I‘T S A POWERFUL LIFE: A CONVERSATION ON CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY

Cesare Casarino and Antonio Negri

 Cesare Casarino: I would like to begin this conversation by turning to those contemporary thinkers who I believe come closest in some respects to your philosophical positions and political projects, namely, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Michel Foucault. Clearly, you have much in common with each of them. There are also, however, important and substantial differences that separate your positions from theirs. You have at times drawn attention to such differences. At the end of your “Twenty Theses on Marx,” for example, you, on the one hand, acknowledge their importance for your work, and, on the other hand, point out their limitations, which for you consist of the fact that ultimately they refuse to identify a constituent power, intended as the collective organ of subversive minorities; (you are also quick to add, however, that at times they implicitly overcome such limitations).1 Moreover, at several points in Empire, you and Michael Hardt in essence reiterate this assessment of their positions.2 I would like you to start from precisely such an assessment in order to discuss your relations to these thinkers. Could we begin perhaps with Deleuze?

Antonio Negri: My encounter with Deleuze took place via Spinoza. I had read Foucault quite carefully already in the 1970s, and, in fact, I wrote back then an essay on Foucault for Aut Aut, which later became a chapter in Macchina Tempo. In this essay, on the one hand, I discussed and defended Foucault’s methodology as being essential for any demystification of the great juridical-political institutions of modernity as well as for any analysis of the phenomenology of power—which at the time we used to call...
“microphysics of power.” On the other hand, I also reached the conclusion there that his methodology ultimately was stuck, was unable to open itself up to social recomposition. In other words, I felt that in the end Foucault’s archeology was unable to turn into an effective process of power: the archeological project always moved from above in order to reach below, while what concerned me most was precisely the opposite movement from below. For me, this was his project’s main limitation. I never met Foucault, even though I knew well and saw frequently throughout the second half of the 1970s his Italian translators—such as Giovanna Procacci, et cetera—as well as all the other figures who were working with Foucault as he was beginning his lectures at the Collège de France.

cc: But Foucault was perfectly aware of the limitations you ascribe to his project. It seems to me that it was precisely in order to overcome such an impasse that his research took a different turn precisely in those years, beginning at least with *Discipline and Punish* but especially later with the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*.

AN: Yes, you are right. I heard him lecture a couple of times at the Collège de France, and each time his arguments were almost the arguments of a historian. He would always leave me profoundly dissatisfied—and it was evident to me that he shared such dissatisfaction. At any rate, it was around this time that I returned to Spinoza. As usual, this return was dictated by my need to find conceptual forms that would adequately describe the positive recomposition of power [potenza] taking place at the time, the exponential intensification of political struggles, the expansion of the political movement throughout the social terrain as a whole. While rereading Spinoza, I also studied all the major interpreters of his thought, and, above all, Matheron. And then I came across Deleuze’s study of Spinoza, and so I began to attend his new lectures on Spinoza at Vincennes. My theoretical engagement with Deleuze begins precisely with his work on Spinoza, since I had never read any of his other works before—and I was right away extremely intrigued by him. Guattari and I were already very close friends by then. But in those years my friendship with Guattari essentially revolved around politics and we discussed philosophy
very rarely. Guattari—who at the time still called himself a psychoanalyst—was very bashful with regard to his involvement in philosophy. It was very difficult to communicate with him about philosophy then, although he became much more open about it when I returned to France in 1983, which is what enabled us to begin cowriting *Communists Like Us*. To return to Deleuze. What struck me immediately about Deleuze was his ability to give a conceptual form to that ensemble of potentialities [*potenze*] which for me had begun to constitute and define the historical horizon, namely, that microscopic horizon of history that was crisscrossed by specific actions and intentions. In other words, what struck me in Deleuze was his ability to break the structural horizon. Up until that point, even within Marxist workerism, the definitions of force, of tendency, and of struggle were given only in terms of and within a general prefiguration of the system. The structure was always prefigured. Class action and—more importantly, as far as we were concerned—the actions of emergent specific social groups and forces were always understood within a necessary and structural teleology. My own handicaps when confronted with such emergent forces were perhaps more serious than those of thinkers who worked within more sociological paradigms, because I was too confined by the juridical framework: often, my focus on the State-form and its juridical institutions limited my research almost inadvertently. You know how apropos of Alessandro Manzoni we say that he went to wash his clothes in the Arno river; well, in that period I can truly say that I went to wash my clothes in the Seine! It was in Paris that I began to confront such impasses. My encounter with Deleuze eventually enabled me to overcome these limitations and constituted a radical break in my research. But at first, the most problematic and yet most inescapable thinker for me to contend with was Foucault, because his project consisted of an attempt to break the structure from within.

**cc:** It seems to me you are implying that you returned to Spinoza, and that you used your discovery of Deleuze, in order to overcome at once Foucault’s impasses as well as the impasses of the research you and your group were conducting in Italy at the time.

**AN:** Yes, exactly.
I know I am jumping ahead in time almost two decades, but let me just point out that, in a sense, this explains why, when you re-elaborate Foucault’s concept of “biopolitics” in *Empire* and elsewhere, you read this concept through the filter of Deleuze’s own re-elaboration of Foucault in his essay “Postscript on Control Societies.”

Yes, of course. You must keep in mind, however, that Deleuze’s reading of Foucault in that late essay was strongly influenced by the relationship that he had by then established with me and Félix, as well as by all that Deleuze had learned in the meanwhile about the contemporary Italian context, in which an intense politicization of philosophical concepts was under way.

Yes, I see what you are saying, and I think this influence on Deleuze is perhaps most evident in *A Thousand Plateaus*, in which they even refer to Mario Tronti at several points.

