



The Anamorphosis of Living Labour

Antonio Conti, Anna Curcio, Alberto De Nicola, Paolo Do, Serena Fredda,
Margherita Emiletti, Serena Orazi, Gigi Roggero, Davide Sacco, Giuliana Visco

translated by Arianna Bove

abstract

In this essay we analyse the category of co-research, which comes from the method and style of Italian *Operaismo*, in order to evidence its difference with respect to other forms of research, first of all the sociological and academic ones, but also the workers' inquiry. Said difference is purely political. In fact, the traditional inquiries within the labour movement are mainly concerned with the production of knowledge understood as a neutral activity, to be used by an external representative subject, whether the party or the trade union. The co-research, on the contrary, tries to knock down the separation between production of knowledge and subjectivity, and the development of political organisation. Nevertheless, with respect to the 1960s and 1970s, the decades of operaista co-research, the framework is today deeply transformed. The space and time of work, and of the sociality and struggles of living labour in the Fordist era, are changed. We therefore have to re-think the co-research method, style and tool in the new space-time coordinates of 'cognitive capitalism', in the productive metropolis, and with the subjects of contemporary precarious labour. As the catoptrical anamorphosis refers to images that, when viewed normally, display indecipherable borders and look like monstrous and distorted 'optical depravities', we have to change our point of view, to recompose what seems the monster of the struggles of the multitude.

When looked at from a particular position in space or if reflected by particular devices, some distorted, monstrous and indecipherable images are recomposed, rectified, and finally display shapes that could not be perceived at first sight. For a long time knowledge of the ways these images were constructed was passed on like a secret magical doctrine; this was until to the fourth century, when anamorphic images became more popular. By the fifth century anamorphosis had spread through all treaties on perspective, architectural practices and the prolific speculations on optics of the time [...]. Art history commonly regards perspective as a realistic device used to restore the third dimension; but it is principally an artefact that can be used for any purpose [...]. Anamorphosis inverts the characteristics and principles of perspective: instead of gradually reducing shapes to their visible limits, it expands and projects them outside those limits to then disaggregate them so that they only reassemble in a second stage, when viewed from a determined point. It is a destruction that announces a restoration, an elusion that calls for a return. This process was established as a technical curiosity but it also involves a poetics of abstraction, a powerful mechanism of optical illusion and a philosophy of artificial reality.

Anamorphosis is a riddle, a monster, freaky. It is not an aberration that subdues reality to a mental vision, but an optical subterfuge whereby appearance surpasses reality. The system is intelligently

articulated: accelerated and delayed perspectives upset the balance of the natural order without destroying it; instead, anamorphic perspective annihilates it by applying the same principle but taking it to its extreme consequences. As a mechanism of vision, anamorphosis is also a mechanism of reason. (Baltrusaitis, 2004)

Catoptrical anamorphosis refers to images that, when viewed normally, display indecipherable borders and look like monstrous and distorted 'optical depravities'. The problem however is not their monstrosity but the observer's standpoint: the normality from which they are looked at. When our position in space changes and we move to a different place, these images and their unsettling borders are rectified and reshaped to finally reveal forms and objects that could not be seen at first sight. Perspective is thus removed from the field of a presumed objective existence and the rationality of the real shatters into thousands of pieces as soon as it faces the insurgence of a standpoint that cannot but look monstrous to the eyes of prejudiced normality. This is the monster of partiality.

It might seem odd to begin a paper on militant inquiry with this digression, but if we were to position ourselves in a particular standpoint and engage in anamorphic practice, this introduction would substantiate one of the premises of our thesis, that is: co-research is to social and workers' inquiry what *catoptrical anamorphosis* is to perspective in art history.

Researchers have hitherto taken pictures of the world, now it is time to change it. Activists have hitherto tried to change the world, now it is also time to interpret it. This double thesis could easily sum up the ambitious aim of co-research. At the same time, it highlights the risks involved when the concept of 'inquiry' is evoked. These risks consist in either an excessively sociological approach, *research* without *joint*, or in a militant underestimation of the production of knowledge, a *joint* without *research*. We also need to point out that the social sciences often lag behind practices of social and militant cooperation: for instance, the research activity much debated in Italian sociological circles is nothing but the *market-oriented* commercial version of co-research.

