



# THIRD TEXT

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# Revolution in the Post-Fordist Revolution? Notes on the Internet as a Weapon of the Multitude

Gene Ray

In 2005, four members of the collective Retort published *Afflicted Powers*, a compelling analysis of the new global mutation of primitive accumulation they call ‘military neo-liberalism’.<sup>1</sup> The book grew out of a broadsheet the group wrote for the global anti-war protests of 15 February 2003, which turned out to be the largest linked demonstrations in world history; ‘Neither Their War Nor Their Peace’ offered two pages of ‘negative wisdom addressed to comrades in a dark and confusing time’.

The appalling destruction of Lebanon has spurred Retort to follow up these trenchant texts with a new broadsheet, this one bitterly titled ‘All Quiet on the Eastern Front’. Among its eleven paragraphs of lucid observations and critical propositions is the assertion that the ‘balance of power in the image-world is changing’. As never before, the reality ‘at the heart of modernity’ has been exposed to view. ‘For more than a century, modernity and state terror from the air – modernity and mass civilian death – have been mutually constituent terms. But never before so instantly, so vividly, so ubiquitously.’<sup>2</sup> Retort points to the material basis of this shift with a biting quotation of US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s whining complaints about the brutal new context in which Empire must fight its wars of systemic enforcement:

Today we’re engaged in the first war in history – unconventional and irregular as it may be – in an era of e-mails, blogs, cell phones, Blackberrys, Instant Messaging, digital cameras, a global Internet with no inhibitions, hand-held videocameras, talk radio, 24-hour news broadcasts, satellite television. There’s never been a war fought in this environment before.<sup>3</sup>

Scrutinising this list of demons haunting the sleep of the war technocrat-in-chief, we can rapidly separate apparatuses of corporate and public sector media subordinated to the rule of profit and state administration

1 Retort (Iain Boal, T J Clark, Joseph Matthews, and Michael Watts), *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*, Verso, London, 2005. Retort, a note on the cover tells us, is ‘a gathering of antagonists to capital and empire, based for two decades in the San Francisco Bay Area’.

2 Retort, ‘All Quiet on the Eastern Front’, *New Left Review*, 41, September/October 2006, available online at <http://info.interactivist.net/article.pl?sid=06/08/12/1824240&mode=nested&tid=8>

3 *Ibid.* The source is identified as Rumsfeld’s speech to the Council on Foreign Relations, 17 February 2006.

(talk radio, twenty-four-hour news broadcasts, satellite television) from independent means of production and uncensored networks of communications (all the other items on his hate list). It is furthermore clear that ‘a global Internet with no inhibitions’ – the open, distributed network that makes possible the rapid and uncontrolled planetary dissemination of images and discourses – is the techno-material factor that links all the mobile micro-means of production and tips the balance of power in the image-world.

If events have not made us reflexively hostile to every glimmer of optimism, we might be willing to read here some confirmation of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s claims about the revolutionary and radically democratic potential of contemporary conditions. Why should this not be recognised as an attempt by the emergent global multitude to appropriate the material means of post-Fordist modes of production and turn them against Empire? As far as I can see, this is a precise and accurate theoretical description of what is going on. The caveat, by which some pessimism is bound to return, is that the balance of power in the image-world does not in itself suffice to negate the brute force of real systemic power. While losses in the image war are sabotaging the machines of consensus and further subverting a damaged hegemony, the multitude still shows few signs of organising itself into the forms of practical agency that could push what is now perhaps a crisis of legitimacy in the direction of a global revolutionary situation.

