

MULTIPLICITY, TOTALITY AND POLITICS

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Translated by James Muldoon

I have always felt that I am an empiricist, that is, a pluralist.
Gilles Deleuze

The Seattle protests have opened up the possibility of a politics of multiplicity. The success of Negri and Hardt's book *Multitude*,¹ is surely linked to this direction that it indicated, a direction indicated, though not unambiguously : to discard the concept of 'the people' as a category that presupposes and aspires to the "one", while rejecting at the same time, a Marxist foundation of this passage. Should we understand Marxism as a philosophy of the multitude? Is the concept of class a category of multiplicity? For Paolo Virno, the concept of class is without a doubt synonymous with the multitude.² For Toni Negri, the concept of the multitude must reactualize the Marxist project of class struggle in such a way that it become possible to affirm: "the multitude is a class concept". However, the action of political forces and trade-unions who claim to represent Marxism remind us that the categories of class (but also of capital, work, etc.) are ontological categories, and not only socio-economic ones, which function and make sense only in relation to a "totality". These concepts imply modes of action that always privilege the "all" over multiplicity, and universality over singularity. The Western political tradition is constituted as a politics of totality and universality. Even when Marxism wanted to be a radical critique, it was unable to create the theoretical and practical conditions to escape this logic. On the contrary, it has often, although not to say always, increased this aspiration for the "all" and the universal.

We have here a fundamental theoretico-political problem: I am convinced that a reclamation of political initiative and the development of movements will only be able to come about on the basis of a politics of multiplicity. The referendum on the European Constitution demonstrated once again that for the political and trade-union forces of Marxist orientation, whether reformist or revolutionary, the call for a sovereign space to construct the "all", the supposed "absolute and total" (that whether we are talking here about the people, the nation-state, or class) seems irresistible. Because this will to push a singularity to overcome itself towards a totality and the universal has systematically been repeated throughout the history of Marxism, it has to have profound roots in the theory of Marxism itself. Contemporary Marxism largely contributes to the production of another fundamental impediment to the development of political movements: by limiting itself to the defence of "acquired rights" it leaves the management of "innovation" to corporate bosses and to the state. It seems to me that a theory of the "production of the new" is what is currently lacking in political Marxism. These two problems—the composition and disjunction of singularities and the production of the new—are inextricably linked and recall Marx's ontology of relations. This is what we will attempt to analyse starting from the philosophy of multiplicity, which is practically contemporary to it.

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ARE RELATIONS INTERIOR OR EXTERIOR TO THEIR TERMS?

In their final book, *What is Philosophy?*,³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari remind us that at the turn of the last century, socialism and pragmatism, the proletariat and the emigrant, embodied two different ways of understanding and practicing the “new society of brothers and comrades”. We will accept Deleuze’s little provocation which puts pragmatism and socialism on the same level because it allows us to confront the Hegelian heritage of Marxism and the damage it has caused, and continues to cause, in political movements.

The question posed by pragmatism appears to have only philosophical implications: “namely, whether all the relations with other things, possible to a being, are pre-included in its intrinsic nature and enter into its essence”.⁴ In reality, the “great question as to whether ‘external’ relations can exist” has important political implications.⁵ The theory of the exteriority of relations implies that relations be largely independent of the terms that effectuate them, and that the terms be able to have multiple relations at the same time. It’s a question of the terms being able to exist within different systems at the same time and to be able to change certain relations without changing all of them. It is around the existence of relations external to terms, around the independence of terms and relations from a totality that plays out the possibility or impossibility of a politics of multiplicity (or of the multitude). This theory of “free-floating” and “diverse” external relations allows us to enter into a world of pluralism and of singularity where the conjunctions and disjunctions between things are each time contingent, specific and particular and do not refer back to an essence, substance or deep structure upon which they would be founded.

