assembly

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ASSEMBLY

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ASSEMBLY

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Keeping faith with people who, in the teeth of relentless oppression, spontaneously resist, is all right on the night. But it is not enough when the next day dawns, since all it means is that, sooner or later, the frontline troops, with their superior weapons and sophisticated responses, will corner some of our young people on a dark night along one of these walkways and take their revenge.

—Stuart Hall, "Cold Comfort Farm"

To know the allure of the commons is to know that one is not simply commencing something but instead fortunate enough to be participating in something vaster, partial, incomplete, and ever expanding.

—José Muñoz, "The Brown Commons"

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To your most excellent Majesty

In olden times authors were proud of the privilege to dedicate their works to Majesty—a noble custom, which we should revive. For whether we recognize it or not, Magnificence is all around us. We do not mean the remnants of the royal lines that grow more ridiculous by the day, and certainly not the pompous politicians and captains of finance, most of whom should be brought up on criminal charges. We are more sympathetic to the tradition of Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman, who revere the glory of the mountains and mystery of the forests—but that is not what we mean either. We dedicate this book instead to those who, against all odds, continue to fight for freedom, those who suffer defeat only to stand up again, indefatigable, to combat the forces of domination. Yours is true Majesty.

—following Melville, following Machiavelli

Preface

> Here poetry equals insurrection.
>
> —Aimé Césaire

The script is by now familiar: inspiring social movements rise up against injustice and domination, briefly grab global headlines, and then fade from view. Even when they topple individual authoritarian leaders they have been unable thus far to create new, durable alternatives. Save few exceptions, these movements either have abandoned their radical aspirations and become players in the existing systems or have been defeated by ferocious repression. Why have the movements, which address the needs and desires of so many, not been able to achieve lasting change and create a new, more democratic and just society?

This question becomes all the more urgent as right-wing political forces rise and take power in countries throughout the world, suspending normal legal procedures in order to attack political opponents, undermining the independence of the judiciary and the press, operating extensive surveillance operations, creating an atmosphere of fear among various subordinated populations, posing notions of racial or religious purity as conditions for social belonging, threatening migrants with mass expulsion, and much more. People will protest the actions of these governments, and they are right to do so. But protest is not enough. Social movements also have to enact a lasting social transformation.

Today we are living in a phase of transition, which requires questioning some of our basic political assumptions. Rather than asking only how to take power we must also ask what kind of power we want and, perhaps more important, who we want to become. "Everything turns," as Hegel says, "on grasping and expressing the True not only as Substance, but equally as Subject."[1] We must train our eyes to recognize how the movements have the potential to redefine fundamental social relations so that they strive not to

take power as it is but to take power differently, to achieve a fundamentally new, democratic society and, crucially, to produce new subjectivities.

The most powerful social movements today treat leadership as a dirty word—and for many good reasons. For more than a half century activists have rightly criticized how centralized, vertical forms of organization, including charismatic figures, leadership councils, party structures, and bureaucratic institutions, become fetters to the development of democracy and the full participation of all in political life. Gone are the days, on the one hand, when a political vanguard could successfully take power in the name of the masses; the claims of political realism and the presumed effectiveness of such centralized leadership have proved completely illusory. And yet, on the other, it is a terrible mistake to translate valid critiques of leadership into a refusal of sustained political organization and institution, to banish verticality only to make a fetish of horizontality and ignore the need for durable social structures. "Leaderless" movements must organize the production of subjectivity necessary to create lasting social relations.

Instead of dismissing leadership completely we should start by individuating its core political functions and then invent new mechanisms and practices for fulfilling them. (Whether this still is called "leadership" matters little.) Two key leadership functions are decision-making and assembly. To guard against the cacophony of individual voices and the paralysis of the political process, the thinking goes, leaders must be able to bring people together in a coherent whole and make the difficult choices necessary to sustain the movement and ultimately to transform society. The fact that leadership is defined by a decision-making capacity presents a paradox for modern conceptions of democracy: leaders make decisions at a distance, in relative solitude, but those decisions must in some sense be connected to the multitude and represent its will and desires. This tension or contradiction gives rise to a series of anomalies of modern democratic thought. The ability of leaders to assemble the multitude demonstrates this same tension. They must be political entrepreneurs who gather people, create new social combinations, and discipline them to cooperate with one another. Those who assemble people in this way, however, stand apart from the assembly itself, inevitably creating a dynamic between leaders and followers, rulers and ruled. Democratic leadership ultimately appears as an oxymoron.

Our hypothesis is that decision-making and assembly do not require centralized rule but instead can be accomplished together by the multitude, democratically. There are, of course, and will continue to be, issues that because of

their urgency or technical nature require centralized decision-making of various sorts, but such "leadership" must be constantly subordinated to the multitude, deployed and dismissed as occasion dictates. If leaders are still necessary and possible in this context, it is only because they serve the productive multitude. This is not an elimination of leadership, then, but an inversion of the political relationship that constitutes it, a reversal of the polarity that links horizontal movements and vertical leadership.

So what do today's movements of the multitude want? They certainly demand equality, freedom, and democracy, but they also want well-being and wealth—not to possess more but instead to create sustainable relations of access and use for all. Long ago these demands were conceived together in terms of happiness. Today political, social happiness is not an unrealistic dream, but instead is embedded in the reality of social production, the result of together producing society, producing social relations in conditions of freedom and equality. That is the only path to a really democratic society.

