



Notes on framing and re-inventing co-research

Gigi Roggero

Co-research (*conricerca*), which I discuss in this paper, was born in the context of Italian *operaismo*. This does not mean, however, that we cannot talk of co-research beyond this context, nor that the *operaisti* invented co-research. In fact, as I will try to show, all militants conduct co-research. At the same time, I will try to underline some peculiarities of the *operaista* co-research, its actuality, and ways in which we can reconsider it today.

Genealogy

I will firstly point out five issues that could enlighten, in a stenographic way, the genealogy and meaning of co-research, its political peculiarity, and the how it is different from workers' inquiry.

Who are the co-researchers? The militants. So, it is immediately clear that the aim of co-research is entirely a political one. It is the organization of the struggles. This does not mean that co-research ignores science: on the contrary, the process was greatly influenced by the social sciences. In the 50s, for example, Italian co-researchers used American and French industrial sociology. But they radically fought the mythology of science and knowledge; in fact, according to Left tradition, science and knowledge are a neutral means to use for social progress. On the contrary, science and knowledge are battlefields, that is to say, not neutral means to be simply put to counter-uses. Indeed, co-researchers were labelled 'anarcho-sociologists'. Nowadays, it is said that they innovate or even invented the sociology of labour in Italy.

But co-research is completely irreducible to a matter of methodology: the object of the study, the capitalist social relationship, is the object of hate. In fact, co-research means a process of subjectivation, organisation and rupture. That is to say, the production of knowledge is immediately the production of autonomy.

The relationship between knowledge and struggle.

Co-research is the breaking with the traditional model of the organic intellectual, or the distinction between the intellectual and militant, discourse and practice. Or, to use Althusser's words, between theoretical practice and political practice, between the class struggle in philosophy and the class struggle in material social relationships. In fact, the Althusserian point of view risks to re-propose a distinction between the autonomy of theory and the autonomy of politics.

Meanwhile, the 'co-'¹ prefix does not presuppose a submission to pure empirical data, or even to a voluntaristic lack of distinction between the interviewer and the interviewee in the name of egalitarianism with populist flavour. Instead it points to the crisis of the division between intellectual and political action that enervates the system of representation, in order to situate the problem of organisation entirely within class composition - within a trajectory where the different positions of singularities are not negated but translated into a common process, the strength of which is measured by the capacity to destroy existing hierarchies. That is to say: it is impossible to fight against the capitalist hierarchies with the ideology of the free autonomous zones, or the micro-politics of the small community: this would be self-referential! The horizontality and equality are what is at stake in any struggle.

Co-research is different from the tradition of 'workers' inquiry.'

The latter begun with the work of Raniero Panzieri and part of the *Quaderni Rossi* group, who strived, among other things, to move beyond the inveterate distrust that Italian Marxism held for sociology. Panzieri described the method of 'workers inquiry' as a limited science, in a similar way to how Marx defined political economy. Yet, workers' inquiry was endowed with its own autonomy, structured on the rigor of scientific and logical coherence. In this tradition, however, worker's inquiry utilized capitalist paradigms and means of scientific organization, putting in question only its finalization, and not its process of production. In other words, its goal was to develop the production of knowledge for political organization rather than for the market.

1 'con' – in Italian *conriserca*

Such a trajectory risked on the one hand to re-propose, although in a completely unprecedented manner, the idea of a neutral science which it was sufficient to appropriate; on the other, the production of knowledge that was constitutively destined for the use of an external subject, the party or the union, reinforcing in this way the classic division of labour between the political and scientific spheres. The co-research hypothesis, which clearly underlies its definition, has the potential for demolishing this separation: in co-research the production of knowledge is simultaneously the production of subjectivity and the construction of organisation.

To reiterate: co-research and inquiry are not necessarily opposed to one another. It could be said: co-research is a process, the inquiry is a phase. As Romano Alquati always said: it does not make sense to say 'I did some co-research.' The militant is always in the process of carrying out co-research. There is no militancy without co-research.