### POST-FORDISM, ITALIAN STYLE

The intense debates generated by the Italian Autonomist Marxist analysis of so-called post-Fordist modes of production have been driven up to now by three books: Hardt and Negri’s widely disseminated *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004), and Paolo Virno’s *A Grammar of the Multitude* (2004). The Autonomist interpretation of post-Fordism is inseparable from the search for a revolutionary passage beyond capitalism. The theoretical work of Negri, Virno, Maurizio Lazzarato, Bifo (Franco Berardi), and others today associated with the renewal of Italian Autonomist Marxism reflects the experience of specific revolutionary struggles to abolish the system of wage labour. From *Operaismo* in the 1960s to the Autonomia movement of the 1970s, through the decades of repression, imprisonment and exile that followed, the Italian Autonomists have kept faith with their revolutionary aims. Within Autonomist theory, the analysis of post-Fordism belongs to the project of rethinking the problems of revolution and trying to determine what new forms, agencies and temporalities may be available today. This clearly distinguishes it from all analyses of contemporary conditions that conclude or dogmatically assume that revolution is dead and that no passage beyond capitalism is possible.

In his 2004 preface to a new edition of *The Politics of Subversion* (1984), Negri offers a summary formula for the meaning of post-Fordism: ‘more exploitation’ but also a ‘greater chance of revolution’.<sup>4</sup> By now the Autonomist arguments have become familiar. Like neo-liberalism, the new forms and modes of production are a systemic response to widespread wage struggles and social uprisings in the late

4 Antonio Negri, *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century*, trans James Newell, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2005, p x

1960s. Nixon's uncoupling of the dollar from the gold standard removed the basis for stable international currency exchange rates and signalled the end of Keynesian state mediation between labour and capital. Dispersing the factories into networks of 'just in time' production linked and coordinated by global networks of communication apparently defuses the explosive concentration of workers at centralised points of Fordist production. But the demands of networked post-Fordism and the increasingly central role of communications at every stage and level of the production process result in a generalised connectivity that is potentially far more explosive than the old Fordist factories.

In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri weave numerous contemporary tendencies and potentials into a portrait of an emerging world system in which the old system of nation-states and sovereign national territories is giving way to a planetary pyramid of power (expressed in the triad 'bomb, money, ether'), and in which capitalist modes of exploitation are mutating into forms of biopower that manage 'hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command'.<sup>5</sup> In *Multitude*, they trace the emergent forms of subjectivity and agency that will be the antagonists to Empire. The multitude is the object of the new post-Fordist exploitation, but it is also the subject of resistance and 'constituent power'.

Virno's book offers helpful theoretical elaborations of this emergent subjectivity. Drawing an analogy to Gaston Bachelard, Virno sketches the multitude from the perspective of various heterogeneous 'predicates', or concepts and notions borrowed from across the disciplines. The term renews the notion Spinoza developed to counter the Hobbesian sovereign: in the register of traditional political theory, the multitude is a 'plurality' that refuses the synthesising one of a People or State. In the 'Day Two: Labor, Action, Intellect' section of his book, Virno develops the multitude as the subject of post-Fordist production. His discussion there has catapulted two predicates in particular – 'virtuosity' and 'general intellect' – to the centre of current debates on the nature and workings of post-Fordism.

Productive labour in the Fordist mode was linked to the production of physical commodities, what Virno calls 'activity-with-end-product'. Under post-Fordism surplus value is extracted from labour forms that no longer have any links to the production of physical commodities ('activity-without-end-product', or 'virtuosity').<sup>6</sup> Such forms always existed in the service economies of capitalism but now they are becoming tendentially dominant. For the Autonomist analysts, the decisive shift is in the qualitatively new role for communication and cooperation within both the production and reproduction processes. Now, 'advanced capitalism directly appropriates laboring cooperation'.<sup>7</sup> This 'laboring cooperation' is the generalised capacity every person has to communicate and cooperate with others.

The Autonomists developed this idea by re-functioning Marx's notion of 'general intellect' from the so-called 'Fragment on Machines' in Notebook VII of the *Grundrisse*. There the term denotes the accumulated technical and scientific knowledge that is concentrated in factory machines; for Marx, general intellect is a form or aspect of 'fixed capital', a power of knowledge objectified in the physical machinery and plant of the factory.<sup>8</sup> The Autonomists re-conceptualise general intellect

- 5 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2000, p xii-iii
- 6 Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson, Semiotext[e], Los Angeles–New York, 2004, p 54
- 7 Negri, *Politics of Subversion*, op cit, p 116
- 8 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans Martin Nicolaus, Penguin and NLR, London, 1973, p 706, Marx's italics: 'Nature builds no machines, no locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules etc. These are products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature, or of human participation in nature. They are *organs of the human brain, created by the human hand*; the power of knowledge, objectified. The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a *direct force of production*, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it.'