If we treat the potential effectiveness of democratic organizing to transform the world only in political terms, however, if we treat the political as an autonomous realm detached from social needs and social production, then we will constantly and inevitably find ourselves spinning in circles or running into dead ends. In effect, we need to leave the noisy sphere of politics, where everything takes place on the surface, and descend into the hidden abode of social production and reproduction. We need to root the questions of organization and effectiveness, assembly and decision-making in the social terrain because only there will we find lasting solutions. That is the task of the central chapters of our book. We can verify the potential of the multitude to organize itself, to set the terms for how we cooperate, and to make decisions together only by investigating what people are already doing, what are their talents and capacities, in the field of social production.

Today production is increasingly social in a double sense: on one hand, people produce ever more socially, in networks of cooperation and interaction; and, on the other, the result of production is not just commodities but social relations and ultimately society itself. This double terrain of social production is where the talents and capacities of people to organize and rule themselves are nurtured and revealed, but it is also where the most important challenges and the most severe forms of domination facing the multitude are in play, including the ruling mechanisms of finance, money, and neoliberal administration.

One key struggle on the terrain of social production plays out over the uses, management, and appropriation of the common, that is, the wealth of the earth and the social wealth that we share and whose use we manage together. The common is increasingly today both the foundation and primary result of social production. We rely, in other words, on shared knowledges, languages, relationships, and circuits of cooperation along with shared access to resources in order to produce, and what we produce tends (at least potentially) to be common, that is, shared and managed socially.

There are primarily two approaches to the common today, which point in divergent directions. One affirms the right to appropriate the common as private property, which has been a principle of capitalist ideology from the outset. Capitalist accumulation today functions increasingly through the extraction of the common, through enormous oil and gas operations, huge mining enterprises, and monocultural agriculture but also by extracting the value produced in social forms of the common, such as the generation of knowledges, social cooperation, cultural products, and the like. Finance stands at the head of these processes of extraction, which are equally destructive of the earth and the social ecosystems that they capture.

The other approach seeks to keep access to the common open and to manage our wealth democratically, demonstrating the ways that the multitude already is relatively autonomous and has the potential to be more so. People together are ever more able to determine how they will cooperate with each other socially, how they will manage their relations to each other and their world, and how they will generate new combinations of human and nonhuman forces, social and digital machines, material and immaterial elements. From this standpoint we can see, in fact, that transforming the common into private property, closing access and imposing a monopoly of decision-making over its use and development, becomes a fetter to future productivity. We are all more productive the more we have access to knowledges, the more we are able to cooperate and communicate with each other, the more we share resources and wealth. The management of and care for the common is the responsibility of the multitude, and this social capacity has immediate political implications for self-governance, freedom, and democracy.

And yet—whispers some evil genius in our ears—the conditions in the world today are not propitious. Neoliberalism seems to have absorbed the common and society itself under its dominion, posing money as the exclusive measure of not only economic value but also our relations to each other and

our world. Finance rules over almost all productive relations, which it has thrust into the icy waters of the global market. Maybe, the evil genius continues, your inversion of political roles could have made some sense if entrepreneurs were like what capitalists boasted about in the old days, that is, figures who promoted the virtues of innovation. But those entrepreneurs are fewer and fewer. The venture capitalist, the financier, and the fund manager are the ones who now command—or more accurately, money commands and those are merely its vassals and administrators. Today's capitalist entrepreneur is no Ahab leading his ship in uncharted seas but a sedentary priest officiating over an unending orgy of financial accumulation.

Moreover, neoliberalism not only has imposed a reorganization of production for the accumulation of wealth and the extraction of the common toward private ends but also has reorganized the political powers of the ruling classes. An extraordinary violence that compounds and exacerbates poverty has been structured into the exercise of power. Police forces have become kinds of militias that hunt the poor, people of color, the miserable, and the exploited; and, correspondingly, wars have become exercises of global police, with little concern for national sovereignty or international law. From the politics of exception have been stripped every varnish of charisma, if there really ever was any, and the state of exception has become the normal state of power. "Poor little deluded ones," concludes our evil genius, with all the arrogance, condescension, and disdain of the powerful for the rebels' naiveté.

And yet there is much more at play. Fortunately, there are myriad forms of daily resistance and the episodic but repeated revolt of potent social movements. One has to wonder if the contempt with which the powerful hold the travails of rebels and protesters (and the insinuation that they will never succeed in organizing if not subordinated to traditional leadership) does not mask their dread that the movements will proceed from resistance to insurrection—and thus their fear of losing control. They know (or suspect) that power is never as secure and self-sufficient as it pretends to be. The image of an omnipotent Leviathan is just a fable that serves to terrify the poor and the subordinated into submission. Power is always a relationship of force or, better, of many forces: "subordination cannot be understood," Ranajit Guha explains, "except as one of the constitutive terms in a binary relationship of which the other is dominance."[2] Maintaining social order requires constantly engaging and negotiating this relationship.

This conflict is today part of our social being. It is, in this sense, an ontological fact. The world as it is—this is how we understand ontology—is characterized by social struggles, the resistances and revolts of the subordinated, and the striving for freedom and equality. But it is dominated by an extreme minority that rules over the lives of the many and extorts the social value created by those who produce and reproduce society. In other words, it is a world constructed in social cooperation but divided by the domination of the ruling classes, by their blind passion for appropriation and their insatiable thirst for hoarding wealth.