Co-research is an evocative term that alludes to a move beyond the classical sociological separation between interviewer and interviewee. Contrary to the claim of populist versions of inquiry, this is not done in the name of an ideological egalitarianism; rather it aims to build a process on the coordinates of the *common* and of *singularity*: a common process of multiple singularities in different positions and with different knowledge, rooted in the Italian tradition of *Operaismo* of the 1960s and 1970s (Wright, 2002; Borio, Pozzi and Roggero, 2005). In the 1950s, when the Italian Communist Party and trade unions claimed that all was quiet in the factories, various groups of *Operaista* militants started to employ the methods of co-research to bring to the surface, connect and organise the mass workers' underground forms of insubordination and resistance that were often aimed at saving energy and avoiding work, and would eventually explode the regime of control and wage labour in the following decade.

The methodological difference between workers' inquiry and co-research is purely political. The method is all but unimportant: on the contrary, in recent years, one of the

limitations of militant research has been its somewhat hastened approach to the consolidation of preset hypotheses that failed to take into consideration the process that produced new forms of knowledge and verified premises. This is not an academic issue of correct methodology; rather, it is a question of the ability to act politically. The traditional notion of inquiry within the workers' movement, even in its most innovative and explosive forms, employed the paradigms, scientific organisation and instruments of capitalism and questioned their goals rather than their merits.

In other words, it used to direct knowledge production towards political organisation rather than the market and commodification. On the one hand, this betrayed an implicit conception of science as something neutral, to appropriate and use in revolutionary activity; on the other, the production of knowledge was developed and used by an external subject, whether the party or the trade union, through a division of political and research remits. Unlike co-research, workers' inquiry was primarily cognitive and extemporaneous; it relied on an external agency for its development. On the contrary, the ambition of co-research is to try and do without this separation: the production of knowledge is immediately production of subjectivity and development of political organisation. An alternative research, knowledge and science will not be constituted in a more or less near future; it exists within the very process that produces co-research. Science is not just criticised for its uses, whilst being regarded as an intrinsic good that is spoilt by malicious ends; the critique of science lives in the radical practice of an immediate alternative and in the questioning of the epistemological foundation of knowledge. In this sense, unlike inquiry, co-research does not only aim to expose particular problems and contribute to increase knowledge; it also questions existing organisational models with the explicit aim to reinvent organisational forms and practices. Collective research is itself organisation, and it is irreducibly one-sided and partisan.

To sum up: workers' inquiry operates within the realm of representation; co-research is opposed to and tends to move beyond it. Workers' inquiry is mainly concerned with the production of knowledge understood as a neutral activity, co-research questions its control. In the words of a cyber punk writer, Bruce Sterling, "knowledge is just knowledge, but *power over knowledge* is politics" (Sterling, 1998).

The Space and Time of Co-Research

Let us begin with our limitations: the first of them is most evident. In recent years within the movement we have been witness to a disproportion between the talk on militant research and its actual production. Now we need to invert that tendency and *change signal*: we simply need to start producing it. To begin with, we need strong political hypotheses that can be verified and implemented in the process of inquiry and on the basis of which militant cooperation can be built. The starting point concerns the *space* and *time* of research. Old models of co-research and militant inquiry were based on the productive localisation and concentration of living labour, according to a temporal scansion determined by the linearity of the relation between factory and

territory; these models are basically useless, save for the skeleton of their political method.

For the past few years urban sociology has been describing the crisis of the Fordist metropolis, the outcome of a transition from the spatial proximity of place of residence and workplace to an increase in the phenomenon of commuting, even if that is rooted in a spatial linearity of displacements within and between city and periphery (work, workers' space, living space). The sociologist Guido Martinotti theorises the birth of a 'second-generation' metropolis and identifies the decrease in the *resident* population of central areas of urban systems and its related increase in suburban areas as the key dynamic of the transformation of the metropolis (Martinotti, 1993). According to Martinotti, a new subject emerges in the second generation metropolis and goes to join the categories of inhabitants and residents: this is the *city user*, i.e. the city consumer who intermittently and briefly visits the city whilst contributing to its economic growth. However, whilst concentrating on *city users*, Martinotti and other important analysts neglect or hide the possibility of articulating this new and second generation subject as a migrant, mobile, flexible and precarious labourer. The main characteristic of the second generation metropolis is in fact its explosion of the Fordist productive cycle (regulated by the rhythms of the factory) and the subsumption of the whole of life, 24/7, under the production cycle.