Yes, it’s quite evident there. But let me return now to my first encounter with Deleuze’s work. After I came across his study on Spinoza, I immediately read all the other major texts he had written before *Anti-Oedipus*, among which *Difference and Repetition* is the fundamental work. It is in this text that Deleuze for the first time confronted and resolved the problems that hampered Foucault’s project. And Foucault understood this right away: in a sense, Foucault’s review essay on *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense*, namely, “Theatrum Philosophicum”—in which he famously declared this to be the Deleuzian century—was all about his realization that Deleuze had found the conceptual solutions that he himself had been looking for and that he would find and elaborate in his own way a decade later. Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition* was a truly explosive event. And this was a philosophical event that corresponded exactly to what was taking place politically in Italy at the time. In this sense, I find the hypothesis that Michael put forth a few years ago quite compelling: namely, while in the nineteenth century France did politics and Germany did metaphysics, in the twentieth century France did metaphysics and Italy did politics. I must add, though, that as I began to study Deleuze, I also resisted what rapidly became the fashionable interpretation of Deleuze: both in France and Italy, Deleuze was immediately read as the philosopher of surfaces, as the first
postmodern philosopher. Deleuze himself was quite incensed by these interpretations: this is the moment when he began attacking ferociously the *nouveaux philosophes* and hence began to make many enemies. I must say I am quite proud of the fact that, unlike many other comrades at the time, I understood most accurately not only the problems Deleuze too would eventually encounter but also the ways in which he finally would be able to solve them, namely, by identifying what we in Italy called “the tendencies” (such as the massive socialization of knowledge, the constitution of new forms of knowledge, the emergence of new forms of labor, and so on). And now I can finally address the issue you raised at [the] very beginning, namely, the differences between Deleuze’s project and my own project with regard to the question of constituent power. In Deleuze, the Event is often identified with Singularity, is often centered around the insurgent birth of the singular—both in an ontological and in a historical sense. Such a conception of the Event, however, never intersects with the Doing of history [*il fare della storia*]: the Event is never identified with the Doing of movements in history. In Deleuze—and even in his last works—there is always a sense of astonished stupor in the face of Singularity, there is always an inability to translate the ontological Event into a prefiguration or schematism of reason, into a constitution, or even into a merely virtual constitution that would nonetheless contain a constructive element. There is always surprise and chance.

**cc:** So, in effect you are saying that Deleuze is so thunderstruck when faced by the Event that he loses sight of that collective Doing of which the Event is expressive and to which the Event could once again lead. It seems to me, however, that Deleuze is a thinker who puts much emphasis on the question of praxis, who repeatedly engages with collective practices of resistance—such as, for example, in the “Treatise on Nomadology” and “Apparatus of Capture” sections of *A Thousand Plateaus*.7

**AN:** Well, I am not so sure—and, in any case, I wouldn’t want to give you interpretive solutions as far as this matter is concerned. What I can tell you is that once I interviewed Deleuze on precisely these issues, that is, on the question of the political.8 This is really a remarkable and beautiful interview, precisely because in it Deleuze
insists on emphasizing both aspects of this question: on the one hand, he affirms the formidable and occasional apparition of Singularity, and, on the other hand, he asserts the inescapable centrality of the Event. The problem is that whatever lies in between Singularity and the Event does not come to the fore, is never articulated. What is the procedure enabling this passage? In other words, how can we translate the ontological substratum into logical dimensions? What kind of relation might be able to link a logical proposition to the Event—and might be able to do so not in a merely descriptive manner? These are questions that Deleuze does not address there. Admittedly, in *A Thousand Plateaus* they do provide us systematically with a series of enormous scenarios within which such a passage or transformation is given, within which such a continuous exchange among different orders of discourse is given. What concerns me most from a political standpoint, however, is to seize on the synthesis within the passage—and forgive me for resorting to a dialectical idiom here! To put it differently: what I consider most important is to capture the moment of decision within such passages and transformations. I must add that Félix, Gilles, and I discussed all these questions on numerous occasions, and that they never denied the crucial importance of the objections that I raised, of the problems I was forcing them to confront. In fact, Gilles was the more forthcoming of the two on these matters: he was always far more willing to admit to these kinds of difficulties and problems than Félix ever was. Ultimately, Félix was still hampered by some sort of residual positivism deriving from his interest in the French sociological tradition and, above all, from his early studies in the French tradition of philosophy of science, to which he remained always very attached. And one had to be extremely careful not to point this out to him as he was very touchy on this matter, and he would easily fly into a rage at the very suggestion that the reluctance he had at times when faced by my criticisms might have been due to residual traces of positivism in his formation! In this respect, Gilles was completely different and not at all defensive. In essence, the problem that I was struggling with—and I think Gilles too was struggling with it, without nonetheless having any desire whatsoever to find a solution for it—was a classical
problem of the phenomenological tradition, namely, the problem of the relation between intention and act. But if one lives this problem from a collective standpoint—that is, from the standpoint of collective subjectivities—this then becomes a fundamentally historical problem, the problem par excellence of constituent power. And this is also the fundamental problem that the main traditions within the philosophy of right—namely, juridical formalism and critical realism—repeatedly faced, without ever being able to come to terms with it adequately, because within these traditions the birth of the norm is always a transcendent act. What is at stake for me, rather, is the internal apparatus: the task is to reach the level of immanence—which is not a horizon, a substitution for a divine scheme, or a pantheism; it is, rather, the discovery of the logic of collective actions, the constitution of such a logic in that moment of Singularity. It is precisely such a constitution—rather than something coming from the outside—that turns that moment of Singularity into an eternal one! In the end, I am not interested in talking about and adjudicating between immanence and transcendence—these are all meaningless debates. What concerns me is finding that force that is in there, which constitutes inside. I believe that a calculus of forces enabling one to understand and forecast what is taking place on the historical terrain is always available: there is always such a calculus that allows one to launch names, schemata, and projects forth—which are much like nets one casts to catch both the present and future.

cc: What I find most striking in your portrayal of Deleuze is that you identify some sort of ambivalence or hesitation at the very heart of his project: even though he understood perfectly the problem you have just outlined, he was nonetheless extremely hesitant when it came to identifying the moment of constituent decision, when it came to articulating a project or process of constitution. To what do you attribute such a hesitation on Deleuze’s part? Why do you think he ultimately was not willing or able to solve this problem? Could we say, perhaps, that this simply was not his project? Could we say, in other words, that his project took him in other directions, that he was driven by different urgencies and priorities, and that he left it to others to contend with the question of constitution—others, such as yourself, whose philosophical
and political formation or proclivities made them better equipped for this task?

