

Virno, P. (2004) *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. New York: Semiotext(e).

Sylvere Lotringer—Foreword: We the Multitude

Not really about Virno, but against Negri's conception. Abstract intelligence, increased mobility, the question of what the multitude is capable of. *Operaismo*—refusal of work, reduction of the role of work in people's lives. Born after Hungary 1956, Negri, Tronti 1960s. Strategy of refusal, work against capitalism from within it, anticipated D&G's arguments. First to question the centrality of the working class, advocate a new social subject. Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, exodus idea: emigrate from capital and the state. Virno advocates desertion, but only as a first step. *Operaismo* gives way to the broader, more society-wide *autonomia* in the 1970s. The movement of 1977, repression.

Multitude comes from [#Machiavelli and] Spinoza. Tronti: don't focus on capital; labor drives change. Tradition of pushing capitalism's decoding even further. Current trend of making imaterial, creative labor extend into every moment of life, plugging that labor into a general intellect and communicating that knowledge across the public sphere. Lots of what autonomists were trying to achieve has come true in the form of labor that exists today. Virno: everything has become virtuosity, performative: labor, politics—they all need an audience, a public space, a common language.

Mention of the crisis of the form-of-state, dropped. For Hardt and Negri, the multitude must push through capital out to the other side. To destroy Empire and create a new society. Negri is a Leninist (pretty unfair). There is lots of virtual potential in the multitude as a result of the production of the common in capitalism. But equality is something capitalism cannot abide. For Virno the multitude does not have a telos, or a pre-made agenda. It is in the process of being shaped, has some current concrete characteristics that we can know, and will be shaped contingently by the actions of agents to come. The question is to discover what the multitude can do, what it can become. There is a combat to be had, to assemble various parts of the multitude into a new communist ensemble, discover and bolster its power, an idea Virno is attempting to provide.

Introduction

Multitude vs. people. Hobbes/people/state won. But perhaps the multitude is re-emerging. Spinoza: multitude is that which is plural and persists as such in collective action without becoming One or evaporating. Hobbes detests the multitude. It is the principal danger to peace. It has to be made into a unitary people so the state, and peace, can reign. Multitude is that which is in the state of nature/war, that which *does not contract to cede its powers*.

Its very mode of being is to remain plural and therefore not unified and therefore not a people under a sovereign. [#I think Virno misses how Hobbes understood the contract: as multiple contracts, each person with every other, to cede his authority. Never a contract of a people with a sovereign. After the many contracts are signed one can speak of “a people,” but it is never actual, it is always a trick, an act of a sovereign *personating* the people, which he has to do because “the people” never actually exists, it is always a fiction, always *actually* a multitude.] the multitude is a-state, pre-state, or non-state.

Liberals try to deal with the multitude by cordoning it in the private sphere. Social democrats by vesting it in individuals, which must yield to the collective. The idea that a unified people exists as the subject of the state is currently shaky. The multitude, for Virno, is not the opposite of One, it redefines One to mean the many with a form of unity *that is not the state*, but rather a language, an intellect, a communal faculty [# i.e. Hardt and Negri's the common]. So the multitude always holds in tension the One/many.

There are three parts to the book: 1) the question of fear/security, and the multitude as ambivalent (servility/freedom, loss/salvation); 2) the multitude's relation to Aristotle/Arendt's labor-politics-thought; 3) the question of the subjectivity of the multitude.

1—Forms of Dread and Refuge (Day One)

We have to create some sense of refuge in the face of the general and unavoidable threat of the world. The people seeks refuge in the state. The clear-cut communities, with their repetitive customs, are no longer (in the churn of the post-Fordist era) viable ways to provide security. The multitude seeks refuge too (it is unavoidable), but not in the state and its clearcut inside and outside. The multitude faces not fear or anguish, but both-at-once: the uncanny. The multitude is united by the risk of not-feeling-at-home. It needs orientation, refuge, repetition. But there are many ways to construct this refuge. The multitude does not entrust itself to a sovereign. They use many forms of refuge.

One central form of refuge is the common places (*topoi koinoi* rather than *topoi idioi*), the common linguistic norms, and the common ideas, images, codes, etc. that are proliferating in contemporary capitalism, i.e. the general intellect. The GI is the One that lies beneath the mode of being of the multitude, and it is becoming only more prominent as a feature of the world today. Virno ties the GI specifically to Marx. The *social* character of the GI is what drives production. We tend to think of intellect as a private affair. To deal with the condition of not-feeling-at-home, the multitude must turn to the GI for orientation/refuge. In the “great urban aggregates” we are even more awash, unmoored (Simmel) and so we need even more to construct a

shelter there. The publicness/sharedness of the GI is not only good: it can take good or bad forms. It can lead to destructive tries at refuge (publicness without a public sphere, e.g. state sovereignty, hierarchies, or the naked sharing in contemporary economic production (the GI as a mere resource for economic production), or it can lead to refuges that really do create comfort (publicness with a public sphere, e.g. non-state republics in which the naked sharing of contemporary economic production has become also a political community).