Social being thus appears as either a totalitarian figure of command or a force of resistance and liberation. The One of power divides into Two, and ontology is split into different standpoints, each of which is dynamic and constructive. And from this separation also follows an epistemological divide: on one side is an abstract affirmation of truth that, however it is constructed, must be considered a fixed order, permanent and organic, dictated by nature; on the other is a search for truth from below that is constructed in practice. The one appears as the capacity of subjugation and the other as subjectification, that is, the autonomous production of subjectivity. That production of subjectivity is made possible by the fact that truth is not given but constructed, not substance but subject. The power to make and to construct is here an index of truth. In the processes of subjectivation that are developed and enacted in practice, a truth and an ethics thus arise from below.

Leadership, then, if it is still to have a role, must exercise an entrepreneurial function, not dictating to others or acting in their name or even claiming to represent them but as a simple operator of assembly within a multitude that is self-organized and cooperates in freedom and equality to produce wealth. Entrepreneurship in this sense must be an agent of happiness. In the course of this book, then, in addition to investigating and affirming the resistances and uprisings of the multitude in recent decades, we will also propose the hypothesis of a democratic entrepreneurship of the multitude. Only by assuming society as it is and as it is becoming, that is, as circuits of cooperation among widely heterogeneous subjectivities that produce and use the common in its various forms, can we establish a project of liberation, constructing a strong figure of political entrepreneurship in line with the production of the common.

It may well seem incongruous for us to celebrate entrepreneurship when neoliberal ideologues prattle on ceaselessly about its virtues, advocating the

creation of an entrepreneurial society, bowing down in awe to the brave capitalist risk takers, and exhorting us all, from kindergarten to retirement, to become entrepreneurs of our own lives. We know such heroic tales of capitalist entrepreneurship are just empty talk, but if you look elsewhere you will see that there is plenty of entrepreneurial activity around today—organizing new social combinations, inventing new forms of social cooperation, generating democratic mechanisms for our access to, use of, and participation in decision-making about the common. It is important to claim the concept of entrepreneurship for our own. Indeed one of the central tasks of political thought is to struggle over concepts, to clarify or transform their meaning. Entrepreneurship serves as the hinge between the forms of the multitude's cooperation in social production and its assembly in political terms.

We have already developed in our other work some of the economic claims that are necessary for this project and we will continue to develop them in this book. Here is a partial list in schematic form. (1) The common—that is, the various forms of social and natural wealth that we share, have access to, and manage together—is ever more central to the capitalist mode of production. (2) In step with the common's growing economic relevance, labor is being transformed. How people produce value both at work and in society is increasingly based on cooperation, social and scientific knowledges, care, and the creation of social relationships. The social subjectivities that animate cooperative relationships, furthermore, tend to be endowed with a certain autonomy with respect to capitalist command. (3) Labor is being changed also by new intensive relationships and various kinds of material and immaterial machines that are essential for production, such as digital algorithms and "general intellect," including extensive banks of social and scientific knowledges. One task we will propose is that the multitude reappropriate and make its own such forms of fixed capital that are essential means of social production. (4) The center of gravity of capitalist production is shifting from the exploitation of labor in large-scale industry toward the capitalist extraction of value (often through financial instruments) from the common, that is, from the earth and from cooperative social labor. This is not primarily a quantitative shift and indeed, considered globally, there may be no reduction of the numbers of workers in factories. More important is the qualitative significance of the extraction of the common in various forms from the earth (such as oil, mining, and monocultural agriculture) and from social production (including education, health, cultural production, routine and creative cognitive

work, and care work), which tends to reorganize and recompose the global capitalist economy as a whole. A new phase in capitalist development is emerging after manufacture and large-scale industry, a phase characterized by social production, which requires high levels of autonomy, cooperation, and "commoning" of living labor. (5) These transformations of capitalist production and the labor-power at its heart change the terms of how resistance can be organized against exploitation and the extraction of value. They make it possible for the situation to be inverted such that the multitude now reappropriates the common from capital and constructs a real democracy. The problem of organization (and the verticalization of the horizontal movements) resides here with the problem of the "constitutionalization" of the common—as objectives of social and workers' struggles, certainly, but also as the institutionalization of free and democratic forms of life.

These are some of the arguments that lead us to believe it is possible and desirable for the multitude to tip the relations of power in its favor and, ultimately, to take power—but, crucially, to take power differently. If the movements are becoming capable of formulating the strategy necessary to transform society, then they will also be able to take hold of the common, and thus to reconfigure freedom, equality, democracy, and wealth. The "differently," in other words, means not repeating the hypocrisies that pose freedom (without equality) as a concept of the Right and equality (without freedom) a proposition of the Left, and it means refusing to separate the common and happiness. By taking power, the movements need to affirm their most incisive differences and most extensive pluralities, that is, as a multitude. But that is not enough. This "differently" also means that by taking power the multitude must produce independent institutions that demystify identities and the centrality of power—unmasking state power and constructing nonsovereign institutions. Producing subversive struggles against power to vanquish sovereignty: this is an essential component of that "differently." But even that is not enough. All this must be constructed materially. And that opens a path to be traveled, one that leads the multitude to reappropriate wealth, incorporating fixed capital in its schemes of productive social cooperation, a path that roots power in the common.