AN: Well, this is a difficult question. Let’s begin by reiterating the obvious: Deleuze’s philosophical formation was in the Bergsonian tradition. Much like Félix, he too emerged from a world dominated by positivism, scientism, and relativism, a world in which the liberation of evolution from its naturalist cocoon was posed as a fundamental problem. Having said that, however, I must add that Deleuze found an escape from such a world by elaborating a particularly rich conception of immanence. Deleuze sensed how the crisis of the Bergsonian project could be identified with some of the outcomes of the Nietzschean project. Before being able to articulate such an identification, however, he tried out all sorts of different paths—from Kant to Hume, and so forth. And each time he would set out in a different direction, he did so with extreme intelligence and elegance: each time, he would critique thinkers from the standpoint of the present, thereby re-actualizing them in the midst of contemporary debates and problematics.

CC: And by doing so, he also posited each thinker as the solution to the unresolved problems of another thinker. For me, that’s most evident in Nietzsche and Philosophy, in which in effect he upholds Nietzsche’s project as the solution and radicalization of the Kantian critique.

AN: Yes, absolutely. And such an intellectual trajectory eventually led him to clash with Marxism. Well, actually, he never clashed with Marxism directly; rather, he clashed with structuralism. You need to keep in mind, though, that structuralism in France was basically a Marxist heresy: in the mid-1950s, in fact, everybody at the École Normale was engaged in a debate concerning the relation between structure and superstructure—a debate whose ultimate aim was to ascertain exactly in what ways structure and superstructure were internal to each other, and, hence, to determine whether such mutual interpenetrations and overdeterminations between the two could any longer be adequately described in terms of dialectical relations. Lacan, on the one hand, and Lévi-Strauss, on the other hand, set the terms of the debate and constituted the system. Unlike Althusser, Foucault, and many others, Deleuze always remained on the margins of this debate. He
circumvented it—and yet he nonetheless had to address it in some way. His answer was precisely *Difference and Repetition*—but it was not a completely successful one. The end of that work, in fact, constituted a crisis for Deleuze—even though it was an open crisis. It was in the midst of this crisis that he finally met Félix in 1968—and this encounter enabled Deleuze to elaborate the relation between Singularity and Desire. And thus *Anti-Oedipus* was born! At the time, many wondered why such a fine philosopher would get together with such a dilettantish jack-of-all-trades like Guattari; what could possibly generate and sustain such an incredibly strange and symbiotic friendship; and so on. And even nowadays, the history of philosophy still finds it impossible to accept their collaboration—thereby at best treating Félix as some kind of regrettable lapse in the expansion of Deleuzian rationality. Such an interpretation is unacceptable. It is thanks to this collaboration that Deleuze was able to confront not only the relation between Singularity and Desire but also their relation to the question of the body: this is, in other words, when we get the best Deleuze. This the Deleuze who then will work like a dog in order to build *A Thousand Plateaus*—because it is there that all the different parts of his project converge, it is there that he puts everything at stake so as to find what he has been looking for all along. And although I don’t think in the end he finds it even there, *A Thousand Plateaus* is nonetheless an extremely rich work—one of the four or five most important philosophical works of the twentieth century.

cc: Actually, as I recall, in the early 1990s you wrote a review of Deleuze and Guattari’s *What Is Philosophy?* in which you assert that *A Thousand Plateaus* is the most important philosophical work of the twentieth century! But let me return a moment to Deleuze’s intellectual trajectory and, in particular, to the different roles that Bergson and Spinoza play in his work. It seems to me, in fact, that there are two different main tendencies or perhaps even two opposite polarities in Deleuze’s work: a Bergsonian polarity and a Spinozian polarity—which at times coexist even in the same text. From everything you have said so far, I am inclined to think that, on the one hand, you have felt a close affinity with Deleuze precisely because of his Spinozian strain, and, on the other hand, you
have always been very critical of his Bergsonian leanings. For example, in *Empire* you and Michael borrow and re-elaborate a series of concepts that Deleuze derives from Bergson, namely, the dyad of “virtual” and “actual,” and the dyad of “possible” and “real.” While Deleuze differentiates between these dyads and ultimately rejects the latter in favor of the former, you and Michael insist on the necessity to produce some sort of continuum between the two, and, above all, on the necessity not to reject the dyad of “possible” and “real” *tout court.* Doesn’t such a re-elaboration of these concepts constitute precisely a critique of the Bergsonian strain in Deleuze?

