



Theory of the Multitude

Akseli Virtanen and Jussi Vähämäki

The breeze blowing from Seattle and Genova broke the immovable air of the desert that, like a television screen, was suffocating sense of life. It gave a voice to the life that was lying underneath: muttering, groaning and complaining, but also living, working and producing new forms of life which before these events seemed unattainable. The voice was that of a new kind of subjectivity, the *multitude*. As a word multitude is both old and young. It was cast out in the dawn of modernity but it never ceased to haunt its political and economic organization. As a concept it makes a giant leap over the modern world into the past and destructs the carefully guarded distinctions between past and future, theory and practice, necessity and possibility, nature and culture.

The desert is now buzzing with life that wants to create the world in its own image. But as an image it risks to remain a purely extensive and descriptive category, only an image of thought. What *ephemera* wants to do is to go beyond this image, into that what is spoken under the visible and touch that which constitutes the body of the multitude giving it intensity, depth and memory. Our aim is not to give a complete reproduction of the concept in its history and in its present actuality, but to show that as a concept it introduces a kind of a new 'person' inside contemporary society, a person whose very existence transforms basic structures and institutions of politics and economy. We believe that only when we hear the voice that is speaking under the desert, the movements that create the wind, all the actions and differences we see on the surface acquire their sense.

In his article, 'Who Killed God Pan?', Christian Marazzi analyzes the crisis of monetary sovereignty that turns monetary politics into a variable that depends on the stock markets. The new architecture of production and exchange of the riches in the post-fordist economy has constructed in language the *space* of the multitude. Now the multitude is the figure of money, the form of its sovereignty. And it has the wisdom and the power to kill the God Pan, the herdsman who makes the flock manageable and who has had traditionally the function of hoarding in the exchange process.

According to Maurizio Lazzarato, we are today faced with a form of the accumulation of capital that is no longer only based on the exploitation of labour in the industrial sense of the term, but on the exploitation of *life*. What organizations produce and sell not only includes material or immaterial goods, but also forms of communication, standards of socialization and perception, models of education, housing and

transportation. It is not so much the production of ‘goods’ but the production of the rigidity of convictions and the solidity of passions that is the condition of capitalist valorization today: capitalism does not first arrive with factories but with words, signs and images. Capitalism tries to control the conditions of the process of constitution of difference and repetition, i.e. the movements of the multitude.

For the first time these movements or that general potentiality which makes human beings ‘human beings’ and which belongs to everyone – yet is no one’s property – is stepping forward to our immediate experience from behind its actual use or its actual meaning. This is, as Akseli Virtanen argues, what defines economy and our experience of it today. He uses the concept of *general economy* to argue that economy has reached the zone of indistinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*, labour and action, life and politics, communication and the faculty of language in general. This zone of indistinction is the source of the crisis of restricted economy where its conception of time and value can no longer grasp ‘that’ which creates value. To say that economy has become general is to say that multitude, society itself is productive. The foundation of production is no longer in capitalist investment but in the investment of social brains. The factory-office and its borders have dissolved into society, into a multitude of productive singularities whose productivity cannot be reduced to actual production, to any actual mode of existence, to any historical time. It is activity that does not materialize into machinery or products but rather retreats from materiality and turning into actual products.

It is impossible to organize and control a labour force that has turned into a ‘mental category’ through its spatial conditions or through the actual deeds it performs (as in disciplinary society). This is why Jussi Vähämäki argues that the presence of multitude forces capitalism to invent new kind of tools, methods of the mind or ‘mental politics’ whose logic Vähämäki unfolds through the concept of *commonplace*. The modern production process is a production of commonplaces, a production of general precondition to every discourse, action and knowledge which capital searches from the space and unity of the multitude itself, from language as such. Commonplaces do not transmit any significant or meaningful information. It is impossible to learn them or teach them through their content. It has no sense to discuss their relevance or to contest them. It is only possible to copy, imitate and follow them: they are structured like pure commands. These commands constitute now the grammar of the mode of power that is replacing the old disciplinary and biopolitical tools.