A new Prince is emerging on the horizon, a Prince born of the passions of the multitude. Indignation at the corrupt policies that continually fill the feeding troughs of bankers, financiers, bureaucrats, and the wealthy; outrage at the frightening levels of social inequality and poverty; anger and fear at the

destruction of the earth and its ecosystems; and denunciation of the seemingly unstoppable systems of violence and war—most people recognize all this but feel powerless to make any change. Indignation and anger, when they fester and drag on without outcome, risk collapsing into either desperation or resignation. On this terrain, a new Prince indicates a path of freedom and equality, a path that poses the task of putting the common in the hands of all, managed democratically by all. By Prince, of course, we do not mean an individual or even a party or leadership council, but rather the political articulation that weaves together the different forms of resistance and struggles for liberation in society today. This Prince thus appears as a swarm, a multitude moving in coherent formation and carrying, implicitly, a threat.

The title of this book, *Assembly*, is meant to grasp the power of coming together and acting politically in concert. But we do not offer a theory of assembly or a detailed analysis of any specific practice of assembly. Instead we approach the concept transversally and show how it resonates with a broad web of political principles and practices—from the general assemblies instituted by contemporary social movements to the legislative assemblies of modern politics, from the right to assemble asserted in legal traditions to the freedom of association central to labor organizing, and from the various forms of congregation in religious communities to the philosophical notion of machinic assemblage that constitutes new subjectivities. Assembly is a lens through which to recognize new democratic political possibilities.[3]

At various points, punctuating the rhythm of the book, we propose calls and responses. These are not questions and answers, as if the responses could put the calls to rest. Calls and responses should speak back and forth in an open dialogue. Classic African American styles of preaching are something like what we have in mind because they require the participation of the entire congregation. But that reference is not really right. In preacherly mode, the roles of those who call and those who respond are strictly divided: the preacher makes a statement and the congregation affirms it, "amen to that," urging the preacher on. We are interested in fuller forms of participation in which the roles are equal, interchangeable. A better fit is call-and-response work songs, such as the sea shanties that were common on nineteenth-century merchant sailing vessels. Songs serve to pass the time and synchronize labor. But really, with such industrious obedience, work songs are not the right reference either. A clearer inspiration for us, to return to the history of African American culture, is the call and response songs sung by slaves in the plantation

fields, with titles like "Hoe, Emma, Hoe." These slave songs, derived from West African musical traditions, maintained labor rhythms like other work songs, but also occasionally the slaves used coded lyrics to transmit messages to one another in ways that the master, although standing right above them, could not understand, messages that could help them avoid the master's lash or subvert the work process or even plan escape. Now is the time to find each other and assemble. As Machiavelli frequently says, don't let the occasion pass.

PART I

THE LEADERSHIP PROBLEM

No good comes from having many leaders.
Let there be one in charge, one ruler,
who gets from crooked-minded Cronos' son
sceptre and laws, so he may rule his people.

—Homer, *The Iliad*

I have no fear that the result of our experiment will be that men may be trusted to govern themselves without a master.

—Thomas Jefferson to David Hartley, 1787

CHAPTER 1

WHERE HAVE ALL THE LEADERS GONE?

We continue to witness each year the eruption of "leaderless" social movements. From North Africa and the Middle East to Europe, the Americas, and East Asia, movements have left journalists, political analysts, police forces, and governments disoriented and perplexed. Activists too have struggled to understand and evaluate the power and effectiveness of horizontal movements. The movements have proven able to pose democratic ideals, sometimes to force reforms, and to pressure and even overthrow regimes—and, indeed, widespread social processes have been set in motion in coordination with or as a consequence of them—but the movements tend to be short-lived and seem unable to bring about lasting social transformation. They don't grow the roots and branches, as Machiavelli says, to be able to survive adverse weather.[1] Many assume that if only social movements could find new leaders they would return to their earlier glory and be able to sustain and achieve projects of social transformation and liberation. Where, they ask, are the new Martin Luther King Jr.'s, Rudi Dutschkes, Patrice Lumumbas, and Stephen Bikos? Where have all the leaders gone?

Leadership has become a conundrum that today's movements seem unable to solve, but the leadership problem in revolutionary and progressive movements is not entirely new. To leap over the contemporary impasse let's take a few steps back and get a running start.

"Errors" of the Communards

In March 1871, while the bourgeois government and its army retreats to Versailles, the Communards take control of Paris and quickly set about inventing institutional structures for a radically new kind of democracy, a government of the people, by the people: universal suffrage and free education are established, standing armies are abolished, representatives are paid workingmen's

wages, and, perhaps most important, the mandates of all politicians are revocable at any time. The Communards seek to create the means for everyone to participate actively in all political decision-making and to represent themselves.