Another classical dialectics that is completely subverted in the metropolis is that of centre-periphery. There are two possible ways of reading this. The first sees the metropolitan area as no longer being determined by the subsidiary functional nature of centre and periphery, but as based on the dissemination of forms of production and command and of an element that exceeds and constantly *spills over* in relation to the centre. The second way of seeing it is from a global perspective. Briefly: in a subversion of the point of view according to which the West is an example of the future of so called 'non-developed' countries, we can assume that first and foremost we must look for a paradigm of metropolis in what was once known as the 'Third World'. On this issue, we refer the reader to Partha Chatterjee's description of postcolonial Calcutta in *The Politics of the Governed* (Chatterjee, 2004), or to Manuel Castells' analysis in *The Rise of the Network Society* (Castells, 1996), or Mike Davis's in *Planet of Slums* (Davis, 2006). Chatterjee, for instance, focuses on Calcutta and describes in detail the forms of contemporary governance and policies that can be seen as participative, the recomposition of class differences into communities, and all the issues we are currently faced with. If the social capital of industrial estates and the viscous power of community traditions are the grounds on which to manage a divided society and techniques of conflict management, the main problem of governing the metropolis consists of reducing its critical and radical elements to *stakeholders* (i.e. individuals involved in the company assets). Pressured by the struggles and mobility of subjects and their forms of hybridisation and recombination, capitalism is forced to keep reinventing itself as a politics of difference.

This raises the question of how to grasp the elements that are simultaneously situated and global in the development of metropolitan inquiry (V.V.A.A., 2000). In this respect we refer not only to the centrality of particular subjects and places, but also to points of precipitation and spatial-temporal coordinates where tendencies of

contemporaneousness are condensed and become immediately visible, through recombination and/or conflict. Metropolises are precisely these points of precipitation. But trends must be articulated as paradigms, because they are not a mirror to reflect the sure fate of other places. In the contiguity of the national, metropolitan and European dimensions – as the closest, also from an institutional point of view, to the global – we find the levels and grounds on which to root political action. Once again, in a change of perspective and via the crisis of the centre-periphery dialectics, it is only natural that the political laboratory of Latin America would feature the coordinates of space, time and action of the metropolis and the continent, even if differently expressed in the experiences of Argentina, Brazil or Venezuela.

How Do We Envisage Metropolitan Inquiry? Starting From Living Labour

Even after our admission that it no longer could work, we have thus far remained fixated on a level of diagnostics. We now need to take a step forward and theorise what would work and be adequate to our times and today's subjectivities. First of all we need to identify what our militant research will focus on: in brief, living labour and the expressions of singular and collective subjectivities; the labour market and productive realms; the subjects of governance and power structures; the places and forms of conflict.

Starting from there, we must seek to develop and experiment with a *flexible modelling* that is obviously not universally applicable, but adaptable and situated, yet *reproducible* at the same time. Schematically, we can outline five levels of development for metropolitan inquiry:

- 1) the labour market, the realms and environments of production;
- 2) the places of conflict and forms of resistance, whether open or underground;
- 3) the places of the metropolis;
- 4) the places of mobility;
- 5) the places and forms of governance and control.

Once the metropolis is identified as the space proper to co-research, and the trends of the labour market are outlined and chartered alongside areas of production and governance, we need to go back to the beginning, that is, the mobile and flexible subjectivities of contemporary living labour.