So the One remains as a feature of the multitude, but it is transformed. It is not the One of the people, of unity of the will and surrender of one's power to a sovereign. The goal is to organize its commonality into non-state republics with a different constitutional principle and produce a non-state public sphere (p. 42). It is not a question of seizing power and constructing a new state, rather the multitude must create forms of non-representative democracy, of non-governmental usages and customs, search for new political forms. Through this democracy people would concretely reappropriate the general intellect. We should definitely start from the GI that is currently being formed in capitalism, but we cannot leave it at that. The multitude's rising prominence and centrifugal character speaks of the crisis in the form-of-state, one that Schmitt saw too.

The multitude does not supersede the working class. It does mean a break with the idea that the working class must seize the state. The working class is no longer a people in this sense. The multitude is a new mode of being for the working class [#among other groups, I assume]. The becoming-multitude of the working class...

2—Labor, Action, Intellect (Day Two)

Labor (organic exchange with nature to produce a product), Action (public creation with others with no tangible product), Intellect (solitary reflection) are no longer separate, they are becoming hybridized. In post-Fordism, where the multitude lives, Labor has absorbed Action, public creation-with-others is central to the production of economic value. Arendt complains that Politics has been reduced to labor (national housekeeping), but it is more that politics has been infused into labor. Action/politics is an activity that is not designed to produce a concrete product, but finds its own fulfillment in the act itself. It involves human speech and requires an audience. There is a sense of contingency, or ephemerality. [#A virtuoso act that, if done well, creates an *affect* in another, where the product is a feeling in an audience and a changed set of relations among the participants.] It requires a publicly organized space (for the encounter between virtuoso and audience). It is a properly political action in the Aristotle/Arendt sense. In Marx such acts were odd and worrisome vis economic production. Now they are the predominant act of production.

This action-labor is act of speech, of tapping into the human capacity for communication and mutual understanding. The priest's impact on the parishioner, or the journalist's impact on the reader. Hard to measure, improvisational, unpredictable. Linguistic persuasion, knowledge, imagination. Workers (rather than capitalist or managers) now must organize and intensify (on their own) the amount of social cooperation. This work cannot be automated; it has to be done by living labor. [#It is a production of subjectivity.] Spectacle: human communication that has become a commodity. Communication-and-organization-with-others is now the reigning productive force, the means of production. This act of communication is captured by capital, and that is a great tragedy, our sociability reduced to a commodity. But nevertheless a trend towards worker-based organization of cooperation in production sits uneasily within capitalism.

The 'score' played by this labor virtuosity is the general intellect (in the sense of being in a state of having-a-language). The general capacity for thought. Post-Fordism is pushing the intellect to become public, to become a real abstraction. The GI is an attribute of living labor—the communicative performance and acting-in-concert of living subjects [#who now organize themselves rather than being organized by capital.] So the general intellect is *both* refuge from the dangers of the world and the score for the performances of labor. It is not the sum total of all knowledge, but rather the general faculty of thinking, the potential of anyone to think.

It currently manifests itself in the hierarchical relations of wage labor. Its publicness is manifested in the State's administrative apparatus. Both these conditions distort the publicness of the GI, they prevent its potential to be a new constitutional principle, a new public sphere. The key is to withdraw our consent to be governed, to unagree to Hobbes' contract. Do not allow the GI to be reduced to labor cooperation or state administration. Split the GI from these things. Institute a *non-state public sphere* that hinges on the general intellect. Draw on the new importance of the GI to develop a radically *new form of democracy*. Totally other than state sovereignty, than the unified people. A constitutional principle and a new republic can be founded on the multitude rather than on the people. Withdraw from state sovereignty: not from particular laws (e.g. Jim Crow), but from the authority of the state to make laws at all (return, that is, to the state of nature/war) [#build a war machine]. Exit is an active attempt to reinvent the conditions of the struggle and of life. A mass exodus from the factory, from the wage relation, from state citizenship, all the while undermining and refashioning the rules/norms of the engagement. It draws on a latent wealth, the wealth of the general intellect, that is, we hope, being extracted and allowed to thrive in the course of exit. Defection, exodus is an attempt to free up the publicness, communication, and knowledge of the GI. The key is not the starving of the state or of capitalism, though that must happen, but the

positive development of the GI's publicness.