Karl Marx, writing from London, admires the audacity of the Communards and celebrates their powers of institutional innovation, their capacity to reinvent democracy. But he also claims that, from too good intentions, the Communards commit two crucial errors. First, by too quickly dissolving the central committee of the Commune and putting decision-making immediately in the hands of the people, the Communards are overly dogmatic in their attachment to democracy. Second, by not pursuing the retreating troops of the Third Republic to Versailles while they have the military advantage in March, the Communards are led astray by their devotion to nonviolence and peace. The Communards are too angelic in Marx's view, and their lack of leadership contributes to their defeat in May, just two months after their historic victory. The Commune is destroyed and by the thousands Communards are executed or exiled by a victorious bourgeoisie untroubled by any angelic inhibitions. But if the Communards had not committed these "errors," wouldn't they have—even if they had survived—negated the inspiring democratic core of their project? For many that is the Gordian knot.[2]

Now almost a century and a half has passed since the victory and defeat of the Paris Commune, and still, when discussing the dilemmas of progressive and revolutionary political organization, we hear repeated denunciations of both those who naively refuse leadership and, on the contrary, those who fall back into centralized, hierarchical structures. But the idea that these are our only options has lasted much too long.

Attempts to get beyond this impasse are blocked, in large part, by the strategic ambiguity or, rather, an excess of "tactical realism" on the part of our predecessors, that is, those who politically and theoretically guided revolutions after the Commune throughout the world—communists of the First, Second, and Third Internationals, guerrilla leaders in the mountains of Latin America and Southeast Asia, Maoists in China and West Bengal, black nationalists in the United States, and many others. The tradition maintains, with many variations, a double position: the strategic goal of revolution is to create a society in which together we can rule ourselves without masters or central committees, but from the realist point of view we must recognize that the time is not right. Modern liberation movements are devoted to democracy as the future goal but not under present conditions. Neither the external nor the

internal conditions, the thinking goes, yet exist for a real democracy. The continuing power of the bourgeoisie and the Prussians at the gates of Paris (or, later, the white armies from Siberia to Poland or, later still, the counter-revolutionary forces led by the CIA, COINTELPRO, death squads, and innumerable others) will destroy any democratic experiment. Moreover, and this is the greater obstacle, the people are not yet ready to rule themselves. The revolution needs time.

This double position has characterized a widely shared conviction, but it is interesting nonetheless to note that already 150 years ago it made many communists uneasy. They shared the utopian desire for a real democracy but feared that the delay would extend indefinitely, that if we expect a mystical event eventually to realize our dreams we will wait in vain. We are not that interested in the ideological critiques directed at Marx and the leaders of the International by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Giuseppe Mazzini, or Mikhail Bakunin but rather those brought by the mutualists and anarcho-communists from Holland, Switzerland, Spain, and Italy to contest the organizational centralism of the International and its organizational methods as a repetition of the modern conception of power and the political.[3] These revolutionaries foresaw that a Thomas Hobbes lurks even within their own revolutionary organizations, that the assumptions of sovereign authority infect their political imaginations.

The relationship between leadership and democracy, which is a political dilemma that has plagued liberals as much as socialists and revolutionaries throughout modernity, is expressed clearly in the theory and practice of representation, which can serve as an introduction to our problematic. Every legitimate power, the theory goes, must be representative and thus have a solid foundation in the popular will. But beyond such virtuous-sounding declarations, what is the relationship between the action of representatives and will of the represented? In very general terms, the two primary responses to this question point in opposite directions: one affirms that power can and must be grounded solidly in its popular constituents, that, through representation, the people's will is expressed in power; and the other claims that sovereign authority, even popular sovereignty, must through the mechanisms of representation be separated and shielded from the will of the constituents. The trick is that all forms of modern representation combine, in different measures, these two seemingly contradictory mandates. Representation connects and cuts.

"'Representative democracy' might appear today as a pleonasm," writes Jacques Rancière. "But it was initially an oxymoron."[4] In modern history and the history of capitalist societies, the possibility of putting together power and consent, centrality and autonomy, has been revealed as an illusion. Modernity has left us the legacy, both in its socialist and liberal figures, of at once the necessity of the sovereign unity of power and the fiction of its being a relation between two parties.

The Communards clearly recognized—and this was no error—the falsity of the claims of modern representation. They were not satisfied to choose every four or six years some member of the ruling class who pledges to represent them and act in their interests. It took many years for others to catch up with the Communards and see through the falsity of modern representation—and if you want one particularly tragic episode in this monstrous history, ask someone who lived through the passage from the "dictatorship of the proletariat" to the "all people's state" in the era of Khrushchev and Brezhnev—but now this perception is becoming generalized. Unfortunately, though, the recognition that leaders don't really represent our desires is most often met with resignation. It's better than authoritarian rule, after all. In effect, the modern paradigm of representation is coming to an end without there yet taking shape a real democratic alternative.

False assumption: Critique of leadership = refusal of organization and institution

Today's social movements consistently and decisively reject traditional, centralized forms of political organization. Charismatic or bureaucratic leaders, hierarchical party structures, vanguard organizations, and even electoral and representative structures are constantly criticized and undermined. The immune systems of the movements have become so developed that every emergence of the leadership virus is immediately attacked by antibodies. It is crucial, however, that the opposition to centralized authority not be equated with the rejection of all organizational and institutional forms. Too often today the healthy immune response turns into an autoimmune disorder. In order to avoid traditional leadership, in fact, social movements must devote more not less attention and energy to the invention and establishment of such forms. We will return below to investigate the nature of some of these new forms and the existing social forces that can nourish them.