Co-research is closely connected to the concept of class composition.

First of all, class – here I am talking about a political, not sociological concept of class. That is to say: there is no class without class struggle. Note the distinction between *technical composition*, based on Capital's articulation and hierarchization of the workforce, and the relation between workers and machines, and *political composition* – the process of the constitution of a class as an autonomous subject. *Operaismo* forged these categories in a very particular context, marked by the space-time coordinates of the Taylorist factory and the Fordist society, and a specific figure of the worker inhabiting these, i.e. the mass worker. Also, *Operaismo* forged the tools to be used against the idealist concept of 'class consciousness'; concretely, class consciousness is a sort of objective condition that, through the mediation of the Party, rips the veil of capital ideology and allows the progress of the History towards its socialist stage. Subjectivity has nothing to do with consciousness: it is not pre-existing but is always being produced. Subjectivity is a battlefield: the capitalist subjectivation is always at a tension with the autonomous subjectivation. This is because capital is always an antagonistic social relationship.

Therefore, the political subjectivation and organization are immanent to the materiality of the processes of life and struggle, and not in a sort of objective and transcendent class consciousness.

What were the subject, time and place of co-research?

The subject was the mass worker, the space was the Taylorist factory, the time was the temporality of the Fordist society, with work and non-work visibly separated. Again, I quote Alquati: 'Co-research was to go in front of the gate of the factory at 6am, 2pm, and 10 pm (at the shift changes), to talk with the workers and to organize with them; and then to come back the day after, and then the day after again'.²

But the choice of the subject was not determined by the symmetry between technical and political composition: according to this deterministic view, the point most advanced in the production is objectively the most advanced in the struggle (this is the view of the Marxist socialist tradition. In the Soviet Union, for example, the chief-cell in the factory was the worker with the most technical skills). On the contrary, this political choice was an investment in a line of tendency, that is to say, a possible becoming. The tendency is never an objective arrow of the history, but a field of forces and possibilities – the material battlefield of possibilities of struggles and organization.

The centrality of the mass workers to this process was not determined by their numerical majority. Similarly, hierarchies of the struggles are not the sociological flipside and mirror of capitalist hierarchies. The *political* centrality of the mass worker was a combination of his position in the processes of accumulation and his processes of subjectivation, within and against his position in the capitalist hierarchy. It is always a matter of relationship, or it is better to say, of an antagonistic relationship. In fact, the mass worker was not objectively a political subject; he became a political subject.

Consequently, there was also a specific time and space for co-research. Panzieri talked of 'hot inquiry', an inquiry conducted as and when there were struggles happening. Instead, according to Alquati, once a struggle exploded, it was already too late. At the same time, the place for co-research is where there possibilities and conditions for a struggle to. So, to jokingly rephrase Panzieri's definition, one could say that co-research is 'lukewarm', or 'tepid', rather than 'hot' inquiry. It occupies the time and place of potentiality, of tendency, of organising, of a possibility to act on and overturn a tendency. Consequently, co-research act on a 'middle radius', where the theory becomes practice and the practice becomes theory. Here is it possible to act on the tendency and to overthrow it.

² Informal conversations.

In short: co-research is the ‘zip-level’ between political discourse and political practice, the *liaison* between the two. Yet, it is not merely mediation: co-research on the one hand translates and implements the discourse into practice, on the other hand it transforms and elaborates political discourse from the starting point of a struggle and the subjective composition. Co-research is at the centre of militancy.

Actuality of co-research

Nowadays, following changes in the forms of production, labour and subjectivity, we have to re-think co-research, and perhaps, to reinvent it. I have been saying this for years now, but that is not enough: now I will try and pose the main problems, but also to go a step further. Below are some open nodes, some related and some new in relation to matters discussed above.

The relationship between militants and class composition.

