

# What Makes A Biopolitical Place?

## A Discussion with Toni Negri

Constantin Petcou, Doina Petrescu, Anne Querrien, Paris - September 17, 2007

**Toni Negri:** I don't know if any news has come your way about the urban struggles that have recently taken place. I am thinking about Denmark, with the struggle around this social centre that the authorities evacuated, and for which people did not stop fighting during the whole month of August. Or this incredible thing that happened in Rostock, on the edges of the G8 summit, with the organisation of a whole series of urban struggles. Today, the watchword of the European autonomous movements is to 'take back the metropolis, take back the city, take back the centre,' and this has really become a widespread rallying cry: these movements which begin from the inside of cities are, from a political point of view, an extremely important thing. Then there is this huge mobilization in Italy, in Vicenza—this old catholic stronghold, but also the seat of a big NATO base. People rebelled against an expansion project of the base and the intensification of the military airport, because the Germans decided that the large Frankfurt NATO base was going to be emptied, and as a result, Vicenza immediately became the fallback solution. The Americans are transferring all the potential military intervention—which is particularly aimed at the Middle East— between Vicenza and Udine. And this is what people—not only those from the movement, but the city residents in general—refuse. The struggle has thus spread across the board: no-global movements, neighbourhood groups, Catholics, pacifists, ecologists...It is a new urban political activism, it is a different image of the city. For instance, people are saying: we do not want war established in our cities. Clearly, this has nothing to do with social centres in the form that they take throughout Italy and elsewhere, or Christiania. But it is exciting. Christiania is also impressive. I believe that there is something like five hundred people in prison in Copenhagen. The movement went on all summer long.

It is a model of resistance... At first there was no desire for provocation or direct confrontation, they were called 'pink'. But, because they were fighting for their space of freedom they became 'black!' What is fundamental is the passage from the idea of constructing countercultural places to the idea of active resistance.

**Constantin Petcou :** Do you know of any more recent experiments than that of Christiania? Experiments that induce 'soft' change?

**Toni:** Your 'soft' is as though you were trying to say that the political diagonal could exist outside of the biopolitical diagram. Or to put in more brutal and caricatured terms, as though the affirmation of other life models could pass over the reality of power relations, as though one could be "outside" power relations. I believe that one always has to consider the political diagonal on the inside of the biopolitical diagram. You can not believe that an action that touches life in all its most concrete aspects—in the biopolitical context, in the city context—can be 'separated': we are always caught in relations. In your analysis, and your choices, you must always consider the relation that exists between the political diagonal and the biopolitical diagram.

**Constantin :** What exactly is the biopolitical diagram?

**Toni:** The biopolitical diagram is the space in which the phenomena of the reproduction of organised life (social, political) in all their dimensions are controlled, captured and exploited—this has to do with the circulation of money, police presence, the normalisation of life forms, the exploitation of productivity, repression, the reining in of subjectivities...In the face of this, there is what I call a ‘political diagonal’, i.e. the relation that you have with these power relations, and which you can not but have. The problem is to know what side you are on: on the side of the power of life that resists, or on the side of its biopolitical exploitation. What is at stake in the city often takes shape in the struggle to re-appropriate a set of services essential to living (the question of housing, water, gas and electricity distribution, telephone system management, access to knowledge...).

**Constantin :** Here we’re talking about political struggles, of a rather global scale, that are interesting to us but less to those who live in the rush of day to day life, who fit in a life pattern imposed on them by others. When we refer to biopolitical space, we’re referring to a rather small-scale biopolitical space where the ‘average’ inhabitants can meet each other and reshape an everyday life that they control to the extent possible. All the examples that we discussed are very important, but there are very few people who are interested in them besides activists, in the strong sense of the word. We’re exploring an everyday ‘soft’ or ‘weak’ activism that everybody can put into practice, starting with the opposition to consumerism, to unwanted local urban projects which bring about undesired changes... etc, and to which the activists (in the strong sense of the word), who are more interested in global problems, aren’t committed. There is thus this gap between two levels of action; maybe there is another diagonal between the global biopolitical scales and the others.

**Anne Querrien:** In relation to exclusion, which is a huge phenomenon in big European urban centres, people are undertaking small struggles or small resistance actions in a problematic that is not that of the representation of the excluded vis-à-vis the global society. There is a series of actions that makes use of occupations, not necessarily squats, but through a negotiation to occupy spaces, to make spaces come alive in a way that does not follow a logic of exclusion but that of a development of local micro-powers. For instance, yesterday we found ourselves between two HLM (council flats) blocks in the XX<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, a site where there had previously only been rubble, and now with the money from the Municipal Political Delegation, City Hall, the DRAC (Regional cultural affairs council), and the Prefecture, there is a sort of building where you can hold meetings, and there are garden plots, and there will also be a library. The people from the HLM across the street came over and said: ‘So, what’s going on here?’