- 9 'General Intellect, Exodus, Multitude: Interview with Paolo Virno', *Archipelago*, 54, trans Nate Holdren, available online at: <http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpvirno2.htm>
- 10 Virno, *Grammar of the Multitude*, op cit, p 37
- 11 Ibid, p 63
- 12 An early and cogent critique of Negri's optimistic interpretation of post-Fordism was made by George Caffentzis of the Midnight Notes Collective in 1998. Caffentzis reaffirms the global operations of the 'law of value' and sees little anti-capitalist potential in Negri's 'socialized worker' or 'cyborg'. For Caffentzis, the actual anti-capitalist struggles are mainly taking place in the global South, where systemic capital sites the violent measures it develops to counteract the tendentially falling rate of profit generated by post-Fordist automation and reorganization: "New enclosures" in the countryside must accompany the rise of "automatic processes" in industry, the computer requires the sweatshop, and the cyborg's existence is premised on the slave." Constantine George Caffentzis, 'The End of Work or the Renaissance of Slavery? A Critique of Rifkin and Negri' [1998], available online at <http://www.korontomedia.net/otonomi/caffentzis.html>. Hardt and Negri respond to this line of criticism in *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Penguin, New York, 2004, pp 103-58, among other places; arguably these criticisms are taken into account in the most recent conceptual elaborations of the multitude. See also Nick Dyer-Witherford's scrupulous discussion of these issues in 'Cyber-Negri: General Intellect and Immaterial Labor', in *The Philosophy of Antonio Negri: Resistance in*

as the 'labor power' of 'living labor'. That is, as potential, a basic aggregate of human corporeal and intellectual aptitudes and capacities – not as a power that is necessarily turned over to and installed in machines, but rather as what can be retained as a basic capacity of human minds and bodies. Thus Virno's formula: 'general intellect = living labor in place of fixed capital'.<sup>9</sup> As the capacity for language, communication and cooperation, the general intellect is the very core of labour power. It is this irreducible potential that the post-Fordist form of capitalism increasingly tends to highlight, valorise and move to the centre of all production. In the old Fordist scheme, virtuosic performances of this capacity for communication and cooperation were the last thing expected from de-skilled factory workers. In the post-Fordist mode of production, the Autonomist argument goes, productive labour itself tends to become virtuosic. Workers no longer merely produce products; they now produce the conditions for production as such. Enter the sexy code-artists, image-wizards and creative entrepreneurs of the new cognitive capitalism.

Behind its glossy imaginary, however, post-Fordism brings a qualitative increase in exploitation. The virtuoso is in fact a wage slave chained by data lines and microwaves to networks of open-source production. The reality spreading behind the visible rise of the wired virtuoso is grim. Capitalism now begins to exploit directly what Virno calls the 'apotropaic resource of the contemporary multitude': the 'fundamental core of the "life of the mind"'.<sup>10</sup> Once the general intellect itself is made an object of direct exploitation, the old borders between work and its outside begin to break down and every aspect of social life is absorbed into the new production process. As Virno puts it:

Nobody is as poor as those who see their own relation to the presence of others, that is to say, their own communicative faculty, their own possession of a language, reduced to wage labor.<sup>11</sup>

For the Autonomists, the persistence of sweatshops and Fordist factories is no refutation.<sup>12</sup> This qualitative leap in exploitation will tendentially reach and restructure all forms and modes of production. Under post-Fordism, the production of commodities and the social reproduction of life converge. This, I take it, is what Negri means by the 'real subsumption'. The passage from the formal to the real subsumption of labour under capitalism is the subsumption of all social life under wage slavery.<sup>13</sup>