The philosophy of Marx, while being a theory of relations, denies the possibility of external relations. As in the idealist and rationalist tradition, relations are understood from the position of the difference between essence and phenomenon. For Marx, the individual is only an empirical fact, a phenomenon. What is real is not the empirical individual, the singular or particular (that is to say, the term), but the social individual and thus the relations in which it is caught up. To grasp the real, one must return to the essence constituted by the set of “social relations”. Immediate and empirical knowledge focuses on the “particulars”. It is a knowledge of phenomena that ignores their connections and relations. Revolutionary theory, on the other hand, takes into account the particulars but also traces their connections and places them in relation with the “totality”. That which is concrete is the “totality” of the relations, a totality in which the individual, the fact, the empirical exist.

The Italian philosopher, Giovanni Gentile, pointed out in his 1899 text on Marxist philosophy⁶—a text whose clarity and precision remain unequalled—that up until this stage of the argument, there has been only Hegel. The sole difference with Hegelian philosophy is that relations are not a fact of thought, but of real sensible human activity. Unity, and totality, and the relation between things are not the result of a “praxis” of the idea but of a “praxis” of the sensible. Unity and totality, and the relation between things, are the result of a “praxis” of the sensible rather than a “praxis” of the idea, where the former involves an alienated form of doing, and in which the “all”, the totality, or the “whole” are constituted not by the set of social relations but by relations of production (the capital-labour relation). If, in the philosophy of Hegel, it is the capacity of unification of the idea that “subsumes” the world, according to Marx it is the capacity of the capitalist relations of production that acts as a unifying force and subordinates the world to its logic. On the other hand, Etienne Balibar gives an interpretation of the ontology of relations in Marx that does not refer to the totality, but to the indetermination of the “transindividual”.⁷ Without entering into a philological debate, we can affirm that, whatever its theoretical influence may be, it is certainly not this ontology of the relation that was at the basis of the theoretical and political praxis of the communist tradition.

If we wish to locate the theoretical foundation of a thought that has profoundly influenced politics in the twentieth century, we must turn to Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness*, which attempts to translate the political gains of the soviet revolution into theoretical challenges to be used against the “antinomies of bourgeois thought”. In this book, which is excellent due to its coherence and faithfulness to Marx’s philosophical thought, the concepts of “totality”, the “all”, and the “whole” reappear throughout. According to Lukács, Marxism must grasp with

“clarity and precision” the difference between the empirical existence of facts and their “internal structural core”, that is to say, their essence. In this way, Lukács follows the philosophy of Marx very precisely, for whom, if the essence of things and their existence as phenomena coincides, all “science” is useless. According to this methodology, relations are internal to the terms. No exteriority or autonomy is possible for either the terms nor the relations: “The elements and the particular moments of the totality contain the structure of the whole, the all”.⁸ That the totality could also be a divided totality does not change a thing. The real is relation, but relations always refer to an essence, a structure. Thus, the parts and the terms find their truth and their possibility of action only in relation to the all, which in the case of Marxism, means in their relation to Capital. Moreover, as with Hegel, reality is not that which is but that which becomes. Reality is movement, tendency, evolution. But an understanding of reality as a process only allows us to uncover the essence of the phenomenon in its realisation. In this way, “becomings” and processes do not open up onto the indeterminacy of the actualisation of their relations, but to their uninterrupted movement towards the totality (the relations of production) towards the realisation of their essence (the necessity of the development of capitalist relations and therefore of class conflict and therefore of revolution).

Marxism thus incorporates another condition of modern politics: to adequately understand the nature of the real in its entirety and to act at the level of the whole, there must be a universal subject.

THE DISTRIBUTIVE POINT OF VIEW AND THE COLLECTIVE POINT OF VIEW

Pragmatism is a long creative articulation of concepts against this mode of thinking and acting starting from totality, and with totality in mind, and against this mode of referring back to a founding substance. William James asks, does reality exist distributively or collectively?—“in the shape of *eaches, everys, anys, eithers?* or only in the shape of an *all* or *whole*?”⁹

Throughout his work, James insists systematically on the difference between the distributive and collective points of view. The first identifies itself with pluralism and multiplicity while the second is associated with a logic of totality and the universal. “We shall, I think, perceive more and more clearly as this book proceeds, that *piecemeal existence is independent of complete collectability*, and that some facts, at any rate, exist only distributively, or in form of a set of *eaches* which (even if in infinite number) need not in any intelligible sense either experience themselves, or get experienced by anything else, as members of an All.”¹⁰