3—Multitude as Subjectivity (Day Three)

Four angles to understand the multitude: individuation, bio-politics, emotional tonalities, idle talk/curiosity.

Multitude is not the cohesive unified people. Multitude consists of a network of individuals. But these individuals are not pre-given. They are rather individuated out of the pre-individual reality (i.e. common sensory faculties, common faculty for language, common faculty for producing, etc.). Simondon: individuation out of this common is ongoing, the 'subject' is the struggle to individuate the pre-individual, to make "I" out of the "One" [#to make singularity out of common?]. This struggle can be disharmonious [#or harmonious?] and so cause us angst. You can only individuate in the context of a collective. In the multitude we individuate ourselves out of the collective, but we also connect up with and lose ourselves in the collective—a constant back-and-forth. "The people" closes off this process, it extracts a homogenous trait from the struggle between pre-individual and individual, which is impossible, since this struggle is ontological. The multitude is like the ether in which the struggle of individuation takes place, it is, in a sense the feasible arena for non-representative democracy. The multitude preserves the many as many without aspiring to unify it into a people. It is a combination of social individuals (Marx) [#lots of echoes of Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage-selves rhizomatically connected to others.]. These social individuals are the key, valorize them. A new kind of (social) individualism.

Bio-politics is interesting only insofar as it involves the governance of labor-power, which is the pure potential of anyone to produce (dynamis). Dynamis is bought and sold, but it is not-real, not-present. It is a potential; but it is inseparable from and incarnated in living bodies. The living body is the tabernacle of dynamis; life is the substratum of dynamis. Thus administering life becomes the interest of the state, because dynamis is essential to production.

The multitude can take on both good and bad sentiments. The current ones, under the regime of post-Fordist capital and its prevailing uncertainty, flexibility, etc., are bad: opportunism (take advantage of what comes without judging the outcome), nihilism (no longer any way to judge good and evil), cynicism (since there are no morals, don't believe in causes or values [e.g. there are no "genuine" smiles, just smiles that are successfully played as genuine]). But the multitude can also take on good sentiments, it is neutral.

Idle talk is discourse indifferent to content, truth, foundation; curiosity is voracious desire for the new. Heidegger thought these were inauthentic (vs.

authentic as the focused work of connecting oneself to the world, of taking care of things). But such attitudes have become the pivot of contemporary production: restless, rootless, baseless, flittering, communication. [#Google records this activity and then sells the data as a record of the consumer's mind.] Benjamin sees promise in this curious activity, it can enrich us when it is not passive, when the spectator is active and critical. Curiosity and idle talk are thus ambivalent.

4—Ten Theses on the Multitude and Post-Fordist Capitalism (Day Four)

The multitude names forms of life in post-Fordism: being-a-stranger, common places, publicness of the intellect, activity without end-product, individuation, relation to the possible. Primary productive force of capitalism is the linguistic communicative cognitive faculties of humankind [#sooo many repetitions of this argument (that I find only marginally plausible and interesting) without much concrete elaboration].

Post-Fordism is a response to the movement of 1977. It responded to the refusal of factory work by turning it into a productive resource, into a whole mode of precarious flexible shifting labor.

Abstract knowledge is the primary productive force rather than repetitive labor. But it is still subject to the rules of wage labor. Labor (work time) and life (free time) are no longer distinct either temporally or spatially. [#Negatively this means work time has obliterated free time, but positively this means free time infuses all work time.] The general intellect infuses all production. People produce more cooperation than can be captured in the labor process—overflow. Workers themselves are increasingly the coordinators of production (that is done by machines). Surplus value in post-Fordism arises from production time that is not counted as labor time (i.e. all the social production activity that happens outside work). Proliferating (and worker-generated) models of labor organization. The general intellect presents itself as living labor. Labor is communicative and instrumental, so is communication. The multitude = the intellectuality of the masses = the generic aptitudes of the mind = post-Fordist labor-power. Capitalism's response to 1917 was to socialistize itself. Its response to 60s-70s was to communistize itself: abolition of wage labor [#i.e. steady Fordist factory labor], extinction of the State, valorization of life. But these communist ideas are perverted to serve capital. Keynesianism and socialism are both dismissed. It is now a dance between the multitude and post-Fordist capitalism.

The struggles of the 60s-70s were a communist struggle for the supersession of wage labor, the valorization of differences/individuation, a rejection of the

state as a political avenue.

[#Pretty disappointing in the way it ends. Much more on the technical details of the post-Fordist system (dwelling on it almost morbidly) than on what non-state republics and their radical democracy might be.]