Katie Vann gets down to the specifics of value theory utilized in the analysis and the practice of post-fordist production. She debates the waning of transcendental ordering practices and the self-valorizing power of labour. Vann argues that the capitalist *embrace of difference* has a constitutive role in the commodification process. The managerial inscriptions of labouring activity have a performative function that turns on the capacity of language through which a reflection of particular forms of exchange – for which production is organized – is brought to life. Indeed, perhaps we could say that we do not lack communication, but rather we have too much of it. What we lack is creation, resistance to the present.

But how is it then possible to create; how is it possible to resist the present? Sandro Mezzadra shows how the progressive removal of every obstacle from the movement and

circulation of goods, services and capital is accompanied by the multiplication and rearmament of borders against migrants and refugees. The free movement of knowledge and free usage of human intelligence is accompanied by a rigid control and shameless destruction of human bodies that carry knowledge and create ideas. This process together with the dynamics of globalization is changing the whole configuration of democracy and the notions of citizenship and wage work in western societies. Yet the mobility of migrant women and men is an expression of a series of subjective movements of escape from the rigidities of the international division of labour. These *movements of escape* constitute one of the eradicated and denied motors of the radical transformations which have influenced the capitalist mode of production during the last two hundred years.

Multitude is thus not only that which can do something. If we wish to think multitude as a new kind of subjectivity, we have to also ask what produces this subjectivity. For this reason Pekka Piironen distinguishes three forms of economy: in the first form (limited bourgeois form) multitude appears as something measurable. In the second form (the analyses of post-fordist production) communication has entered production. The analyses of the second form are the best description of the contemporary economy but they are, as Piironen argues, still insufficient in determining *that* which produces the problem of economy, the multitude. This is then the task Piironen assigns to what he calls the *third form of economy* where multitude and economy belong together: the third form makes it possible to think that multitude intends to achieve an end. But this intentionality does not serve as means towards an end. Rather, the multitude with intentionality dwells in facticity where thinking about element and technique are mixed. The third form of economy makes it possible to move on from the definitions of multitude to stating the question ‘*What should we do?*’.

The setting of this problem for thinking is the essential political problem. Ole Fogh Kirkeby addresses it by a theory of the way in which we are able to relate to the event. The event is the active, creative centre in the middle of our lives which we carry with us and without which there would be no change. But we are only able to relate to the event *by proving worthy to it*. We are centres of incalculable actions (general potential to produce) but cannot endure the merciless potentiality of the event: we are unable to become those who we are not. This is our tragic and happy obligation to become, the game of necessity and fate we are playing. We are obliged to act in relation to that which actually is in our power but have to change the world in the name of the unnameable, that is, in approaching and even handling the event and its inherent zones in our capacity of bodies which are corporeal hostages of reality. To do this in a way *equal to the event* means the uniting of theory and practice, of being ready and prepared to give assent to reality by creating it, by being its motor of transformation. Without thinking our relation to the event as multitude’s mode of being, the multitude will remain abstract, deprived of meaning or of what Deleuze calls ‘intuition’, and we are thus unable to determine the conditions of problems, expose false problems and discover variables under which the problem of economy and politics must today be stated correctly. Or to put it differently, without developing this *memory*, multitude will remain just a reactive series of sensations following one and another and thus unable to create and change (become) – to *organize in accordance with life*.

We are convinced that some of the key concepts employed in the issue – concepts such as *multitude*, *event*, *mimesis*, *linguistic resistance*, *escape*, *cooperation between minds*, *firm without factories*, *commons*, *general economy*, *whatever subjectivity*, *tools of the mind*, *means without ends*, *noopolitics*, *intuition*, *memory* – outline the terrain on which we move tomorrow and with the help of which the economics and politics of wealth are understood. This attempt to find words for things that exist but do not yet have words or specific meanings points to the need to create new concepts, a new ‘language’ or a new sense to the movements that we see developing in different parts of the world and ‘environments’. This is maybe the most obvious connection this special issue has with the tradition of Italian operaismo – the unorthodox wing of European workers’ movement which never accepted work as the defining aspect of human life. When work or production in its traditional sense is not anymore a centre of human life and at the same time in life there is nothing but work and production, we have to create new forms of resistance, new ways to create the good life. For this we have to look directly into the eye of our *power to do anything*. We already feel its breeze in our face.

the editors

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