The possibility of thinking the universe in the “each-form” (“*eaches, everys, anys*”)¹¹ and not in the form of a “collective unity”, the possibility of a mode of thinking which allows for multiplicity and pluralism, “means only that the sundry parts of reality *may be externally related*.”¹² Relations are thus free from all foundation, from all substance and from any essential attribution. Terms can be independent of relations. Things can be related to each other in multiple ways but there is no higher single relation which encompasses them all or which could contain them all. Each relation expresses only one particular aspect, characteristic or *function* of a thing. Deleuze will speak of an “operational essence” to distinguish this idea from the classic conception of essence. The operational essence is that which breaks off from a unity through a certain operation and thus gives rise to a new difference.¹³ In James’ words, “the same thing...can belong to many systems”,¹⁴ it can enter into a composition or unity without being completely determined by it.

Before being a form of political organisation, federalism is a way of organising the universe. In a pluralist universe, federalism signifies the impossibility of totalising the singularities in a complete and absolute unity as there will always be some element that remains “outside” of it. “The pluralistic world is thus more like a federal republic than like an empire or a kingdom. However much may be collected, however much may report itself as present at any effective centre of consciousness or action, something else is self-governed and absent and unreduced to unity.”¹⁵ The existence of diverse and free-floating external relations makes creation possible. In the “all-form”, parts are essentially bound together; their continuity and cohesion are assured by the totality. However, in the “each-form”, there are discontinuities and disjunctions and, as James would

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say, “something always escapes”.¹⁶ It is precisely what escapes that creates movement and innovation. “In the each-form...a thing may be connected by intermediary things, with a thing with which it has no immediate or essential connexion. It is thus at all times in many possible connexions which are not necessarily actualized at the moment.”¹⁷ In the theory of external relations, there is no essence or substance. Behind phenomena “there is simply nothing”, as James will say. In this respect, relations refer only to the indeterminacy of the virtual, to a “possibility of the new”, and not to the realisation of an essence. Pragmatism holds that there is an abundance of different possibilities from our present experience.

There is no such possibility of absolute, untimely and unpredictable creations in Marxism, since they are given or implicated in structure and follow from essence in advance. Marxism could never be a theory of the “production of the new” as its ontology closes off any possibility of innovation (or the creation of new subjectivities) in a pre-ordained relation (capital and work hold a monopoly over innovation and processes of subjectification).

THE UNION AND DISUNION OF THINGS

A pluralist ontology implies a new method of understanding politics as it describes the ways in which singularities assemble and disassemble, how they unify and separate, according to two types of logic that, following Deleuze and Guattari, we can call majoritarian and minoritarian.

Pluralism does not deny processes of unification and composition, but in recognising that the ways in which the continuity between things is established are innumerable and always contingent, it poses the following question: “The world is One—yes, but *how* one. What is the practical value of the oneness for *us*.”¹⁸ For James, the problem of unity and diversity cannot be resolved by *a priori* arguments. The world will have as much unity and diversity as we observe in it. Empiricism conceives of the world in hypothetical propositions; rationalism (and Marxism) conceives of it in categorical propositions.

In the same way that there is a multiplicity of relations, there is also a multiplicity of different modes of unification, different degrees of unity, different ways of being “one”, and a multiplicity of ways of realising it. We could have “[u]nion of various grades, union of diverse types, union that stops at non-conductors, union that merely goes from next to next, and means in many cases outer nextness only, and not a more internal bond, [or] union of concatenation”.¹⁹ Human efforts are constantly unifying the world, but these processes are always contingent, empirical and partial. “We ourselves are constantly adding to the connections of things, organizing labor-unions, establishing postal, consular, mercantile, railroad, telegraph, colonial, and other systems that bind us together in ever wider reticulations.”²⁰ Unification is achieved through connections and systems constituting an “incalculable number of overlapping networks”. The “mode of unity” described by James is very different from the “perfect unity”, the “absolute unity” implied by the “all-form”.