**Doina Petrescu :** It is through space that we can build a link with this political diagonal, where one can start opposing oneself, formulating counter-proposals, and from where a counter-power can emerge. These spaces –Felix Guattari talked about *vacuoles*–, are necessary in order to create breaches and to specify relationships so that those who are subjugated by these relationships are able to be in a direct position in order to formulate them, to confront them; otherwise they will always be represented by others, those who are the most politicised, those used to the struggle.

**Toni:** All of what you are telling me is a fascinating field of experimentation. I also think that the interstice represents an essential dimension, because it allows one to single in on a space that is precisely an ‘in-between’, which demands that one confront the problem of different languages and the link between them, or that of a power relation (the biopolitical exploitation of life) and force (the

resistance that is expressed in the experimental practice of an interstitial space). This is almost an artistic problem. The question that I always ask myself—and this does not contradict what you are saying—is finally: ‘where is exodus at home?’ What is the space for those who want to go into exodus from power and its domination? For me, exodus sometimes also requires force. And this is, paradoxically, an exodus that does not seek an ‘outside’ of power, but which affirms the refusal of power, the freedom in the face of power, in the interior of its meshes, in the hollow of its meshes. Force... You are talking here of weak, soft multitudes... And for me, the use of these adjectives is quite problematic.

In the case of this ‘weak’ and toned-down production, what is the production of specific subjectivity?... What is the specificity of this production? Where does this lead?

**Constantin :** In spaces like these, there are especially people such as unemployed, retired, intermittent artists; people who have a lot of time and who don’t have a socially valued subjectivity in the capitalistic social and professional environment. Through their implication and by taking up an activity (cinema, gardening, music, parties), they create positions, roles, subjectivities which they build by an aggregation between each other. And these subjectivities surpass identity because its via intersubjectivity that they get to that point, creating collective relationships, and, in the end, it is also produces a mental and social project. Precisely, this appears with time, through everyday practices, by long stretches, which is not specific to the highly visible and frontal struggles (as a matter of fact, Félix Guattari underlines the importance of the lasting ‘existential territories’ for the production of subjectivity and heterogenesis).

You cannot produce existential spaces in movements that are too agitated, so you must unite the conditions of heterogenesis, which is what we define as being *alterology*. When you let the other self-manifest and build his/her subjectivity, there is less violence, more listening, and more reciprocity. And you can even reach political dimensions without their being intended from the beginning, as it happened with ECObox : there were people who came to garden, then they started taking part in the debates, and in the end they were in front of the town hall with billboards, and among them were people who didn’t even have their papers. They never imagined they would come to that; and it was possible because there was a group, they were not alone, and because of the coherence in their project and in their action, the ‘good cause’ being obvious. And indeed it is difficult to be in this alterology, because for the most part capitalism emphasizes a logic of individualism.

Do you see contradictions between scales in biopolitics: abstract, general, symbolic and scales of everyday life, of the ordinary ?

**Toni:** There are some conceptions of the biopolitical that consider it only as a field where biopower’s expression is played out in reality as the extreme form whereby modern political power’s rational or bureaucratic —and instrumental—force manages to organise itself. On the contrary, it is obvious that biopower is something that is played out on various levels: first on the level of micro-conflict, i.e. there where neither repression nor consensus are widespread, but where conflict is constantly reintroduced. Then, on the second level: when this conflictual situation is also productive—the moment of struggle is also that of a production of subjectivity. Class struggle as a struggle of *classes* is not very interesting. What is exciting is class struggle as a conflictual fabric, when subjectivities propose and construct themselves through situations of conflict. Exploitation is at the heart of this process; it is at the centre of the biopolitical. The intensity of exploitation is something that attains the soul—don’t be mistaken about this term: it passes through the body and touches on the way we think, our imagination, desires

and passions. And it is on this, on this bodily intensity and this full singularity that one must determine resistance.