In the past few years the issue of precarious labour in Italy met an editorial 'fortune' that is uncommon not only in terms of sociological literature, but also in the usual forms of the cultural industry, films, documentaries, novels and a growing public attention to the phenomenon of precarious labour. The experience of Euro Mayday¹ contributed to a

1 Cf. [<http://www.euromayday.org>].

horizontal dissemination of the lexicon of precariousness in the continent, at least in networks of activists; the French revolts against the CPE last spring bounced the term *precariousness* on the other side of the Atlantic, where within weeks the New York Times dropped the inverted commas that used to embrace the term. This transversal dissemination of the issue of precariousness does not follow the stages of the production of norms that gave rise to an increasing pressure on demands for more flexibility in the labour market; rather, it follows a feeling of loss that the precarisation of work has aroused in social perception. That is, a loss of power and of the chance of playing a strong role in the mediation between an increasingly individualised labour force and a stronger capital that is refractive to rigidity: for the trade unions it is a loss of security and of the ability to program a life plan for precarious workers. If the dominant tone of the public narration of precariousness is that of loss, it is because this process is inscribed in a transition where society loses its Keynesian ability to regulate the whole of relations, to manage the totality. The abyss of the deregulation of risk society opens up before us and, *pars pro toto*, the precariousness of labour becomes a precariousness of existence, the concrete possibility of not making it despite all the good will.

However, it is as ‘whiny’ as it is useless and repetitive to insist on the issue of loss in the inquiry into precarious labour, risking to render obscure the subjective side and the partisan imprinting on the processes of social change. At the same time, this distinctive gap between the guiding hypotheses of co-research and the existing mainstream and alternative literature of denunciation cannot offer its flank to the other side of the literature: the one that is apologetic of the status quo and addresses precariousness with the false name of flexibility, thus making it out to be a proto-capitalist and Robinson Crusoe-esque ideology of the individual who is entrepreneurial of himself and ready to catch the golden fruits of a land of opportunities. Although we realise that there is a real material basis to the feeling of loss in the transition from a mode of production centred on large scale industry to one de-centred on network enterprises, we do not think that because of this the *dispositifs* of security conquered by the working class are universal and desirable *a priori* and by different figures and subjectivities. Given that sociological inquiry cannot be separated from political imagination, and the organisational forms, objectives and specific issues of the ‘economic’ struggles of precarious labour in post-Fordism still undergo lengthy periods of incubation, the focus of co-research fades from this sense of loss of security, to concentrate on putting the autonomy of precarious workers first. In other words, the point of honour of research is the problem of shifting from this description of precarious labourers as the image of an absence and lack – of rights, security and income – to an analysis of their ability to cooperate, self-valorise and resist. After all, the genealogy of flexibility is also ambivalent, as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello demonstrated in their heuristic study of the literature of the 1970s and 1990s (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). Whilst in the period of mass insubordination workers’ struggle and the flight from work was (for the employers) synonymous with terror, two decades later it is presented as the redemptive recipe of labour and development policy. The motor of this radical metamorphosis is clearly the constituent power of conflicts and living labour, rather than the criteria of capitalist rationality.

Inside the Ambivalence of Practices of Self-Valorisation

When we inquire about the level of autonomy expressed in the behaviour of precarious workers, in fact we are asking what are the tactics and strategies employed by these subjects in order to secure that continuity of income that the contemporary organisation of labour can no longer provide. It is the biographical solution to systemic contradictions, or the ability of the social individual to use inventive and *ad hoc* strategies to compensate for the absence of securities that were once inscribed in the DNA of workers' subjectivity and are now absent from the new organisation of labour due to the demise of the welfare state. If verified, the assumption that innovation-power is not only employed as labour power but also as a survival strategy in systemic conditions of precariousness does not lead to a policy of greater disengagement of the mediatory and political government from the labour market. Rather, it is a case of playing it positively at the level of a discovery of the virtuous behavioural traits specifically forged in the climate of precarious subordination and its restless mobility, trying to posit, without prejudices and pre-set models, the question of possible organisations of collective self-valorisation of precarious workers.

Moreover, our emphasis on an 'anthropological' image of the new labour-force as an eradicated subject that has lost past gains, the power of contractual negotiation and the quota of power before the class that employs it, this image of a subject that is left to its own devices in a labour market that increasingly resembles a Hobbesian state of nature, does not contribute to the search for a political enfranchisement and to a transition, to use an old terminology, 'from labour-force to class'. This image of absolute weakness is the key to burden the 'new forces' of labour and to subordinate them politically: politicians and trade unionists will speak in the name of a subject whose language and forms of life remain completely alien to them.