In the universe of multiplicity, the variety of ways of being “one” imply a multiplicity of modes through which these unifications occur. How are things held together, how do networks forge connections, how is the world produced? “Things can be consistent or coherent in very diverse ways.”²¹ Among the “innumerable types of connections”, James distinguishes a “concatenated union” held together by connections through intermediaries which construes itself between bits and pieces and implies time, from an “absolute union” or union of “total conflux” (fusion or subsumption in the Hegelian-Marxist language).²² Because for James, knowledge is one of the most dynamic parts of reality, its cogency is found not in its ability to encompass the all or the universal (the pretention of marxisms to proclaim themselves to be sciences), but in its capacity to illuminate and direct us towards an “immense network of relations” to produce something new and singular. Knowledge also has a distributive, temporal and pluralist mode of constitution. “This ‘concatenated’ knowing, going from next to next, is altogether different from the ‘consolidated’ knowing supposed to be exercised by the absolutist mind.”²³

A pluralist universe is thus constructed through a “continuous concatenation” of things and through the

“intellectual connections” of concepts. Networks establish certain cohesions and “partial confluxes” through a connection between different parts of the universe. These parts are linked to each other by relations that are always specific and particular. “The result is innumerable little hangings-together of the world’s parts within the larger hangings-together. ... Each system exemplifies one type or grade of union, its parts being strung on that peculiar kind of relation, and the same part may figure in many different systems”.²⁴ It is thus not impossible to imagine different worlds contrasted by their diverse modes of connection and ways in which their heterogeneous elements “hang together”. “‘The world is One,’ therefore, just so far as we experience it to be concatenated, One by as many definite conjunctions as appear. But then also *not* One by just as many definite conjunctions as we find.”²⁵ Disjunction also has a multiplicity of modalities of being realised. There are a number of heterogeneous ways dividing which are each time contingent, specific and singular.

The study of the “special kinds of union which the universe enfolds” reveals “many of these to coexist with kinds of separation equally real.”²⁶ In place of a “block universe”, whose terms and relations would be implicated in one another and both in relation to a totality, we have a “mosaic universe”, a “patchwork universe”, an “archipelago universe”, that is to say an incompletely systematised universe, a “partially illogical or irrational” world where there are a possible and contingent multiplicity of junctions and disjunctions, unifications and separations. Jean Wahl has compiled a number of the terms with which James defines the pluralist universe: “arbitrary, chaotic, discontinuous, swarming, tangled, muddy, difficult, fragmentary, divided”.²⁷

What we have here is an unfinished and unfinishable universe, an incomplete universe where reality and knowledge gradually unfold, bit by bit, in a cumulative process through the assemblage of their various parts of bits and pieces. A universe where the composition must follow the cartography of singularities, of little worlds, of the different degrees of unity that animate them. A cumulative world where the total is never complete and “grows here and there”, thanks, not to the action of a universal subject, but to the piecemeal contribution of heterogeneous singularities. It is in this world of incompleteness, discontinuity and possibility—where innovation and knowledge produce themselves in a multiplicity of ways—that individuals and singularities can genuinely act (not only collective or universal subjects) and know, obtain knowledge [*connaître*].²⁸

We are now in a position to answer the pragmatic question: what practical consequences flow from the idea of unity in its absolutist and pluralist conceptions? The “absolutist and complete” modes of unification and the pluralist modes of unification refer respectively to the majoritarian and minoritarian logics by which Deleuze and Guattari defined politics in modern societies.

MARXISM AS A POLITICS OF TOTALITY

Pragmatism allows us to understand how Marx’s ontology of relation is still profoundly indebted to 19th century idealist philosophy and thus highlights the ontological limits of Marxist politics.

It is impossible for Marxism to imagine relations of pure exteriority that would be pure exteriorities, relations without a basis in the totality of relation of Capital. The methods of action and cognition of social movements that developed after World War II, however, express relations that are not inferred directly from terms, and terms that can be independent from relations. These movements, which practice and aspire to a politics of multiplicity, find only the most ambiguous of allies amongst current Marxists.