**Doina :** Yes, but how ? That is the question.

**Toni:** Through action, through a ‘doing’, through a putting into operation. It is the only way. In the past one could imagine a world in which intellectual anticipation was a complement for action, and which made it possible to attain a certain level of universality. Today, material production is fed by intellectual production, the two are intertwined and form part of this biopolitical context. Without intellectual production there would not be this enormous power of capitalism. At the same time, one must be able to imagine a full resistance in which the bodily and intellectual elements would be inseparable, and which instead of being the field on which capitalist domination consolidates and reformulates itself, would become the very matter for a new organization of resistance. For me, the problem is to build another society in which there would be liberty, equality and solidarity...and joy. I am not pessimistic, I do not believe that we must limit resistance to small units, micro-units. Moreover, I have an understanding of history that is full of leaps, discontinuities, ruptures, an accumulation of these ‘soft’ things of which you speak, but which, for me, absolutely do not exclude that this may lead to a threshold from where one must break harshly to create an event, something new.

**Doina :** But precisely in order to reach this threshold, there is a time of accumulation.

**Toni:** One must not theorise it. All betrayals have always emerged through a notion of time that was more important than the imagination of the rupture. Obviously, there is time—the time of the city, work time, travel time, time between life and death—it is a given, it is there. But why theorise it? I come from a generation that polemicised about everything: reformism, betrayal, and also time...

**Constantin :** In your opinion, who is building biopolitical spaces today? Do you also know of small scale examples?

**Toni:** I only know those around me. For example, in Venetia, I know groups of people who occupied their apartments. They got together and built spaces—of solidarity, everyday life, shared struggle, communal production. This can take the form of cooperatives in which they work, or mutual help associations for the most vulnerable, migrants, the unemployed, the sick, the elderly...In this context, they are union type situations but which work *against* official unions, and which do this very well: they take over a very broad territory, very complex, but also very rich and contradictory, which mobilises many men and women, and experiments with other organizational and political intervention models, and more broadly, other forms of life...However, there are two ways of going about this. On the one hand, there is the ‘NGO’ way, and on the other, the ‘movement’ way. In Italy, it is the latter that is gaining more and more ground. For example, in Padua, the municipal government began implementing a whole set of measures against disorder and the negative image that would result from the city’s blaming of prostitution for the degradation. But the residents of many neighbourhoods organized a real ‘reaction to the reaction’ against the mayor and in solidarity with the ‘girls.’ They held demonstrations and went so far as to wall up the mayor’s door with bricks! Beyond the prostitute issue, they were protesting against a repressive normalisation that was reining in their life in a wider sense. It is a Brazilian transvestite— magnificent on top of it—with exceptional oratory talent and an incredible political finesse, who managed the whole thing, who organized it and developed it, and who turned it

into a common struggle for all liberties. So: how does one go from a repression of prostitution to the creation of a 'small garden for all'...

**Constantin :** How do these small scale actions sometimes come together, organise themselves in order to reach a larger scale?

**Toni:** The levels are extremely different. There is a level of minimal participation: in the evening people will eat or drink together, they live in the same neighbourhood, and they will, for instance, occupy vacant apartments and organise themselves... They fight to maintain this occupation. Today, this is a growing phenomenon, not only because there is a need for this, but also because it is a new way of living and fighting, of creating, of getting organised together...

At first, this was a completely working class matter: it was about workers helping each other according to a very old tradition, but which has been completely reinvented because of the recent industrialisation of our society. These are basically associative practices, but which are alternatives to the workers' movement, because the worker's movement ended by reducing itself to a certain number of stalinist mechanisms. Alternative practices, for sure, but still completely working class. Afterwards, workers broadened their demands: not only housing, but payment for hours spend in commuting, for example. When the bosses did not want to give them this, they occupied the house next to the factory to be closer. In Italy, starting in the 1960s, this has basically been the process. Later on, with the crisis in the 1970s, one aspect was armed resistance with, for example, the phenomenon of armed struggle, and above all the defending of the privileges and social positions of some. Violence erupted on the scene, and I assure you that the 'soft' or 'weak' forms of solidarity that you have in mind were often the fundamental element upon which the armed struggle was built, because these were territories on which trust was essential. Paradoxically, the 'soft' often generated a real violence, because one finds oneself in an affective reaction that had more to do with a complicity born of closeness than a political decision... One must be careful with this...

Afterwards, there were terrible setbacks, which had consequences: political backfiring, drugs, disarray; and somewhat later the rebirth of 'social centres'; places where one sought to bring together new political experiences, trying to both relaunch them and to invent something else... In reality, in Italy it is in the beginning of the 1990s that it all begins again, and it is also a new generation. A new generation that no longer has the same history, a generation that is rediscovering the political. Not institutional politics, but rather another relationship to the political in which what I previously called the 'political diagonal' becomes possible.