Metropolitan inquiry mainly investigates the behaviour of precarious workers and tries to follow their living and working paths within the metropolitan space and to map the emergence of possible productive basins. The analysis chiefly concentrates on the strategies of autonomy that allow these workers to survive the jungle of the labour market. By strategies of autonomy we mean various forms of practical knowledge used both at work and in between jobs, which might point to the subject's effort to oppose resistance to command.

These strategies operate within a horizontal dynamic. As Andrew Ross pointed out in a magisterial ethnographic research on outsourcing and knowledge workers in China, the volatility of capital has created, almost in a mirroring fashion, a mobile and disloyal labour force, ready to flee wage ties and obligations before their bosses do (Ross, 2006). As we have already seen in the Silicon Valley and Milan when the hot bubble of the net economy burst, the main concern of companies today is not to increase the flexibility of the labour force, but, on the contrary, to secure its loyalty. This is one of the main theses informing our work of metropolitan inquiry: when it comes to highly skilled labourers in contexts of minimal unionisation in particular, horizontal mobility and disloyalty are the tools of contractual negotiation and self-valorisation of living labour.

This leads to the other working premise of our inquiry: the precarious subject is fundamentally disillusioned with regards to upward social mobility, which was a distinctive trait of bourgeois sensibility. She knows that the system is not capable of fulfilling this promise and thus designs her own strategies of mobility between one job and the next in the attempt to adapt her movement to the requirements of her life style. Her search is not aimed at the best job *in itself* (it is inappropriate to even mention career), but at the best job *for her*. This perception of a permanent state of risk in the subjects of precariousness is also, on the other hand, a likely cause of crisis for companies that have to deal with risky workers who are not tied to the company by a relation of loyalty, whether contractual or ethical.

Horizontal mobility refers to the nomadic and diasporic movement of the post-Fordist labourer from one job to the next, where there is no vertical fluctuation of status, but only varying degrees of application of the subject's strategies of autonomy and of her ability to adapt this mobility to her own lifestyle. This does not mean to say that forms of horizontal mobility can be grasped immediately as processes of conflict and transformation. Rather they describe the ambivalent constitution of contemporary subjectivity, where the search for autonomy inhabits a space between careerist individualism and practices of resistance, between the ethical crisis of labour and the lengthening of the working day. By highlighting the ambivalent conduct of micro-resistance and potential conflict of living labour, co-research tries to build forms of non-representative organisation that are capable of combining – to use Hirschman's expression – the *exit and voice* options in a process that is simultaneously singular and collective, of struggle and of constitution of a new public space (Hirschman, 1995).

At the same time, the aim of metropolitan inquiry is to analyse the vertical structuring of the labour market and use it as the starting point for identifying which forms of self-valorisation and resistance, whether visible or not, are practiced by different agents of production. From this perspective, we aim to theoretically articulate again what was once known as the 'refusal of work'. The very negation of one's labour power is probably only one of the expressions of that refusal; we need to ask whether and how it also ambivalently takes on the form of the re-appropriation of knowledges and their subtraction from companies, which might be defined as intellectual property theft.

Together with the theory of horizontal mobility and the various practices of resistance of different subjects of living labour, the issue of knowledge becomes one of the central nodes of metropolitan inquiry. Deepening our analysis, we might see that alongside this process there is an increase of the levels of qualifications and a transition towards something like 'differential inclusion': in other words, the value of the old degree is today 'accrued' in the process of life-long learning, often more useful to enrich 'social and relational capital' than knowledge. If, as Foucault noted in a far-sighted forecast of the 'self-made entrepreneurs' that would feature in much of the Italian literature of the 1990s, human capital transforms the subject into a kind of enterprise, the elements acquired for its constitution are simply not reducible to school and professional training; they shape an 'educational investment' that is irreducible to criteria of economic measure and programming (Foucault, 2004). It is precisely in this gap that self-training is inserted and becomes central to the constitution of the labour force, and the attempts to measure it only confirm its fundamental value. If this is the case, we need to

investigate how self-training is also used as a strategy of self-valorisation and possibly of resistance.