In the Autonomist view, however, this situation also brings with it new systemic antagonisms and revolutionary potentials. Capitalism cannot mobilise the general intellect (ie, social life as such) for direct exploitation without at the same time vastly increasing the critical and creative potential – constituent power – of the multitude. The technological infrastructure that makes possible intensified exploitation also links people up in ways that cannot be controlled. The Internet is the obvious example. This distributed network of global communication, developed for military uses but quickly becoming the indispensable basis for transnational 'just in time' production and everyday business operations, can be appropriated and inverted by the multitude. Enter the hacker and hacktivist. From widespread practices of file-sharing and digital piracy, to denial-of-service attacks on the websites of select

corporations and state agencies, to the digital organisation of the great counter-globalisation and anti-war demonstrations of recent years, the example of the Internet shows that the multitude is willing and able to turn the instruments of its exploitation to its own advantage. Whether such contemporary forms of the capitalist contradiction can become revolutionary is of course the big question.

### THE REPUBLIC OF NON-SERVILE VIRTUOSITY

Virno is careful to acknowledge the emotional ‘ambivalence’ of the multitude. There is nothing in the structure of the ‘emotional situation’ created by post-Fordism to indicate that the multitude will necessarily be inclined to use its opportunities to enlighten and liberate itself, let alone develop into a revolutionary force. The ‘neutral core’ of its emotional register can manifest the ‘bad’ sentiments of opportunism, cynicism and resignation just as easily as the ‘better’ sentiments of generosity, solidarity and the courage to change and take risks.<sup>14</sup> Virtuosity can develop either into ‘servile’ forms, tending toward the negation of autonomy and the proliferation of hierarchies in contexts dominated by the ‘hypertrophic growth’ of state administrative apparatuses; or else into ‘non-servile’ forms that tend toward the construction of non-state public spheres as a shared field for political cooperation and experiments in radical, non-representational democracy.<sup>15</sup> For Virno, the character of the multitude does favour two forms of politicised struggle. ‘Exit’ – or as he puts it elsewhere, ‘exodus’ – is a practice of active flight and ‘unrestrained invention which alters the rules of the game and throws the adversary completely off balance’. And the ‘right to resistance’ is a resolve to defend those traditional or de facto rights and prerogatives that were won through struggle or installed through the use of constituent power.<sup>16</sup>

For Virno, the non-servile form that the virtuosity of the multitude can take tends toward the formation of a non-state public sphere. Virno’s public sphere is not identical to the bourgeois or liberal public sphere theorised by Jürgen Habermas. Like the bourgeois public sphere, Virno’s is a ‘political space in which the many can tend to common affairs’ and which is characterised by its autonomy from the state.<sup>17</sup> It is a ‘non-public public sphere’, a ‘non-governmental public sphere, far from the myths and rituals of sovereignty’.<sup>18</sup> Sometimes he even calls it a ‘republic’: ‘The *general intellect*, or public intellect, if it does not become a *republic*, a public sphere, a political community, drastically increases forms of submission.’<sup>19</sup> The general intellect and virtuosity of the multitude are always at risk of becoming servile or submissive if these do not appear and unfold in the right kind of ‘publicness’. A ‘*publicness without a public sphere*’ produces ‘terrifying effects’: personal dependence and the ‘*unchecked proliferation of hierarchies*’.<sup>20</sup>

Unlike the bourgeois or liberal public sphere, however, Virno’s is also defined by its opposition to wage labour. It forms ‘outside’ the wage relation and ‘in opposition to it’.<sup>21</sup>

The general intellect asserts itself as an autonomous public sphere only if the juncture that ties it to the production of goods and wage labor is severed.<sup>22</sup>

*Practice*, eds Timothy S Murphy and Abdul-Karim Mustapha, Pluto, London, 2005, especially pp 146–61.

13 See for example Negri, *Politics of Subversion*, op cit, pp 84–5; Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, op cit, p 25.