Let us take, for example, the feminist movement (although we could have chosen any other minoritarian practice—any bit or piece of the mosaic universe, as James would say). Marxism has always had a great difficulty with movements that do not refer, either directly or exclusively, to class relation. It cannot imagine them in their autonomy and independence, it cannot think them as “radical novelty” because Marxist method holds that their truth is not immanent to the movements themselves; it is not measured by the new possibilities of life that these struggles open up, but solely to the capital-labour relation. These movements only represent phenomena whose essence lies in the “relation of relations”. With Marxism as with rationalism, ultimately there is only the

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“one” there is ultimately “only one thing”. The world is a priori “one”, or has to be so.

Marxism will think of the feminist movements in a number of different ways but all of which will ultimately refer back to an essence. The feminist movement is understood as a movement for the “payment of domestic work”, or the “sexual division of labour” in the factory or in society as a whole, or even as the “becoming-woman of work”. Marxism only sees in the distributive mode, in the dissemination, the fragmentation of “bits and pieces” through which the production and the knowledge of the universe come about, a dispersion, of simple disjunctions, a multiplicity without connections.

The impossibility of external relations, the impossibility of absolute newness, the impossibility of understanding the universe as a multiplicity, all this will bring the Marxist concept on the terrain of a “perfect absolute and complete” unification, operating in a way which seeks to purify and recuperate all that escapes it. Class, like all totalities, is never able to account for everything in a mosaic universe. However great the number of elements that are able to be brought within the unity may be, there is always something which remains outside, as independent and autonomous, and for which socialism was, and remains, a nightmare. In presupposing that the world of capital is ‘one’ (or, which amounts to the same thing, that it is divided into two), Marxism has vigorously contributed to its own ‘absolute and complete’ unity, thus making everything that subtracts itself from it or exceeds it pay a high price.

PRAGMATISM AND CAPITALISM

It is not necessary to demonstrate the pragmatic affiliation of Gilles Deleuze’s thought, which he has openly admitted himself. However, it is Michel Foucault, whom, while never acknowledging the influence of this tradition, drew from it to better use in the analysis of politics and in the reconstruction of genealogies of knowledges [*savoirs*].

In *What is Philosophy?*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari claim that the market is the one true universal of capitalism. Foucault adds a fundamental consideration to this observation, by demonstrating in some of his most recently published courses,²⁹ that this universal is, like any universal, a pragmatic construction. The capital-labour relation does not have the spontaneous dynamic that Marxism lends itself to. It is, on the contrary, the result of a strategy that utilises a multiplicity of apparatuses [*dispositifs*] of power. In the place of the totalising principle of Marxism, Foucault substitutes the proliferation of *dispositifs* that constitute a multiplicity of contingent compositions, systems of consistency, and degrees of unity. These *dispositifs* are not only multiple, they are also differentiated. *Dispositifs* of security differ from *dispositifs* of discipline (as do those of politics and the economy) in their manner of guaranteeing the cohesion of their parts, of assuring the continuity and discontinuity of their fragments, of their different methods of being “one”, and of incorporating the autonomy and independence of their elements. Additionally, for Foucault, a subject of rights (*homo juridicus*) is not the same thing as an economic subject (*homo oeconomicus*), both of which should be distinguished from “social” subjects.

According to Foucault, the centrality of the capital-labour relation is to be found in the fact that it proved to be the most effective way to control, master and appropriate external relations and their capacity to produce innovation. In terms of its strategy of the construction of universals one can justly apply the following remark from James to capitalism itself: “[h]e speaks of what he calls the rational *unity* of things, when all the while what he really means is their possible empirical *unification*.”³⁰ The deconstruction of universals and the critique of the relation of Capital as encompassing the relation of relations is argued and practiced from a point of view perfectly in line with the pragmatist method: the many ways of being “one”, necessitate for their “accurate ascertainment... as many different programs of scientific work.”³¹