Conclusion

To sum up our main points, the proposed modelling of metropolitan inquiry is articulated on three axes: on the vertical axis the object of investigation is the location of subjects within the realms of the labour market and social assets, i.e. the hierarchy of the labour force. The horizontal axis consists in a map of the dynamics of mobility and resistance – micro and macro, singular and collective – in other words, the strategies of the subjects. On the third, transversal axis we place the self-perception of individuals in relation to their condition and their chances of changing it.

Let us now return to our initial suggestion. If we look at reality with the cold and critical eye of the social scientist, from an *objectively* normal perspective, we can only see the decomposition and fragmentation of living labour. The photos on the film are images that cannot be traced to collective dynamics of conflict: flexibility only translates into precariousness, deprivation and imposition. However, if we adopt a *subjectively* determined perspective, *one-sidedly*, this monstrosity suddenly displays the traits of figures that exceed the relations of exploitation and control. Subjective and singular strategies aimed at saving one's efforts and 'thieving' intellectual property, the use of training and relational opportunities, leaving as a practice of refusing to be blackmailed and to increase the value of one's labour power; these take on a character of self-valorisation that is properly ambivalent: they are cynical and opportunistic forms of individual competition, but also potential expressions of liberation and transformation. Co-research navigates this ambivalence. *Hic Rhodus, hic salta*.

From this partial standpoint the monstrous *racaille* that emerged in the event of the Parisian banlieue uprisings, for instance, takes on the form of a mobile and flexible, transnational and relational, hybrid and precarious labour that is disloyal to the past of hard-working parents and thus to the community of belonging as much as to the fate assigned to it by a presumed universalism of Western values where commodity exchange is indispensable to the acquisition of the rights of citizenship. The moment when, as Marx forecasted in the *Grundrisse*, knowledge becomes the main productive force, the unit of measure of labour is made to explode by an excess of social cooperation and living labour (Marx, 1970: 403). In other words, the law of value is in place but no longer valid, it is a simple measure of exploitation, rather than of human activity. Under these circumstances inquiry becomes the emergency practice of an excess of subjectivity that designs new fields of possibility that find their recombination in a precise point, in the event. The anamorphic practice of co-research is thus the radical decomposition and also the constituent form of a power of transformation that already lives in the folds of the real. Here we encounter the problem of organisation and of what is to be done, precisely as collective research. At this height, to cite Isaak Babel,

we must situate our point of view and action, to see, whilst searching for the becoming subject of the monstrous, the ‘mysterious curve of Lenin’s straight line’ (Babel, 1929).²

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the authors

Antonio Conti, Anna Curcio, Alberto De Nicola, Paolo Do, Serena Fredda, Margherita Emiletti, Serena Orazi, Gigi Roggero, Davide Sacco, Giuliana Visco are movement activists involved in the Esc social centre (<http://www.escatelier.net>) in Rome. They are currently working on a research project titled ‘Young People between Precarity and Autonomy’

the translator

Arianna Bove is an independent researcher in philosophy, involved in the making of www.generation-online.org [<http://www.generation-online.org/>], where her research, articles and translations can be found. She has translated many works from Italian and French, including texts by Althusser, Foucault, Negri, Bifo, Virno, and others. Her recent translations have appeared in A. Negri, *Books For Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s Italy* (Verso, 2005) and T. Murphy and A. Mustapha (eds.) *The Philosophy of Antonio Negri. Resistance in Practice* (Pluto, 2005).
E-mail: ari@kein.org

2 Isaak Babel’s sentence was used by Mario Tronti in the editorial (titled *Lenin in Inghilterra*) of the first number of *Classe Operaia*, one of the most important political reviews of Italian *Operaismo*: “With a masterly stroke, the Leninist strategy brought Marx to St Petersburg: only the working class viewpoint could have carried out such a bold revolutionary step. Now let us try to retrace the path, with the same scientific spirit of adventure and political discovery. What we call ‘Lenin in England’ is a project to research a new Marxist practice of the working class party: it is the theme of struggle and of organisation at the highest level of political development of the working class. At this level, it is worth the effort to convince Marx to retrace ‘the mysterious curve of Lenin’s straight line’ [*A questo livello, vale la pena di convincere Marx a ripercorrere ‘la misteriosa curva della retta di Lenin’*]” (Tronti, 2006: 93).