It is true, we the militants are *within* the social composition: we’re precarious workers and exploited in the metropolitan social factory. It is the end of the militant as ‘external figure’. But we have to pay attention to the short circuit: often activist groups start from this correct assertion, yet arrive at an incorrect conclusion that the point of view of the activists is the point of view of the precariat. So, the idea of self-inquiry has to be managed carefully: self-inquiry cannot be self-referentiality, it has to be situated not within a group but within a social composition. For example: co-research in the No Tav movement in Susa Valley in Italy (See: ‘A sarà düra!’)³; self-inquiry by theatre workers in Milan by Macao collective; finally, the logistics workers militant inquiry (see uninomade.org and www.commonware.org).

The circularity between production of political discourse, inquiry, and struggle: co-research as a style of militancy.

Today there is a great socialization of knowledge, which in turn extends of the abilities of inquiry – there is an expansion of the possibility of inquiry immanent to the class composition of ‘living knowledge’. It could be said there are many instances of inquiry, and few of co-research. That is to say, there is an expansion

3 Centro Sociale Askatasuna, *A sarà düra! Storie di vita e di militanza no tav*, Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2013.

of knowledge production that has various difficulties becoming antagonistic knowledge. This is the political problem.

At the same time, there is a need to re-think class composition and the relationship between technical and political composition, based on a difference between living and dead labour. Indeed, there has been a change in the relationship between constant and variable capital, a kind of partial re-appropriation of the machines from the workers. The embodiment of an increasing part of constant capital in the living labour/knowledge certainly does not mean a deterministic line of liberation. It produces terrifically ambiguous effects, for which the suffering goes with the *potentia*, the new pathologies of living knowledge continuously segment the social cooperation. In a way, based on the centrality of subjectivity in the contemporary forms of production and capture/accumulation, the political composition comes before the technical composition. Or, to put in another way, the technical composition sustains the mechanisms of segmentation of the workforce and differential inclusion in the labour market, within a context in which the general intellect is embodied in the cooperation of living labour/knowledge.

In this context, one could say that there is more at stake in the co-research process than in the past: it is the autonomy of living labour/knowledge; it is the creation of the new institution of life in common.

There is also a need to re-think the tools required for these processes. For example, in the past the militant journal played a great role (*Quaderni Rossi*, *Classe Operaia*, etc.). Recently, there were some good examples of militant journals, but also a noted decline of its political effectiveness. In fact, now the tools of inquiry have to be reinvented at the level of the general intellect's networks, going beyond the division between virtual and real, which no more exists.

The above could be contested as the incurable optimism of the Operaista thinking. However, such critique risks losing the view of the Marxian concept of capital as a social relation, the antagonism inherent to the processes of capitalist development. In fact, there is a constitutive duplicity in all the Marxian concepts: they are also placed in a relation of force determined by resistance and command, cooperation and exploitation, living labour and dead labour. These abstractions are historically situated and embodied in specific collective subjects and power relations.

Co-research looks for the embodiment of the historical determination of the class antagonism, the material base of autonomy of living labour and the breaking with capital: the material base of revolution.

Time and place.

Let me return to Alquati: co-research means to go in front of the gates at 6am, 2pm and 10pm. And today, what are the gates and the shift? It is necessary to avoid two opposite risks: total continuity and total discontinuity. On one hand, I just excluded the possibility of practicing the co-research in the same form. It should be contradictory with its character of process immanent to the changes in class composition. On the other hand, it is true that the metropolis has become a factory, and the production is spread out; also, it is true that there is now an overlap or at least the blurring of the border between life and work. But it is not true that all the places and times are equal. For instance, financialisation: it is similar to a flow, but there are also taps of condensation of value. To interfere with these taps means to hurt the processes of accumulation and in turn, the bosses. Or let's take the problem of the strike: what does it mean to strike today for the new subjects of labour, in the confusion of life and work, often in the individualization and internalization of the forms of command and hierarchies? These are problems we have faced for a few years now, and tried to resolve in the student movement in Italy. We experimented with the idea of stopping circulation as a form to generalize strike beyond classical workplaces. Workers in the Italian logistics sector gave us some answers in the last few years: they were able to re-think the strike to effectively hurt their bosses and the vulnerable points in the circulation process.