The path to realize these alternatives, however, is at times circuitous, with numerous pitfalls. Many of today's most intelligent political theorists, often ones with rich activist experiences, regard the problematic of organization as a festering wound that remains from past defeats. They agree in general and in theory that organization is necessary, but seem to have a visceral reaction to any actual political organization. You can taste in their writing a hint of bitterness from dashed hopes—from inspiring liberation movements that were thwarted by superior forces, revolutionary projects that came to naught, and promising organizations that went bad and fell apart internally. We understand this reaction and we lived together with them through many of these defeats. But one has to recognize defeat without being defeated. Pull out the thorn and let the wound heal. Like the "unarmed prophets" whom Machiavelli ridiculed, social movements that refuse organization are not only useless but also dangerous to themselves and others.

Indeed many important theoretical developments of recent decades, including ones we have promoted, have been cited to support a generalized refusal of organization. Theoretical investigations, for instance, of the increasingly general intellectual, affective, and communicative capacities of the labor force, sometimes coupled with arguments about the potentials of new media technologies, have been used to bolster the assumption that activists can organize spontaneously and have no need for institutions of any sort. The philosophical and political affirmation of immanence, in such cases, is mistakenly translated into a refusal of all norms and organizational structures—often combined with the assumption of radical individualism. On the contrary, the affirmation of immanence and the recognition of new generalized social capacities are compatible with and indeed require organization and institution of a new type, a type that deploys structures of leadership, albeit in new form.

In short, we endorse in general the critiques of authority and demands for democracy and equality in social movements. And yet we are not among those who claim that today's horizontal movements in themselves are sufficient, that there is no problem, and that the issue of leadership has been superseded. Behind the critique of leadership often hides a position we do not endorse that resists all attempts to create organizational and institutional forms in the movements that can guarantee their continuity and effectiveness. When this happens the critiques of authority and leadership really do become liabilities for the movements.

We do not subscribe either, at the opposite extreme, to the view that the existing horizontal movements need to dedicate their efforts to resuscitating

either a progressive electoral party or a vanguardist revolutionary party. First of all, the potential of electoral parties is highly constrained, particularly as the state is ever more occupied (or sometimes actually colonized) by capitalist power and thus less open to the influence of parties. Second, and perhaps more important, the party in its various forms is unable to make good on its claims to be representative (and we will return to the question of representation in more detail). Progressive electoral parties, in the opposition and in power, can tactically have positive effects, but as a complement to not a substitute for the movements. We have no sympathy with those who claim that, because of the weakness of the movements and the illusions of reform through electoral means, we need to resuscitate the corpse of the modern vanguard party and the charismatic figures of liberation movements past, propping up their rotting leadership structures. We too recognize ourselves as part of the modern revolutionary and liberation traditions that gave birth to so many parties, but no act of necromancy will breathe life into the vanguard party form today—nor do we think it desirable even if it were possible. Let the dead bury the dead.

Leaderless movements as symptoms of a historical shift

To confront the leadership problem we need to recognize, first, that the lack of leaders in the movements today is neither accidental nor isolated: hierarchical structures have been overturned and dismantled within the movements as a function of both the crisis of representation and a deep aspiration to democracy. Today's leadership problem is really a symptom of a profound historical transformation, one that is currently in midstream—modern organizational forms have been destroyed and adequate replacements have not yet been invented. We need to see this process to its completion, but to do so we will eventually have to extend our analysis well beyond the terrain of politics to investigate the social and economic shifts at play. For now, though, let us focus on the political terrain and the challenges of political organization.[5]

One simple answer to the question—Where have all the leaders gone?—is that they are behind bars or buried underground. The ruling powers and the forces of reaction (often in collaboration with the institutional parties of the Left) have systematically imprisoned and assassinated revolutionary leaders. Each country has its own pantheon of fallen heroes and martyrs: Rosa Luxemburg,

Antonio Gramsci, Che Guevara, Nelson Mandela, Fred Hampton, Ibrahim Kaypakkaya—you can make your own list. Although targeted killing and political imprisonment are the most spectacular, a host of other weapons of repression are continually employed that, although less visible, are often more effective: specialized legal persecution, from measures that criminalize protest up to extraordinary rendition and Guantanamo-style imprisonment; covert operations, including counterinformation programs, provocations by undercover law agents, and entrapment by goading potential activists into illegal acts; censorship, or using dominant media outlets to spread false information, create ideological confusion, or simply distort events by translating social and political questions into matters of style, fashion, or custom; the making of leaders into celebrities in order to co-opt them; and many, many more.[6] And don't forget the collateral damage of each of these methods of repression, not only those bombed or imprisoned "in error" but also the children of the imprisoned, the communities disrupted, and the generalized atmosphere of fear. The ruling powers deem such damage as acceptable costs of achieving the objective. Every counterinsurgency manual preaches the importance, by one means or another, of removing revolutionary leaders: cut off the head and the body will die.

No one should underestimate the effects and damages of such forms of repression, but on their own they reveal little about the decline of leadership in social movements. The repression and targeting of revolutionary and liberation leaders, after all, are not new and, in fact, focusing on such external causes gives us a poor understanding of the movements' evolution, in which the real motor of change is internal. The more profound answer to the question—Where have all the leaders gone?—is that leaders have constantly been critiqued and torn down from within the movements, which have made antiauthoritarianism and democracy their central foundations. The goal is to raise the consciousness and capacities of everyone so that all can speak equally and participate in political decisions. And such efforts are often accompanied by undermining all who claim to be leaders.