14 Virno, *Grammar of the Multitude*, op cit, pp 84–8

15 *Ibid*, pp 40–1, 66–71

16 *Ibid*, pp 69–70; see also Paolo Virno, ‘Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus’, in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, eds Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996, available online at <http://info.interactivist.net/>

17 Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, op cit, p 40

18 *Ibid*

19 *Ibid*, p 41

20 *Ibid*, pp 40, 41

21 *Ibid*, p 68

22 *Ibid*

What Virno has in mind here is the *sharing* of the capacity for communication and cooperation for the purpose of tending to ‘common affairs’.<sup>23</sup> As post-Fordist modes of production are now directly exploiting this capacity and bringing it under the wage relation (a form of publicness without a public sphere), it is necessary to reclaim the general intellect by giving it a de-commodifying form of publicness. In Hardt and Negri, this oppositional publicness is also called [real] ‘democracy’.

Conceived as a space beyond the state and liberal representational politics but also beyond the relentless commodification of social life, Virno’s public sphere is a ‘republic’ where the multitude meets to discover what it has in common and to reach decisions about that commonality. It is also a space of creation and construction, in which skills and capacities are shared and developed collectively in common projects of invention. In Hardt and Negri, the common-republic is both the basis of cooperation and collective action, and their result: ‘The production of the multitude launches the common in an expanding, virtuous circle.’<sup>24</sup> The radical republic is the sphere of constituent power and it ‘appears’ every time the multitude reclaims this power to cooperate and invent on its own terms, for its own ends, and each time the multitude generalises autonomy by giving the general intellect this special kind of publicness.

Here Virno and Negri are reflecting their experience of *Autonomia*, a robust movement of workplace militants, precarious and unemployed workers, women, students and cultural ‘marginals’. From the early 1970s to its repression by the Italian state in 1979, the militants of *Autonomia* invented new forms of anti-capitalist culture and struggle, including ‘proletarian shopping’ and the organised ‘auto-reduction’ of prices, rents, transportation fares, and concert and cinema admissions, as well as pirate radio and squatted social and cultural centres.<sup>25</sup> During this combative period, similar pockets and bases of radical culture were created and defended in cities across the world. In its tenacity and duration, however, *Autonomia* is a perhaps unequalled historical example of a republic based on non-servile virtuosity.

### ***DIGITAL VIRTUOSITY, CULTURE INDUSTRY, COUNTER-SPECTACLE***

In his elaboration of virtuosity and the general intellect, Virno briefly discusses the Frankfurt School notion of the ‘culture industry’ and the Situationist notion of the ‘society of the spectacle’. These passing invocations raise more questions than they answer but at least establish that a critical articulation of these two bodies of theory with the Italian Autonomist Marxist interpretation of post-Fordism is an urgent task today.<sup>26</sup>

Here are some preliminary thoughts. If, as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argued, the social functions of industrialised and administered ‘culture’ in late capitalism are systematically to inculcate resignation, conformity and accommodationism, and to block the development of rebellious and revolutionary impulses, then under post-Fordist capitalism the Internet may mark the emergence of a new cultural sphere beyond the control of ‘administration’. Or, to say the same thing in Guy Debord’s Situationist idiom, if the social power of the spectacle

23 Ibid, p 41

24 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude*, op cit, p 350

25 Virno, *Grammar of the Multitude*, op cit, p 99; Antonio Negri with Anne Dufourmantelle, *Negri on Negri*, trans M B DeBevoise, Routledge, New York and London, 2004, pp 14–15. Accounts of Italian *Autonomia* in English are few and hard to come by. Of works now in print, Steve Wright’s *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, Pluto Press, London, 2002 and the essays in Murphy and Mustapha, eds, *The Philosophy of Antonio Negri*, op cit, are indispensable. Semiotext(e) has promised to reissue its *Italy: Autonomia, Post-Political Politics*, Semiotext(e), New York, 1980. See also Robert Lumley, *States of Emergency: Cultures of Revolt in Italy, 1968–78*, Verso, London, 1990.