It is this methodology that Deleuze recognises in the work of Foucault and it is in this sense that he defines his philosophy as “pragmatist and pluralist”. “The One, the All, the True, the object, the subject, are not universals, but singular processes—of unification, totalisation, verification, objectivation, subjectification—present in the

given apparatus. Also each apparatus is a multiplicity in which certain operate processes of this nature still in formation, distinct from those operating in another.”³² James’ pluralist theory of knowledge finds a striking continuation in the Foucaultian genealogies of local, minor, situated and discontinuous knowledges. Whereas the Marxist tradition challenges science on its own terrain, Foucault attempts to put these local knowledges into play against the “unitary moment”, against the “centralising effects of power”, which could be linked to an institution but also to a “political apparatus, as in the case of Marxism”.³³

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in tracing possible connections between things other than as part of a totality this pragmatist ontology will perhaps find a use in describing ways of “being together” and “being against” (this division is also multiple, it is not ‘one’ division as in Marxist theory) that post-socialist movements are in the process of experimenting with.³⁴ A movement, like any element, can take part in several systems at once, have multiple relations, play different roles; be, for example, at the same time on the inside and outside of the relation of capital, be inside and outside of an institution, be both “for” and “against”, create, produce. This will lead to political strategies that are completely opaque to political and trade-unionist forces precisely because these forces consider the unity of things to be superior to their multiplicity.

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NOTES

1. Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).
2. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, (New York, Semiotext(c), 2004).
3. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (London and New York: Verso, 1994).
4. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1909), 79.
5. Ibid, 80.
6. Giovanni Gentile, *La Philosophie de Marx*, (Paris: Editions T.E.R., 1995).
7. This interpretation of the concept of ‘transindividual’, in both Balibar and Virno, is a surprising one. From the texts of Simondon, it seems impossible to interpret the concepts ‘pre-individual’ and ‘transindividual’ as language, relations of production or social relations. In both cases, it is ‘potentials’, ‘reserves of being’ and ‘metastable equilibria’ that allow for both biological and social individuation. To confuse the ‘non-structured’ potential (which is neither social nor vital) with the structuration of language, social relations and relations of production seems to me a most problematic interpretation.
8. Georg Lukacs, *History of Class Consciousness*, (London, The Merlin Press, 1971).
9. William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1911), 114.
10. Ibid, 170.
11. TN: In English in the original.
12. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1909), 321.
13. Gilles Deleuze, *Deux régimes de fous*, (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2003), 320.
14. William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1911), 130.
15. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1909), 321-2.
16. Ibid, 321.
17. Ibid, 324.
18. William James, *Pragmatism*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912), 132.
19. Ibid, 149.
20. William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1911), 130.
21. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1909), 74.
22. Ibid, 358-9.
23. William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1911), 129-130.
24. William James, *Pragmatism*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912), 136.
25. Ibid, 148.
26. Ibid, 165.
27. TN: The French terms used by Wahl are “arbitraire, cahoté, discontinu, grouillant, embrouillé, bourbeux, pénible, fragmentaire, morcelé”, Jean Wahl, *Les Philosophies pluralistes d’Angleterre et d’Amérique*, (Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2004).
28. This description of ontological constitution is in line with Gabriel Tarde’s constitution of the social.
29. For a useful analysis of Foucault’s two courses: ‘Security, Territory, Population’ and ‘Birth of the Biopolitics’, see Maurizio Lazzarato ‘Biopolitics and Bioeconomics: a politics of multiplicity’, at <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/Biopolitics-Bioeconomics-a>, accessed 4 January 2010.
30. William James, *Pragmatism*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912), 280.
31. William James, *Pragmatism*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912), 148.
32. Gilles Deleuze “What is a *dispositif*?”, in Timothy J. Armstrong (ed.) *Michel Foucault: Philosopher*, (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 162.
33. Michel Foucault, *Il faut défendre la société*, (Paris : Gallimard - Seuil, 1997), 15.
34. See chapter 5 of Maurizio Lazzarato, *Les Révolutions du capitalisme* (Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2004) where I sketch out a cartography of these new dynamics. But in this domain, everything is left to be done.