AN: Yes, I completely agree. In *Empire,* Michael and I develop the concept of power [*potenza*]—that is, the concept of the virtual as potential, the concept of the possible potential. The concept of the possible is linked to chance, while the concept of the potential is linked to a virtuality of the possible. In effect, we undertake an analysis of the concept of power [*potenza*] in Spinoza as well as in Marx’s *Grundrisse.* In any case, it is always very dangerous to discuss these matters simply in the context of philosophical references. There is something else of fundamental importance that lies behind the analysis of all these concepts, namely, the development and the overcoming of the concept of class—whether intended as social class or as political class. Or, to put it more precisely, what is at stake in our development of the concept of power [*potenza*] is an attempt to revitalize the rational nucleus of the concept of political class through a new concept of corporeal singularity, to update such a rational nucleus by forcing it to confront the world of the immaterial, that is, the world in which the body is given a priori as wholly constructed and artificial, as always already a labor instrument. (And it goes without saying that I intend the body as indivisible from the mind.) But the moment when the body has thus become a body that has already undergone its specific *bildung* and that already has been brought to a level of effective historicity and of real productivity—that is the moment when the possible is no longer ruled by chance and is, rather, that which is powerful [*potente*], that which is potentially able to take place. *This* is the virtual! From this standpoint, the Bergsonian paradigm becomes entirely irrelevant, while the
Spinozian paradigm is integrated by the re-elaboration of the concept of labor. When the human is conceived of and produced as tool, immanentism too becomes materialism, and the referent of a whole series of conceptual categories is incorporated, becomes incarnate.

CC: Yes, I understand. But let me return for a moment to the relation between those two dyads. In what you have said so far, you have not mentioned once the second half of each of the dyads; that is, you have not mentioned either the actual or the real. It’s almost as if here the real has become subsumed by the possible and the actual has been subsumed by the virtual; or, at any rate, it’s as if suddenly there is no longer much difference between the virtual and the actual as well as between the possible and the real. As I recall, however, what you and Michael undertake in Empire is quite different: there, you conceive of the possible as the passage from the virtual to the real, as that which transforms the virtual in a constitution of the real. I find this rather perplexing, because then the possible runs the risk of being turned into a category of mediation. In other words, it seems to me that suddenly you resort to a dialectical relation precisely where you reject the possibility of any dialectical resolution.

AN: Well, if that’s what we wrote, I immediately recant! [Laughter] If there is any possible mediation—which is then no longer a mediation at all—that is power [potenza] itself. And this power [potenza] needs to be understood in two ways at once: on the one hand, it must be singularized as unrepeatability, and, on the other hand, it must be universalized in its being instrument or tool. I believe that this concept of tooling [utensileria]—which is very important in Gilbert Simondon and which one can see here and there also in A Thousand Plateaus—is fundamental for a materialist reading of Singularity and of its power [potenza].

CC: In any case, it seems to me that what differentiates you and Michael from Deleuze is the fact that you insist on the necessity of the concept of the real. And such a necessity is another version of what we were discussing earlier, namely, the necessity to identify a constituent power.

AN: Yes, absolutely. When my Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State was published, I had several discussions specifically
on the question of constituent power, first with Félix and later with Gilles. Félix kept on saying that he agreed with me—even though actually he at once agreed with me and did not agree with me at all, in the sense that, as far as he was concerned, the problems I was trying to solve were already solved. For him, what I identified as problems did not constitute problems at all.

cc: Do you think that perhaps he had found the solution to the problem of constituent power through his involvement in various political movements?

an: No, no, Félix was not so uncouth or stupid as to expect to solve such a problem simply by getting involved in politics! [Laughter] What he thought, rather, was that this was a preconstituted problem, for which one needed to find an explanation. In other words, he did think that the problem really existed, but he also thought that the explanations were already perfectly developed and available—so that what one needed to do at most was to refine one’s own conceptual tools, which is precisely what he thought he and Gilles were doing in What Is Philosophy? In the late 1980s, we were conducting a small seminar at Félix’s house, and, as I recall, all these problems came to a head when Paul Virilio joined us. In Virilio, I saw a dispersion of the constituent horizon, which in the end becomes an elusive web. In Virilio, the charge of the constituent Singularity is extremely strong, but in the end finds no resolution, or, rather, finds a resolution only in an explicitly theological transformation: the singularities engaging in the work of constitution ultimately disperse in the speed of the process, in the irrecuperability of the tendencies, in the lack or dissolution of center.

cc: This is a waste. This is a philosophy of waste.

an: Yes, precisely. Or, rather, this is a philosophy of communication as waste.

cc: There is a precedent in French philosophy for all this, namely, Bataille.

an: Yes, undoubtedly. I am sure that Bataille and others were enormously important for Virilio. But ultimately he is a technician before being anything else. All this philosophizing of his comes somehow from being a specialist and a technician of urbanism. His cultural and intellectual formation is rather shallow. He is well connected—that’s all. Even though he is often compared or
confused with somebody like Baudrillard, there is an enormous difference between the two. So, Virilio and I got into some pretty nasty fights, and we even stopped talking to each other for a while. The point of this story, in any case, is to stress that Félix would try all he could to help Virilio find a way to reformulate his conception of immanence into an immanence recuperated as and in concrete, positive acts. At the same time, I was conducting a seminar in Paris in which we would often engage with Bruno Latour. With Latour, too, the main problem was to try and identify the moment of constitution in his methodology: whereas for Latour such a moment was determined on the margins of the epistemological terrain, I was trying to imagine constitution as something that erupts from within that terrain. The impasse of Latour’s research lies in an excessive emphasis on epistemological caesuras and on radical doubt intended as that which produces knowledge.

CC: In some ways, this is similar to Foucault’s impasse: Foucault pushed the project of epistemological critique to its furthest limit—a limit beyond which such a project could not go without being turned into and reborn as a fully ontological project.

AN: Yes, definitively. And in his final years, Foucault was attempting precisely such an ontological leap.

CC: Before turning to Foucault’s final years, there are still a few matters I would like to discuss regarding your relation to Deleuze and Guattari. When Deleuze and Guattari undertake the project of identifying the emergence of new antagonistic and revolutionary subjectivities, they begin such a project by contending with psychoanalysis (and I am referring mainly, but not exclusively, to *Anti-Oedipus*). But why is it exactly that—unlike Deleuze and Guattari—a philosopher as concerned with the question of subjectivity as you are has never felt the need to engage with psychoanalytic discourse?