One powerful moment in this genealogy—one that still resonates with activists throughout the world—is constituted by the efforts of many feminist organizations in the late 1960s and early 1970s to develop tools to promote democracy within the movement. The practice of consciousness-raising, for instance, and making sure that everyone speaks at meetings, serves as a means to foster the participation of all in the political process and to make it possible for decisions to be made by everyone involved. Feminist organizations also developed rules

to prevent members from taking the position of representative or leader, dictating, for example, that no one should speak to the media without the group's permission. An individual being designated as leader or representative of the group would undermine the hard-won accomplishments of democracy, equality, and empowerment within the organization. When someone did present herself or accepted being designated as a leader or spokesperson, she was subject to "trashing," a sometimes brutal process of criticism and isolation. Behind such practices, however, was an antiauthoritarian spirit and, more important, the desire to create democracy. The feminist movements of the 1960s and '70s were an extraordinary incubator for generating and developing the democratic practices that have come to be generalized in contemporary social movements.[7]

Such democratic practices and critiques of representation also proliferated in other social movements of the 1960s and '70s. These movements rejected not only the way male legislators claimed to represent the interests of women and the way the white power structure claimed to represent black people but also the way movement leaders claimed to represent their own organizations. In many segments of the movements, participation was promoted as the antidote to representation, and participatory democracy as the alternative to centralized leadership.[8]

Those who lament the decline of leadership structures today often point, especially in the US context, to the history of black politics as counterexample. The successes of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s are credited to the wisdom and effectiveness of its leaders: most often a group of black, male preachers with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and with Martin Luther King Jr. at the head of the list. The same is true for the Black Power movement, with references to Malcolm X, Huey Newton, Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture), and others. But there is also a minor line in African American politics, most clearly developed in black feminist discourses, that runs counter to the traditional glorification of leaders. The "default deployment of charismatic leadership," Erica Edwards writes, "as a political wish (that is, the lament that 'we have no leaders') and as narrative-explanatory mechanism (that is, the telling of the story of black politics as the story of black leadership) is as politically dangerous . . . as it is historically inaccurate." She analyzes three primary modes of "violence of charismatic leadership": its falsification of the past (silencing or eclipsing the effectiveness of other historical actors); its distortion of the movements themselves (creating authority structures that make democracy impossible); and its heteronormative mascu-

linity, that is, the regulative ideal of gender and sexuality implicit in charismatic leadership.[9] "The most damaging impact of the sanitized and oversimplified version of the civil rights story," argues Marcia Chatelain, "is that it has convinced many people that single, charismatic male leaders are a prerequisite for social movements. This is simply untrue."[10] Once we look beyond the dominant histories we can see that forms of democratic participation have been proposed and tested throughout the modern movements of liberation, including in black America, and have today become the norm.

Black Lives Matter (BLM), the coalition of powerful protest movements that has exploded across the United States since 2014 in response to repeated police violence, is a clear manifestation of how developed the immune system of the movements against leadership has become. BLM is often criticized for its failure to emulate the leadership structures and discipline of traditional black political institutions, but, as Frederick C. Harris explains, activists have made a conscious and cogent decision: "They are rejecting the charismatic leadership model that has dominated black politics for the past half century, and for good reason."[11] The centralized leadership preached by previous generations, they believe, is not only undemocratic but also ineffective. There are thus no charismatic leaders of BLM protests and no one who speaks for the movement. Instead a wide network of relatively anonymous facilitators, like DeRay Mckesson and Patrisse Cullors, make connections in the streets and on social media, and sometimes "choreograph" (to use Paolo Gerbaudo's term) collective action.[12] There are, of course, differences within the network. Some activists reject not only orderly centralized leadership but also explicit policy goals and the practices of "black respectability," as Juliet Hooker says, opting instead for expressions of defiance and outrage.[13] Others strive to combine horizontal organizational structures with policy demands, illustrated, for example, by the 2016 platform of the Movement for Black Lives.[14] Activists in and around BLM, in other words, are testing new ways to combine democratic organization with political effectiveness.

The critique of traditional leadership structures among BLM activists overlaps strongly with their rejection of gender and sexuality hierarchies. The dominant organizational models of the past, Alicia Garza claims, keep "straight [cisgender] Black men in the front of the movement while our sisters, queer and trans, and disabled folk take up roles in the background or not at all."[15] In BLM, in contrast, women are recognized, especially by activists, to play central organizational roles. (The creation of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter by

three women—Garza, Cullors, and Opal Tometi—is often cited as indicative.) The traditional assumptions regarding gender and sexuality qualifications for leadership, then, tend to obscure the forms of organization developed in the movement. "It isn't a coincidence," Marcia Chatelain maintains, "that a movement that brings together the talents of black women—many of them queer—for the purpose of liberation is considered leaderless, since black women have so often been rendered invisible."[16] The BLM movement is a field of experimentation of new organizational forms that gathers together (sometimes subterranean) democratic tendencies from the past. And like many contemporary movements it presents not so much a new organizational model as a symptom of a historical shift.