This is about the creation of the Green party, it is they who built it, in part instrumentally so as to have a structure that could benefit from the assistance offered by various municipal governments, and in part because concerns with the state of the planet were beginning to emerge as a ground for common struggles... In Italy there are many examples of this... All these are characterised by the dynamics of a movement. To get to your "model", for one can call it such, from here on in: an intensive model, almost interiorised, and in which the passage towards the formation of a 'consciousness', a common 'becoming aware' —even if these are horrible expressions, and I shouldn't say it like this—is essential. This is a fantastic training, absolutely real and at the same time utopian, where each person is reinventing him or herself with the others... I do not consider that the qualifier utopian is something negative as such, but I prefer that it not be used to escape the materiality of power relations, of reality—because it is therein that one must act, and not in some unreal dream dimension... So I know exactly what your answer is going to be: 'we, we are in the process of transforming ourselves at every instant'... Yes, but, in hard reality, I also need something that does not depend on the representation of

what is already there. A leap in which one can begin to speak not only of solidarity, but also of democracy, for instance. There is a moment where one must take the leap, this passage, to pose the real big problem that is behind all these micro-practices of which we are speaking and to think about how to respond to it...

**Constantin :** In fact, we talk about them, not directly, but we work very much around these issues. The fact that there is no hierarchy between the types of activities because, going back to the basic examples, there are people who came to garden and went on to debate politics and culture, but never the opposite! We are trying to create transversalities in different directions, in every direction if possible, and this is a lot about democracy, about equal conditions, and about access to knowledge.

**Toni:** What am I thinking about when I define a biopolitical context? For example, about the quantity of money that state or capitalist institutions, regardless of their specific context, bring into play. But also, in a mixed up way, about people's lives. There is no "pure" context that is totally political—or apolitical—or, on another level, a context of total misery, or total sterility, or a space that is totally liberated in relation to these same relations of power...For me, this is what is interesting about interstices: to bear witness to complexity, to turn it into a weapon instead of being subjected to it as an 'impurity' or a weakness...

Therefore, for me, this is a passage from a thematic of 'weak' solidarity and activism to a stronger activism or a more general reflection on democracy, which means taking all these things into account.

**Constantin :** Take what into account exactly?

**Toni:** All these flows that intersect, and which are real flows.

**Doina :** As soon as you isolate a space everything is portrayed there: all the social conflicts, the flows and all questions are asked, that of availability, of time, of sharing or of appropriation.

**Toni:** With the mass worker, thirty years ago, it was impossible to attempt, or even imagine such associative forms. This was immediately reduced to the family, to forms of social reproduction, to a certain type of aggregation, or at best, to a cooperative, generally as part of a party cell. I am fully convinced that the new forms of production, communication and circulation of languages and knowledge are of enormous help in making the affective elements—central to the new 'associations'—work. We are, today, in a biopolitical context of immaterial work (with an intellectual and affective component), a context in which what was considered an 'individual' is rethought as a 'singularity' in a flow of plural and different singularities that construct relations and shared distributions, compose what they are and create a new 'common'. This is not the old superstructure, it is a material base in which each one is inserted while remaining open to the possibility of constructing a new being, new languages, new relations and forms of life, new value...And I am convinced that this is nowhere else as visible and forceful as in the urban dimension. Something has shifted and organised itself in the city—this was evident in what happened in the Parisian *banlieues*—and this is something fundamental. One could mention a myriad of other examples. Rostock, this summer, was the first time in Germany that movements went beyond the traditional limit constituted by workers and unions. This is an important leap. But, before Rostock, there were other new experiences in Europe. The organisation of the precarious workers, of urban production and city spaces...From the standpoint of social configuration, this is all extremely new. There are many immigrants in certain sectors of immaterial

work, there is an intellectual and qualified immigration, and in a broader sense a social intelligence that is everywhere, even with economic migrants who used to be less qualified...The relation to knowledge and cooperation has completely displaced the difference between material and immaterial and the question of qualification, including in illegality, in the most absolute precarity...

**Doina :** I think that the spaces we're talking about allow just that... it transits through multiple types of occupancies. Some are illegal occupancies, others can be negotiated, but I would say that the fact of having a space is extremely important. What, myself, I understood of your seminar on the metropolis is that, in fact, the present day metropolis as a space of biopolitical production is somehow the equivalent of a factory and it has to be seen as a space of resistance and of struggle. It is in the metropolis that we have to create these spaces of encounter that can take different forms. Even the space of a café can be important... For it to be cumulative, there must be recurrence, repetition, continuity and long-term social temporalities. It is good to have Rostock, but it is also good that Rostock came after Edinburgh, that there is recurrence and continuity somewhere.

