to ask whether the failure of the autonomous workers’ movement in Italy was due to the absence of a new theory of the political subject (your later contribution) or due to the lack of progressive forms of organising (for instance, the Marxist-Leninist approach to political parties, which you constantly criticise). Or was it rather the consequence of the bourgeoisie’s relentless counter-attack due to their concerns about the growth of the joint movement of workers and students joint movement? Given the vast disparity in class power, the movement was inevitably doomed to fail. If the latter is the case, then it is a problem of the contrast of class power, not a problem of the new class subject or how the movement is organised. I find myself deeply fascinated by the autonomous workers’ movement, mainly because it engaged with intellectuals and students alongside the debates it sparked during that time. One critique directed at you that I remember is that you suggest a shift away from the production sphere to the social production sphere. You say that the concept of the “mass workers” lost its validity. It was precisely a moment when students and worker leaders were arrested in the factories, and the workers’ movement was suppressed. Since then, the movement led by students and workers has been in a state of decline. What do you think about this circumstance?

Question 2: Your contributions to the theory of resistance, from the concept of mass worker to the socialised worker to the multitude, have been widely recognised. In particular, the concept of the multitude addresses the contemporary form of global capitalism and turns the concepts of society and the factory upside down within the network society. Today’s factories act as the metropolis, producing not only commodities but also immaterial labour and the worker subject itself; that is, biopolitics. This theory is indeed inspiring as it dissolves the boundary between the factory and society, thereby expanding the subject of resistance. But I would like to make a less funny joke: If the Foxconn workers in China (the world’s largest factory producing Apple cell phones) were to concur with your view that the world outside the factory is the same as inside, I wonder if this led to more suicides. My point is that these two worlds are different in workers’ life experiences. Despite the alienation they have in common, it is precisely the expectation of life outside the factory that makes the monotonous life on the assembly line somewhat bearable for the workers and warrants resistance. Life outside the factory compensates for the alienated world inside the factory and motivates rebellion.

Prof. Negri, I am sure you know the traditional classification of our world into the First and Third Worlds. In your seminal work, *Empire*, you suggest that we are in a new global order and that the old division of labour no longer applies. Yet, observable realities seemingly echo the old international division of labour, and the peasants and workers still dominate the resistance movements in the Third World, such as the Rural Movement and the Occupy Factories movement in Latin America. In the United States, the acquittal of a white police officer for the killing of a black child has ignited widespread urban protests in hundreds of cities, aligning more closely with your concept of multitude. I would like to ask: How can diverse groups establish a common space amidst this turbulent struggle? Specifically, how can the multitude enact absolute democracy? How can a new autonomous and self-governing society emerge? What are the organisational forms to support such a society? Is there a role for new cultural and political leadership? How can we fight against the counterattack of our powerful enemies? Lastly, how can we avoid the repression experienced in the 60s and 70s?

Question 3: As you know, China is a world factory. I bet you have also heard that China is a paradise for postmodern architecture and cities, where different kinds of capital – information capital, financial capital, real estate capital, and industrial capital – find their stage. Yes, I believe that China is one of the most important, if not the last, playgrounds for the reproduction and expansion of global capitalism. I share your interest in finding subjects of resistance every day. Despite different forms of capital, China maintains its vital role as a world factory under the international division of labour, producing the most substantial quantity of commodities worldwide and, inevitably, the world's largest working class. My question is about the centre of the world revolution. Thus, I disagree with your assertion that the traditional Marxian class theory is outdated. My observation in China is that the spectre of the working class is still haunting us. Consider, for instance, the Foxconn factories (a Fortune 500 entity employing over 1 million workers in China), where each industrial zone houses between 100,000 and 200,000 workers.

Contrary to the implementation of post-Fordist production systems in post-industrial societies, we witness an intensification of capital centralisation and monopolisation despite the fragmentation of labour relations in many of China's multinational corporate factories, alongside an unprecedented scale-up in factory sizes – housing from hundreds of workers in the 1990s to thousands in the 2000s, and now to tens and hundreds of thousands of workers. The burgeoning contradictions of industrial production and new rounds of land enclosure spotlight peasants and workers as the primary subjects of resistance in today's China. The frequency and intensity of strikes are rising, starkly contrasting with the situations of the immaterial workers you mentioned. I do not say there are no immaterial workers in China, but their resistance predominantly manifests as online debates, lacking tangible and direct actions.

I do not intend to dismiss your concepts of the multitude and the common, including the four new subjects of resistance you have introduced in your work, *Declaration*. These ideas have inspired me a lot. But what I want to know is how we can deal with the challenges of real subsumption of capital in the capitalist relations of production. In your theoretical framework, subsumption is everywhere – from our lives to our emotions – presenting itself as dispersed, fragmented, and microscopic. It leads me to wonder about the conditions for the multitudes' revolt. How is the commonality of the multitude established in action? Marx used the commodity as a symbol of capitalist material production because the commodity encapsulates a fundamental antagonism between two distinct classes. I recognise and do not dispute the significance of the

analysis of immaterial production. But my question is, where are the contradictions and antagonisms within these immaterial production processes and their outcomes? Does the concept of the multitude contain an intrinsic crisis that catalyses resistance?