AN: First of all, psychoanalytic discourse did not play a central role in my intellectual formation. Secondly, I have some doubts regarding the scientificity of the psychoanalytic problematic. I have never quite understood either where the unconscious might be or even whether it exists. And I am not quite sure what else to say. . . . I read Freud early on, but I never did much with it. After
that, while I was working on German historicism, I studied much late-nineteenth-century psychological materialism, which I found enormously rich and interesting. When I was a student, I even took a couple of psychology courses, which focused on the old Viennese school and emphasized the physiological and neurological aspects of the question. And it was only later that I started reading Lacan. All in all, my assessment of Lacan is quite simple: I think of him as the intellectual figure who introduced and started doing philosophy of language in France. He did philosophy of language in exactly the same way it was being done in the Anglo-Saxon tradition—with one important difference. Whereas in the Anglo-Saxon countries the main research focus was the definition of meaning [senso] as well as its reference to reality, in Lacan the focus shifted to the relation between language and a hypothetical and ever-so-elusive soul. I never managed to become interested in such a project. Language and the analysis of language, however, do concern me enormously. But for me the analysis of language is nothing other than a way to enrich corporeality. Wittgenstein’s finest insight—which is the reason he is one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century—is precisely that language is a gestural form: he taught us that to speak is to gesture [gestire], that is, to manage the body [gestire il corpo]; he taught us that language is all there within the body. This is why psychoanalysis—with all its somersaults toward consciousness? The unconscious? A suffering interiority?—has always left me perplexed. Psychoanalysis truly is a science of pity, a compassionate science, a dubious science.

CC: But if your theory of subjectivity does not allow for a concept of the unconscious, whatever you mean by subjectivity is then very different from Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of subjectivity.

AN: As far as I am concerned, there is no concept of the unconscious in Deleuze and Guattari. What we find in Deleuze and Guattari, rather, is simply a concept of desire. This is a concept of desire that is continuously referred to [as] a complex, undulatory subjectivity that moves about on the surface of a consistency—at once a historical and natural consistency—in which there is no space for the unconscious. In this sense, I think I reached the same
conclusions that Deleuze and Guattari reached, without, however, going through the cesspool of psychoanalysis.

cc: Well, I don’t really agree. But let’s return to Foucault. In the last years of his life, Foucault was working on the concept of biopolitics. Clearly, this concept has been very important for your project. It seems to me that in re-elaborating it for your purposes, you bring to the fore its latent aspects: in particular, you emphasize the element of productivity, of productive potentiality that had remained implicit in Foucault’s articulations of this concept. Would you agree with this assessment?

an: Yes, I would. The definition of biopolitics that I extracted from Foucault ultimately is not present in his work—even though all the elements enabling such a definition are certainly there. What I think is there in Foucault, above all, is an excavation of subjectivity that leads to the question of biopolitics. In the end, Foucault rediscovers and reformulates an old truth, namely, that human beings make, build, produce themselves. What emerges in the late Foucault is a humanism after the end of Man—a humanism in the best possible sense of the term.

cc: As I recall, you and Michael discuss this type of humanism in Empire.

an: Yes. And this is the humanism that comes after the end of any possible humanism of transcendence and that reaffirms human power [potenza] as a power [potenza] of the artificial, as the power to build artfully [la potenza del costruire con arte]. This is a humanism that understands and defines human beings at once as artificers and tools, and that is characterized by a Renaissance materiality of the human, by that religion of the human that was born in the Renaissance.

cc: But how is such a religion of the human to be intended nowadays?

an: What I mean by a religion of the human is simply the richness and power [potenza] of matter that continuously produces itself in each and every instant.

cc: Let me return to the concept of biopolitics. You said that you extracted the definition of this concept from Foucault’s work. I take this to mean—among the other things—that you also had to extract it from the original context in which Foucault was trying
to elaborate this concept. Of course, there is nothing wrong with that: this is what we need to do whenever we want to re-elaborate a concept so as to use it for our own purposes. I would like, however, to return to and reflect on that original context for a moment, namely, the last chapter in the first volume of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*. Within that context, the question of sexuality is the central focus of the whole investigation: in the last chapter of that work, Foucault posits the invention and deployment of sexuality as one of the fundamental technologies of power in modernity, and understands sexuality as the crucial apparatus [*dispositivo*] used by both the modern state and modern capital to produce, organize, and manage life directly. In Foucault, in other words, sexuality is the principal mechanism of power in modernity, the central apparatus [*dispositivo*] of biopolitics. I think that this crucial aspect of Foucault’s project is lost or ignored in your own re-elaboration of the concept of biopolitics.