**Constantin :** The political dimension is not natural. It is more of a social dimension. Already, social issues are learned, through education; there are different types of cultures and sociability, and politics is even more, thus, it is taking part in one's constitutional rights, democracy, equality. For me, subjectivity, the pre-individual, is a kind of pre-political condition. To be able to act politically, one must already be somewhere and thus we, through our action, try to greet the emergence of subjectivities and afterwards, if possible, to go further.

But I don't think everyone can, just like that, act on a large political scale and connect him/herself to activist networks. Before, political struggles took place in the workspace, through the factory worker... that is less and less the case. We sometimes define the spaces that we're working on with the inhabitants as neighbours' unions because, since the workspace is no longer an entrance into politics, the inhabitant, even the immigrant, offers an entrance to another form of political practice.

**Toni:** I even proposed to the Secretary General of the Italian steelworkers union to transform the workers' councils into urban social centres... If the city is the place where valorisation is produced, it should be evident that we must transform the workers' councils into places that are no longer reserved to the sole 'operators' of the sector, and that they should be open to all men and women who enable production...One should have citizens' unions, in which a fundamental concern would be to take care of the most fragile and exploited: migrants, women, youth, the elderly...The Secretary General was not against this, he even seemed quite fascinated by the idea...

**Doina :** I would like to ask another question, that of invention and creativity, because like you say, you somewhat forced this political character to do something new, something unexpected: to look at the same space in another way, to transform it from a stock exchange to a social centre; in my opinion, this is a creative action.

**Toni:** In reality, I believe that a biopolitical place, like the city, is a space of mixture, of encounters and above all intellectual, political and ethical expression that is becoming increasingly important. One must imagine this exactly as one has always considered language, or the building of wealth: as accumulations. But accumulations that are more than a simple addition of parts. Creation is not an act of genius, and certainly not something individual, or something that belongs only to the avant-gardes.

This is why, for example, copyright is always deeply arbitrary and almost criminal: it is an act of appropriation at the expense of a common multitudinous reality. And politics, this politics we are now speaking of, has to do with the organisation, structuring and institutionalisation of the biopolitical as a common and resistant subjectivation. The biopolitical is full of possible institutions. The institution is also a surplus of reality. The State is older and poorer than these movements. Ever, since I understood this, I began thinking that the institution should become a continuously open reality in which constituent power would not be excluded but integrated. An institution in permanent becoming. In general, constituent power is viewed as something that serves to found a system, and that is all. In the juridical, system's sources constituent power does not exist as such, it is pre-judicial! It must yield the place to constituted power as the sole creator of institutions. This is where one must break off. No, constituent power can be a juridical element, i.e. an institution that must constantly produce other institutions. One then needs a place for this. Nowadays, I believe that this place is the city.

**Constantin :** And how to keep this constituent power almost permanent, to not be institutionalised?

**Toni:** A constituent power produces subjects, but these subjects must get together. The production of subjectivity is not an act of innovation, or a flash of genius, it is an accumulation, a sedimentation that is, however, always in movement; it is the construction of the common by constituting collectivities. There are many movements that do not leave any real accumulation. While others do. Just think of the *banlieus*: there was this incredible rebellion. Next time around, this will take off from a much higher level, politically speaking. There are thresholds of irreversible accumulation. Think of Rostock: I don't want to say that this was a new revolutionary 1905, the beginning of a new cycle of revolutions. I'm just saying that this is the first time in Germany, since the anti-missile protests in the mid 1980s, that there has been a true national mobilization for which the elements built by the base, the forms of cooperation and articulation, the discussions and points of consensus between people—who are experimenting with practices like yours, or with others, those who have come back to politics and realised that what's at stake here is life...—in short, all these mediation experiences with the political diagonal have become fundamental. A whole range of social and political creativity has accumulated and found the opportunity to express itself, take shape, and attempt to organize itself. And this was not a wild, disorganized, spontaneous insurrection. The urban dimension is fundamental, just as is the question of the precariat; one must thus rethink the building and the organization of the political from the base up. The problem of democracy is not only that of anti-fascism: it is the setting of goals, the construction of shared conflictual and projectual dimensions, it is to come together, to create the common through differences...It is a capacity to work in common.

Translated from French by **Bernard Schütze** and **Nicole Klein**