4) Today a strike has to be destituent and constituent at once.

It needs to hurt the bosses and create new forms of life and production in common simultaneously. This is the problem faced by movements in the current crisis, from Tunisia to the US, from occupied squares to attempts at self-managing of hospitals or universities.

Again, someone could say: we see only segmentation, fragmentation, decomposition!

The problem of co-research as a style of militancy is exactly to produce new glasses, through which to see what is not immediately visible and perceivable, as well as what it can be or what it could become. The glasses of the potentiality! When *operaisti* begun militant inquiry at the end of the 50s, factories were largely

absent from the political discourse abandoned on the political point of view. The idea was for an integration of the working class: a sort of a Frankfurt School – mode useful for the strategy of the Italian communist party. Operaisti saw, with their ‘new glasses’, underground forms of refusal. When workers did not participate in the strike, they tried to understand why, and discovered that workers refused to participate, but in the useless – in their eyes - strikes called by the unions. Even passivity can be a form of struggle! These forms of diffused refusal were present at the micro-level, not visible: they constituted a potentiality of a massive class struggle, and the micro became macro.

Is it possible to see something similar today? In '61 in the Olivetti factory Alquati talked of the contradiction between the growing socialization of production and the political role of hierarchies. What does it mean from the point of view of class composition subjectivity and its forms of political socialization? Can we talk of something of similar today? For example, during the ‘Anomalous wave’ of university movements in Italy in 2008, we had to face the problem of meritocracy. For us, there was no doubt about what meritocracy is: the language of power, i.e. a mystification aiming to create and legitimise fragmentation and hierarchies. We could reproach students and young precarious workers for their ‘lack of political consciousness’, but it would have been useless. It was better to point out the ambivalence of this feeling of disapproval that first of all depends on material condition. Its base is precarity, the *déclassement*, and the end of the university as an elevator for social mobility. Yet, the enemy is identified as those who are corrupt, rather than with the system, which produces and allows corruption. Yes, there is mystification, but this mystification acts on an ambivalent class’ claim. Two years later in Italy we had another strong students’ movement, with almost no claims of meritocracy. On one hand, the crisis quickly dispensed with any illusions of social mobility; on the other hand, the movement was younger than before. They were the ‘precarious of second generation’, sons and daughters of the precarious of first generation – socialized in an environment of welfare and stable work, the first generation experienced the erosion of rights and social condition, precarity not as a stage but a permanent condition, the stolen future, etc. Instead, the ‘precarious of second generation’ were socialized with precarity as a permanent condition, without any illusions about the future, and even without being able to tell if there is a future for them. Their only time is the present, a permanent present. It is an ambivalent state: it could become the source of mass nihilism, or, on the contrary, of a political radicalization, or a mix of the two. But certainly, progressive promises of capital no longer carry any possibility.

Also, it is not an irenic process; it could be process of conflict in the class composition. In fact, the emergence of mass workers created a conflict within the

former class composition with craft workers at the centre. In any case, nowadays, between the lines of tendency and dramatic ambivalences the political gamble is not to await the Event, but rather to organize the process, which will bring it along. Forty years following the Piazza Statuto event, an interviewer asked Alquati whether the militants expected the workers' revolt at the time, and he replied: 'We didn't expect the revolt, but we've organized it'⁴. This sums up the truth of co-research, as well as the organization of class organization.

the author

Gigi Roggero is involved in the militant collectives Commonware (www.commonware.org), edu-factory (www.edu-factory.org), and Hobo (hobobologna.info). He is part of the editorial board of *WorkingUSA*. He is a precarious researcher. Among his various publications, he is author of *The Production of Living Knowledge: The Crisis of the University and The Transformation of Labour in Europe and North America* (2011, Philadelphia: Temple University Press).
E-mail: conricerca@hotmail.com

4 'Interview with Romano Alquati', in Giuseppe Trotta and Fabio Milana, eds., *L'operaismo degli anni sessanta: Dai 'Quaderni Rossi' a 'Classe Operaia'*, Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2008, p. 738.