**AN:** No, I don’t think so. First of all, I believe the concept of sexuality as such cannot be reduced to the game of sex, to the specific and determined historical arrangement of the game of sex—and, of course, Foucault never reduced it to that. Sexuality, rather, is the fundamental element of human reproduction. I intend reproduction here in its strict Marxian sense: labor power reproduces itself above all through sexuality. This means that sexuality is crucial not only in the formation of social hierarchy—that is, in the reproduction of pre-existent force relations—but also in the formation of styles of life, forms of life, and types of human beings. Foucault’s interest in precisely these aspects of the question of sexuality is an index of the radical ontological turn that his project took from the middle of the 1970s onwards—and it is not a coincidence that around this time he also began to engage with all the problems of identity. In any case, in articulating such a concept of sexuality, I don’t think I am adding anything new to what contemporary feminism has been saying for a while, namely, that the choice of different styles of life and different styles of sexual play is overdetermined by the structuring of reproduction, which is as important as production itself. And this brings me to my own definition of biopolitics. In the world of immateriality in which we live, reproduction—which is the first possible definition of
biopolitics—and production can no longer be distinguished from each other: biopolitics becomes fully realized precisely when production and reproduction are one and the same, that is, when production is conducted primarily and directly through language and social exchange. I began elaborating such a definition of biopolitics in Paris—thanks also to the numerous discussions I had there with several dear comrades, such as Maurizio Lazzarato, Christian Marazzi, and Judith Revel, who at the time was director of the Foucault archives. Undoubtedly, the initial inspiration and crucial point of departure for my investigation into the question of biopolitics was the Deleuzian reading of Foucault. I took this reading, however, in a different direction: the concept of biopolitics for me ultimately needs to confront and address the question of labor. In any case, this is something I do with each and every concept I elaborate: I always try to bring concepts to bear on labor—which is why I still call myself a Marxist. In this sense, I see my definition of biopolitics as an expansion of Foucault’s own investigation: rather than disregarding or neglecting Foucault’s elaboration of biopolitics in the context of the deployment of sexuality, I assumed such an elaboration and expanded it so as to account for the overall construction of the body in the indistinguishable realms of production and reproduction, that is, in the realm of immaterial labor. Such an expansion of the investigation enabled me also to clarify something that in Foucault had remained relatively undefined, namely, the relation between biopolitics and biopower. I feel it is necessary, in fact, to introduce a distinction within the very concept of biopolitics, to distinguish between two different and antagonistic aspects or tendencies of that concept: biopolitics, on the one hand, turns into biopower [biopotere] intended as the institution of a dominion over life, and, on the other hand, turns into biopower [biopotenza] intended as the potentiality of constituent power. In other words, in biopolitics intended as biopower [biopotenza], it is the bios that creates power, while in biopolitics intended as biopower [biopotere], it is power that creates the bios, that is, that tries alternately either to determine or to annul life, that posits itself as power against life. This is also to say that in re-elaborating and expanding the concept of biopolitics, I attempted to turn it into a fully Spinozist concept.
Spinozism is at once a formidable identification of the reason founded on the number two [la ragione del due] and a radical rejection of the reason founded on the number three [la ragione del tre]. Spinozism is a system of thought that knows no mediation: on the one hand, there is this power [potenza] that creates life, that produces and reproduces, that defines the styles of life in which freedom, love, and knowledge continuously interact in the constitution of such a process of production, and, on the other hand, there is nothingness—the power [potenza] of the nothing.

cc: So, much like Deleuze’s work, your own work is replete with dualisms: the two versions of biopower, constituent power and constituted power, the theory of the two modernities,10 et cetera. And all these dualisms are different forms and manifestations of this dualism you find in Spinoza.

AN: Yes, that’s right; in the end, there is only one fundamental dualism.

cc: What I am wondering about is the relation between the polarities of this dualism. You emphasize that there is no possible mediation between the two. There must be, nonetheless, some kind of relation between them. It seems to me that you conceive of such a relation as one of capture and domination: constituted power continuously endeavors to subject and exploit constituent power.

AN: Or, to put it more precisely: power takes away power [potenza] from life. And I conceive of this life not at all as something personal or as a flux—which is why I am very much anti-Bergsonian. My conception of life is not a vitalism. I conceive of life, rather, as the multitude of singularities, which come together or apart, and in doing so they constitute, they produce together the moment of constitution. Such a multitude is continuously subjected to a subtraction of power, which affects each and every aspect of its attempt to constitute. And this is then how the dualism turns into an infinity of concrete relations, rather than constituting a polarity of first principles awaiting some kind of metaphysical Zoroastrian resolution! But to return to biopolitics and biopower. It goes without saying that these concepts—like all other concepts—are to be evaluated according to their constitutive efficacy, according to the enabling efficacy that they might have for reasoning. There is no such thing as biopolitics or as biopower: they do not exist as such, as things. These are names that might or might not be
useful for describing the real, or, rather, for capturing the real from the standpoint of the ones who are living it, who live in it, as well as for identifying tendencies and imagining projects of constitution that already exist in potentia here and now in the real. And for the time being, biopolitics and biopower are extremely useful names precisely in this sense.

cc: Let me return for a moment to your version of Spinozism and to that fundamental dualism that manifests itself in a variety of other dualisms. On the one hand, there is a power [potenza] that creates, produces, constitutes—which, I believe, is precisely what Deleuze and Guattari mean by “desire”—and, on the other hand, there is a power that subtracts and negates, which is what you just referred to as the power [potenza] of the nothing. I would like you to clarify the ontological status of the latter. Whenever you describe the various specific forms the latter takes—such as the State’s power of domination, capital’s power of exploitation, and so on—you always do so in negative, privative, subtractive terms, you always conceive of them as negations of being. Now, my point is that, in order not to misunderstand this fundamental dualism as some sort of Manicheanism, such a negation of being cannot be thought of as an entity per se. In other words, the power [potenza] of the nothing is precisely nothing—not a power [potenza] and not a thing at all! And I suppose this also means that there cannot be any kind of symmetrical relation between the polarities of the dualism. And yet domination does exist, exploitation is real, and so forth. How does one deal with this paradox?

an: There is no paradox here. All this is worked out very clearly in Spinoza when he engages with the problem of Evil, when he elaborates his own concept of Evil. For Spinoza, Evil does not exist.

cc: Evil does not exist . . . and yet it subtracts and negates life?!

an: No, wait, there is a misunderstanding here. Subtraction and negation are not positive actions. Evil does not exist—and hence does not act, does not do a thing. We are the ones who do not succeed, who are incapable of action, who cannot act! In this sense, Spinoza completely reinterprets Saint Augustine, for whom Evil is real, for whom there is such a thing as hell, for whom, in other words, some kind of Manicheanism continues to play the role of fundamental theological structuring principle. In any case, it is a
common feature of many religious traditions to need to conceive of Evil as a real entity: even when Evil is said not to exist from a metaphysical standpoint, it is said nonetheless to exist from a moral standpoint. For Spinoza, on the other hand, Evil is simply a limit—a very real limit against which we continuously struggle. For Spinoza, Evil is the limit of our desire.

cc: Yes, now I understand. The Spinozian dualism, in other words, is structured by, on the one hand, a productive power [potenza]—namely, our desire—and, on the other hand, a negative power, which consists of the point at which our desire runs into an impasse and for a time can no longer expand, can no longer develop any further.