26 Virno, *Grammar of the Multitude*, op cit, pp 56–61

- 27 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans Donald Nicholson-Smith, Zone, New York, 1995, p 22
- 28 Ibid, p 60. Virno makes Debord into a Spinozan here. Deleuze seems to be the mediator by which Spinoza enters Italian Autonomist thought. Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* [1970], trans Robert Hurley, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1988, pp 17–18: ‘We speak of consciousness and its decrees, of the will and its effects, of the thousand ways of moving the body, of dominating the body and passions – *but we do not even know what a body can do.*’ Thanks to Steven Corcoran for his help in tracking down this reference.
- 29 Geert Lovink, *Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002
- 30 State surveillance of electronic communications is one direction of threat. Indications of the reality and scale of state surveillance capacities have come to light in the recent exposure of collaborations between the telecommunications industry and the US National Security Agency. The future battle now appears to be shaping up around the principle of ‘net neutrality’. Three networks active in fighting for a free Internet are the Center for Digital Democracy, <http://www.democraticmedia.org>; the Electronic Frontier Foundation, <http://www.eff.org/>; and the Electronic Privacy Information Center, <http://www.epic.org/>.

works by linking spectators in a ‘one-way relationship to a center’, so that it ‘unites what is separate, but unites it only *in its separateness*’,<sup>27</sup> then the Internet is potentially a source of counter-spectacle that reconnects and reactivates subjects and in which images that negate and dissolve the unified image of power can circulate. The spectacle does not, as Virno reads Debord to mean, ‘reveal what men and women *can do*’.<sup>28</sup> The opposite is the case: it shows us the image of our impotence. Dispossessed of historical agency, we can only accommodate ourselves to a given that affirms itself as unchangeable with all the power of brute fact. The message of both the spectacle and the culture industry is that resistance is futile. But, just maybe, the Internet, as the anarchic medium of counter-images, is beginning to reveal ‘what men and women *can do*’.

Of course, we would need immediately to qualify this in various ways. We would need, first, to repudiate the whole neo-liberal discourse in which the Internet is mystified as the Smiling Utopia of Networked Personal Computing. So far, our new micro-chipped commodities of liberation have mainly been deployed against us, as the flexible instrument of intensified exploitation and surveillance. We will need to retain all the scepticism and remember all the warnings expressed by Geert Lovink and others who already in the 1990s were refusing the ‘California ideology’ and attempting to establish a ‘critical Internet culture’.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, we will have to fight to keep the Internet anarchic and basically free from administration. After all, servers and material infrastructure are still mostly in State and corporate hands. If Rumsfeld is raging against an ‘Internet with no inhibitions’, we can be sure that steps to discipline and neutralise it are high on power’s agenda.<sup>30</sup> Still, this is surely a possibility worth fighting for.

The last and most important qualification: if in fact we are now beginning to make and show ourselves the virtual image of what we *can do*, it still remains for us *to do it*. That means eventually putting our bodies on the line with others in real struggle.

Virno’s thesis is that, under post-Fordism, the culture and communications industries have become testing grounds for new forms of communication and cooperation that will eventually be deployed elsewhere in production processes. We could add that these are not the only testing grounds. The capitalist art system probably also takes on this function, in addition to its traditional affirmative ones. Indeed the more radical conclusion would be that life itself has become one big testing ground for new forms of exploitation. The ‘real subsumption’ of social life under capital does not mean that passages to the outside are now utterly excluded. However, building and defending durable republics of radical culture will not be a simple or painless task.

As the techno-material basis of networked connectivity, the Internet puts the multitude in touch with itself. Let us grant that the multitude is in the process of learning what it can do with this connectivity. The Internet raises well-marked problems of access and the condensed, hierarchical divisions of labour embedded in information technologies. But assuming the trends toward universal access continue and assuming that the common core of communicative capacities is to some degree directly translatable into digital literacy, we can also grant that the Internet is basically a politically neutral technology. Everything depends on concrete uses and situations. Provided the autonomy it now enjoys can

be defended against the encroachments of administration that surely are coming, the Internet can be a virtual space for a radical, anti-capitalist public sphere – for all the communicative forms and cooperative practices possible in and appropriate to cyberspace. And cyberspatial events can certainly produce effects in the ‘real world’. Still, virtual bodies and real bodies are not the same. Politics and struggle are, at the end of the day, an affair of real bodies in real places.