The same people who lament the lack of leaders in the movements today bemoan too the dearth of "public intellectuals." We shouldn't forget that sometimes the refusal of leadership in political organizations corresponds to a plea to academics or intellectuals to represent the movement. This issue was powerfully present in the revolts of 1968, when new social subjects "took the floor" and spoke out. Michel de Certeau, a great moralist and attentive historian of that period, rightly emphasized that this prise de parole (literally: "taking the word") itself constituted a revolution, which is certainly true.[17] But the act of speaking out alone does not resolve the question of what to say. Hence the plea, often tacit but constant, to recognized intellectuals to become public, political intellectuals, that is, to indicate the political line. In France and elsewhere Jean-Paul Sartre functioned as a primary model. But in the late 1960s, as some students asked professors to represent the movements, they recognized the potential danger that such representatives would drown out the voices of others. Take, for example, the case of Jürgen Habermas in Frankfurt. He supported the movements and combatted Theodor Adorno's unfounded critiques of them, but he also undermined the movements by trying to rein them in to an ethics of individualism and the respect for formal democracy.[18] The activists themselves, however, tried to express (against individualism) their collective project and (against the merely formal democracy of the dominant parties and the state bureaucracy) the truth of the exploited and the necessity of revolution.

The most intelligent intellectuals have taken this lesson to heart. When they support movements rather than presenting themselves as spokespeople they seek to learn from the movements or even to play a role functional to them. Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault are good examples of this, as are

Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler and Stuart Hall. Intellectuals, at least the best of them, have learned a fundamental lesson: never speak in the name of others. The movements instead must serve as guide, marking the political direction for intellectuals. Already in the early 1960s Mario Tronti understood well that the role of the "party intellectual" is over since all theoretical knowledge tends to be embedded in practical activity. So, let's be done with public intellectuals! That is not to say, of course, that academics should stay closed in their ivory towers or write in incomprehensible jargon, but that those with the talent and inclination should engage cooperatively in processes of co-research, valorizing and contributing to the theoretical knowledges and political decision-making that emerge from the movements.[19]

The first step, then, to understanding today's "leadership problem" is to reconstruct its political genealogies. As we said, leaders have been attacked by state and right-wing forces with a wide range of legal and extralegal tactics, but, more important, they have been prevented from emerging within the movements themselves. The critique of authority and verticality within the movements has become so generalized that leadership is viewed as contrary to the movements' goals. Liberation movements can no longer produce leaders—or, better, leadership is incompatible with the movements due to their challenges to authority, undemocratic structures, and centralized decision-making along with the critiques of representation and the practice of speaking for others. The movements have cut off their own head, so to speak, operating under the assumption that their acephalous body can organize itself and act autonomously. The internal critique of leadership thus leads us directly to the problematic of organization.

One exception that proves the rule: when leaders of liberation movements appear today they must be masked.[20] The masked subcomandante Marcos, until recently the primary voice of the Zapatistas, is emblematic. His mask served not only to prevent recognition by the Mexican police and the army but also to maintain an ambiguous relation with the democracy of the Zapatista communities. The mask marked his status as a *sub*comandante (undercutting the traditional military title) and allowed him to insist that "Marcos" is not an individual but a placeholder for all the subordinated: "Marcos is a gay person in San Francisco," he asserted, "a black person in South Africa, an Asian person in Europe, a Chicano in San Isidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, an indigenous person in the streets of San Cristobal."[21] Beatriz (Paul) Preciado recognizes in Marcos's mask an act of disidentification in line with

the most radical queer and transgender practices: "Zapatista, queer, and trans experiences invite us to de-privatize the face and the name so as to transform the body of the multitude into a collective agent of revolution."[22] But even the mask is not enough. On May 25, 2014, Marcos announced that his figure had always been merely a hologram for the movement and would cease to exist.[23] Even the mask of the leader must fade away.

The problem today. We need to take up the problem of leadership under current conditions and investigate two primary tasks: how to construct organization without hierarchy; and how to create institutions without centralization. Both of these projects contain the materialist intuition that constructing a lasting political framework does not need a transcendent power standing above or behind social life, that is, that political organization and political institutions do not require sovereignty.

This marks a profound break from the political logics of modernity. And it should be no surprise that the clear light that allows us to recognize these truths today, at the twilight of modernity, resembles the illumination of modernity's dawn. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, several authors in central Europe, including Johannes Althusius and Baruch Spinoza, fought against the theorists of sovereignty and the absolutist state in England and France, such as Thomas Hobbes and Jean Bodin, to pose alternative political visions. For centuries, princes and the social classes they ruled, the governors and the governed, clashed in assemblies in tests of their respective power. The first charters and constitutional documents, Sandro Chignola explains, were granted as recognition of the power of the ruled. The rulers and ruled, he says, formed the geometrical figure not of a circle (with a single center) but an ellipse (around two central points): "Historically, the governed social classes are the ones that provoked the princes and constrained them to draft statutes and documents that recognized libertates and immunity. And, vice versa, the incitement that the princes exercised on those social classes, trying to manage their challenges and to govern their otherwise irreducible resistance, is what helps to trace the outline of the ellipse."[24] We have no desire, of course, to return to the political arrangements of premodern Europe, but some of the truths of those struggles can still serve us today. Yes, we need to resist every form of leadership that repeats modern sovereignty, but we also need to rediscover what many knew long ago: sovereignty does not define the entire field of politics, and nonsovereign forms of organization and institution can be powerful and lasting.