Question 4: Finally, I would like to invite you to clarify the dialectical relationship between the concepts of the multitude and class. You have mentioned in numerous publications that multitude is a class concept. But given your discussion of class as subjective and dynamic, it lacks an objective basis. This ambiguity inevitably leads to uncertainties in telling who our enemies are and who our friends are in any social movement. If the concept of the multitude cannot provide a more objective class analysis, then how can we identify those who might suppress us and who might unite with us? Of course, the absence of a concrete class analysis renders a more fundamental problem of identifying “us”, tending to dissolve the solid ground for class struggle. In this way, I think that the theory of the multitude in the metropolis, as a subject theory of resistance, remains fraught with unresolved complexities that need further development before it can effectively address the pending question of “what to do” in the left movement.

2. Antonio Negri's Responses

We should analyse the interplay between the multitude and class through a historical lens. The mode of production determines the transition from the class to the multitude. The working class in Marx's time had not yet reached post-Fordism, but today, Marx's so-called class has transformed into our multitude. The relationship between friend and enemy has not changed. The enemy is still capital, but the forms of capital have changed. Today, the objective of capitalist production is not only to produce commodities but also knowledge. The shift from a period characterised by standardized workers, commodities, and factories to an era of non-standardisation has given rise to a new subject – not a single entity, but a multitude. The traditional organisational structure is outdated. We should call for a new form of organisation that fosters human interaction and knowledge exchange rather than outdated political parties and trade unions. From a revolutionary standpoint, we harbour immense potential as we are all “workers”, embodying proletarians and knowledge workers, without needing an elite and social division. While not discrediting Marx's theories, we must forge a new Marxist theory – a creative Marxism – and a new organisational structure without hierarchy and distinctions.

Reflecting on the history of Italy, Germany, and France during the 1970s, the workers and students encountered a distinctive situation. To a certain extent, the industrialisation process in Italy set the stage for post-Fordism, making a significant shift in capitalism across Italy and Europe. This transition period has posed challenges for the workers' movement, leaving the workers incapable of dealing with this matter. At that time, their judgments were wrong and led to, for some, a turn towards terrorism. The refusal of the Communist Party in France and Italy to support the workers' movement exacerbated the situation. We cannot go back to these old organisations. The Italian Communist Party betrayed the workers' movement. There was also a divide among the European left. The unity of the Communist Party and the workers was utterly impossible, as it is today, leading to the movement's collapse.

We should pay attention to the dominant trend in information-based factory production, which is mental labour rather than physical labour. If you want to know how to organise workers, you should better do inquiry among workers and learn their wisdom.

Many people have criticised my book *Empire*, but others have praised it. Its core message is straightforward: *Empire* is a global market. The existence of this global market needs an order. But who can master this order? When I wrote this book, it seemed the United States could, but now it has collapsed, leaving no country capable of asserting control. There is no clear clarifying distinction between the First World and the Third World. We found ourselves in a chaotic time.

About the Author

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Before joining Lingnan University as Chair Professor in 2021, Prof. PUN Ngai was a Professor of Sociology at the University of Hong Kong. Pun Ngai received her Ph.D. from the University of London, SOAS, in 1998. She won the 2006 C. Wright Mills Award for her first book, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Duke University Press, 2005). *Made in China* is widely used as required reading in major universities in America, Europe, and Asia. Together with *Dying for Apple: Foxconn and Chinese Workers* (co-authored with Jenny Chan and Mark Selden, 2016), these two texts have been translated into German, French, Italian, Spanish, Polish, and Chinese. She is the sole author of *Migrant Labor in Post-Socialist China* (Polity Press, 2016). She is also the editor of seven volumes of books in both English and Chinese. Two of her Chinese books were also awarded the Hong Kong Book Prize in 2007 and 2011 as the top ten popular books widely read in Hong Kong and Mainland China. She was a Top 2 Scientist in the World ranked by Stanford University.

She has published extensively and cross-disciplinary in top-tier journals in Cultural Studies, China Studies, Labour Studies, Anthropology, and Sociology. Her articles appeared in *Cultural Studies*, *Positions*, *Public Culture*, *Information, Communication and Society*, *New Media and Society*, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, *Global Labor Studies*, *Work, Employment and Society*, *The China Quarterly*, *Modern China*, and *The China Journal*, *Cultural Anthropology*, *Dialectical Anthropology*, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *Sociological Review*, *Sociology*, etc.