AN: Yes, our desire reaches a limit, which then we identify with the State, et cetera. In other words, this limit is a negative reality that is actually produced—and it is produced at once by our need to develop and by our inability to do so. The existence of the State, for example, is determined by this impasse, is precisely a produced limit. But we must always go beyond such an impasse! And each and every time we are able to overcome the limit of our desire, we are able to do so only to the extent to which we express love rather than hatred or other negative passions. We overcome limits only by expressing positive passions, which increasingly constitute us collectively, that is, as collectivity. This means that we come to affirm and posit ourselves as democratic citizens only when we have been able to determine absolute democracy. This is the democracy in which the absoluteness of desire has developed collectively: to desire, in fact, is not an individual act; it is, rather, at once a singular and collective act. In such a collectivity, there is no longer any contract: there is simply a founding, constitutive act of love. This is not utopia: this is the schema of reason, which enables us to select models, to link the ethical and the political, and, indeed, to abolish any difference whatsoever between ethics and politics, soul and body, private and public, the individual and the collective, in other words, between desire and its realization. None of this entails enacting a utopia; it entails, rather, analyzing what is in front of us—such as, for example, class struggle—from the standpoint of such a conception of collectivity. In this sense,
class struggle ought to be understood as an ongoing attempt to produce love, as a great experiment of love.

cc: I would like to return to the question of biopolitics—but this time as a way to begin investigating the uncanny similarities as well as the crucial differences between your work and the work of Giorgio Agamben. On the one hand, the two of you share several specific concerns—such as, for example, the question of biopolitics. And in more general and fundamental terms, you seem to share in an attempt to produce a philosophy of immanence centered around an ontology of potentiality. On the other hand, the two of you think about these common concerns and articulate such a shared project in strikingly different ways. Unlike Agamben, for example, you always emphasize the question of production, of the productivity of being. Such an emphasis leads you to critique Agamben’s articulation of biopolitics and especially his concept of naked life: in Empire, you and Michael argue that Agamben turns naked life into the negative limit of biopolitics, whereas you would rather conceive of it as the productive element par excellence in biopolitics. Agamben, for his part, critiques your concept of constituent power in Homo Sacer.

AN: Agamben is one my best friends, one of my most intimate friends. I have known him for roughly two decades: we often spend summer vacations together; we get together for Christmas every year; we are basically family. In short, we love each other very much. I am older than he is. And, unlike myself, he was never involved in political struggles, for which he has an incredibly voracious curiosity, as they constitute a great lack in his life—and he very much regrets not having had such experiences. He is quite limited when it comes to understanding politics—and in his work this limitation takes the form of a radical Heideggerism. He is absolutely convinced that the human is a being-for-death. Such a conception of the human lends a paradoxical rhythm to his research, which is then founded on the idea that the world is continuously and miraculously reborn precisely at the limit of life, namely, on that threshold which is death. In a sense, one can already find such arguments in Rosenzweig or in Benjamin. In Agamben, however, this problematic gets terribly complicated,
because all in all he is also very much a materialist. Unlike Rosenzweig, Agamben has no interest in the problem of the individual. Unlike Benjamin, Agamben has no interest in the ambiguous relation between truth and eschatology. In the end, the questions he poses are historical questions concerning the nature of institutions: in his work, the fundamental questions have always been political questions. My polemics with Giorgio always have had to do with this tension in his thought: this is a tension precisely in the sense that he tends and stretches towards the extreme limit of being so as to extract from it some kind of new and purified language. Much like him, I, too, believe it is extremely important to analyze such a limit. As I was suggesting earlier, it’s not a question of pitting the power [potenza] of life and the power [potenza] of the nothing against each other, as if in some sort of Manichean agon; rather, it’s a question of capturing the relation between these powers [potenze]—intended as the relation between life and its real limits—in each singular nexus. If one looks at it from a subjective standpoint, such a relation becomes also our relation to death—a relation that is lived in each and every instant, since we can never be sure we shall live to the next instant. But it’s one thing to give this limit the name of “death” and to believe that things signify only thanks to their contact with it, and it’s something quite different to focus not on this limit but on our power [potenza] continuously to overcome it and to believe, in other words, that such a power [potenza] produces the world thanks not to its contact with such a limit but to its capacity to expand each and every time beyond it, to its ability to leave it behind over and over again. I am very often in agreement with Giorgio. But it’s as if we looked at the same things from two different standpoints: we posit and engage with the same grand metaphysical-ontological schema—but he apprehends it from one side while I do so from the other side.

cc: Clearly, neither you nor Agamben conceive of death as the opposite of life; for both of you, rather, death is part of and immanent to life itself—much like we see, for example, at some points in Foucault’s *Birth of the Clinic*.