The circulation of counter-images is already an indispensable critical function of the Internet. Today the lying images and utterances of Empire are immediately answered by ad hoc networks of autonomous media. This de-reifying circulation is what Retort points to – and Rumsfeld wrings his hands at. But it needs to be matched by networks of organised practice, actualisations of Negri’s constituent power. The Internet as counter-spectacle would have to be more than a circulation that merely reproduces existing structures of passive and isolated spectatorship. It would need to be not a liberal but a *radical* public sphere, in Virno’s sense: a means of production of new forms of organisation and militant action eventually capable of reaching the critical mass of anti-systemic agency. Here, Peoples’ Global Action, the Noborder network, the Anti-G8 Dissent! network, regional social forums and Euromayday are beginnings that go in the right direction.

For all the black holes of commerce and maelstroms of porn and idiocy to be found in the ether, promising hints of a networked militancy to come continue to emerge. Modest examples point to potentials. In spring 2005, a coalition of students, faculty and community members in Honolulu took direct action to block a Navy-funded centre for secret weapons-systems research at the University of Hawai’i. When the coalition took over the president’s offices and occupied them for a week, they turned his conference room into a bustling Indymedia centre. Their campaign website – complete with document archive, webcam, blog, and continuous uploads of photos and the coalition’s statements – soon caught the attention of student and activist networks on the mainland. The action was top story for several days on the main Indymedia website, with coverage and photos also reproduced on the San Diego, Bay Area, Portland and NYC IMC pages. The filmmaker Michael Moore picked up on the protest and hosted the occupation webcam on his own website, and Amy Goodman, the host of the important alternative daily news programme Democracy Now!, covered the action with a cell-phone interview. Solidarity emails poured in from around the world.<sup>31</sup>

This globalised reception served to ‘legitimise’ resistance to the planned Navy weapons lab, finally compelling local corporate media to acknowledge and report it. The direct action and its digital dissemination galvanised student and community support, exposed a back-door deal to public scrutiny and debate, and at least so far has scuttled the University’s fast-track embrace of the Empire’s war machine. Episodes like this lend a degree of credibility to Hardt and Negri’s claim in the opening of *Multitude* that ‘the possibility of democracy on a global scale is emerging today for the very first time’.<sup>32</sup>

31 See <http://www.stopuarc.info/>

32 Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, op cit, p xi

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I thank Brian Holmes and Gerald Raunig for helping me to think through the issues addressed in this article.

# Notes from the Beirut Siege

Rasha Salti

## *SIEGE NOTE 3*

*Dispatched 15 July 2006*

... I was the only one who seemed to have experienced the weariness, to be genuinely frustrated with having to face another round of the Arab–Israeli conflict. Everyone at the gathering seemed resigned to endure this dark and sinister moment. Everyone was busying themselves with analysis and speculation. Mind games, fictions, chimeras. I regretted expressing my weariness from the fight, from having to summon the energy to face Israel and defy the destruction of Lebanon. I felt as if I had betrayed a principle, a value, disrespected people's pain and suffering. I know a great number in the country shared my sentiments, the political debates on TV returned to the question tirelessly. Still, I felt 'smaller' than the historical moment demanded.

## *SIEGE NOTE 5*

*Dispatched 17 July 2006*

... By Day Five of the Siege, a new routine set in. 'Breaking news' fills the passage of time. You find yourself engaging with the strangest of activities: you catch a piece of breaking news, you leap to another room to announce it to family although they heard it too, and then you text-message it to others. Eventually you do become the actual messenger of some news to someone in the chain. Along the way you collect other pieces of 'breaking news' that you deliver back. Between two sets of such news, you gather up facts and try to add them up to fit a scenario. Then you recall previously mapped scenarios. Then you realise none works. Then you exhale. And zap. Until the next piece of news comes. It just gets uglier. You fear night. For some reason, you believe the shelling will get worse at night, when vision is impaired, when darkness cloaks