AN: Yes, of course.

cc: The two of you, however, are in complete disagreement when it
comes to the concept of naked life. In your recent essay “Il mostro politico. Nuda vita e potenza” [“The Political Monster. Power and Naked Life”], you undertake a radical critique of Agamben’s use of this concept, and, indeed, you denounce it as a purely ideological construct. Such a critique is different from and, in fact, more uncompromising than the critique of naked life we see in Luciano Ferrari Bravo’s essay on Agamben: rather than rejecting such a concept *tout court*, in fact, he attempts there to identify and criticize a fundamental ambiguity, dualism, or oscillation at the very heart of the concept, namely, the oscillation between nakedness and life. But it strikes me that your most recent critique of naked life is also much more radical and scathing than the one you and Michael undertook in *Empire*: unlike what you wrote in that book—in which you suggest a way of interpreting naked life different from Agamben’s—your essay now asserts that this concept is simply irredeemable. In any case, it seems to me that you have changed your mind about these matters since you wrote *Empire*. What has occurred in the meantime? Why did you feel the need for such a critique of this concept right now?

**AN:** Yes, Ferrari Bravo insists on asking: Is it life that is naked or is it the naked that is life?

**CC:** Well, yes, but what do *you* think? And, in particular, what do you think about the fact that the concept of naked life has become so enormously and increasingly important for Agamben lately?

**AN:** I believe Giorgio is writing a sequel to *Homo Sacer*, and I feel that this new work will be resolutive for his thought—in the sense that he will be forced in it to resolve and find a way out of the ambiguity that has qualified his understanding of naked life so far. He already attempted something of the sort in his recent book on Saint Paul, but I think this attempt largely failed: as usual, this book is extremely learned and elegant; it remains, however, somewhat trapped within Pauline exegesis, rather than constituting a full-fledged attempt to reconstruct naked life as a potentiality for exodus, to rethink naked life fundamentally in terms of exodus. I believe that the concept of naked life is not an impossible, unfeasible one. I believe it is possible to push the image of power to the point at which a defenseless human being [*un povero Cristo*] is crushed, to conceive of that extreme point at which power tries to
eliminate that ultimate resistance that is the sheer attempt to keep oneself alive. From a logical standpoint, it is possible to think all this: the naked bodies of the people in the camps, for example, can lead one precisely in this direction. But this is also the point at which this concept turns into ideology: to conceive of the relation between power and life in such a way actually ends up bolstering and reinforcing ideology. Agamben, in effect, is saying that such is the nature of power: in the final instance, power reduces each and every human being to such a state of powerlessness. But this is absolutely not true! On the contrary: the historical process takes place and is produced thanks to a continuous constitution and construction, which undoubtedly confronts the limit over and over again—but this is an extraordinarily rich limit, in which desires expand, and in which life becomes increasingly fuller. Of course it is possible to conceive of the limit as absolute powerlessness, especially when it has been actually enacted and enforced in such a way so many times. And yet, isn’t such a conception of the limit precisely what the limit looks like from the standpoint of constituted power as well as from the standpoint of those who have already been totally annihilated by such a power—which is, of course, one and the same standpoint? Isn’t this the story about power that power itself would like us to believe in and reiterate? Isn’t it far more politically useful to conceive of this limit from the standpoint of those who are not yet or not completely crushed by power, from the standpoint of those still struggling to overcome such a limit, from the standpoint of the process of constitution, from the standpoint of power [potenza]? I am worried about the fact that the concept of naked life as it is conceived by Agamben might be taken up by political movements and in political debates: I find this prospect quite troubling, which is why I felt the need to attack this concept in my recent essay. Ultimately, I feel that nowadays the logic of traditional eugenics is attempting to saturate and capture the whole of human reality—even at the level of its materiality, that is, through genetic engineering—and the ultimate result of such a process of saturation and capture is a capsized production of subjectivity within which ideological undercurrents continuously try to subtract or neutralize our resistance.
cc: And I suppose you are suggesting that the concept of naked life is part and parcel of such undercurrents. But have you discussed all this with Agamben? What does he think about your critiques?

an: Whenever I tell him what I have just finished telling you, he gets quite irritated, even angry. I still maintain, nonetheless, that the conclusions he draws in *Homo Sacer* lead to dangerous political outcomes and that the burden of finding a way out of this mess rests entirely on him. And the type of problems he runs into in this book recur throughout many of his other works. I found his essay on Bartleby, for example, absolutely infuriating. This essay was published originally as a little book that also contained Deleuze’s essay on Bartleby: well, it turns out that what Deleuze says in his essay is exactly the contrary of what Giorgio says in his! I suppose one could say that they decided to publish their essays together precisely so as to attempt to figure this limit—that is, to find a figure for it, to give it a form—by some sort of paradoxical juxtaposition, but I don’t think that this attempt was really successful in the end. In any case, all this incessant talk about the limit bores me and tires me out after a little while. The point is that, inasmuch as it is death, the limit is not creative. The limit is creative to the extent to which you have been able to overcome it qua death: the limit is creative because you have overcome death.

cc: Yes, and the creativity—indeed, the productivity—that derives from having overcome this limit is the creativity of absolute freedom in the Spinozian sense. This is, in fact, one way of understanding what Spinoza means when he says that one must free oneself from the fear of death and that nobody is more free, more powerful, and more dangerous than somebody who no longer fears death: in Spinoza, absence of the fear of death is at once absolute freedom and untrammeled productivity, namely, the expression of the most creative potentials, the zenith of creativity; or, more precisely, in Spinoza, that moment of absolute freedom that is the absence of the fear of death constitutes the indispensable condition of possibility for such an exponential leap in expression, production, creation (without, perhaps, necessarily guaranteeing it).

an: And while Spinoza tells us to free ourselves from the presence of death, Heidegger tells us the contrary.
cc: But let’s return one last time to the question of naked life. In your recent book *Kairos, Alma Venus, Multitudo*, you discuss at length the question of poverty; in fact, one could say that you elaborate there a specific conception of poverty, that you produce the concept of poverty. I want to return to this concept later. What interests me for the moment is to note that in those pages on poverty you also engage with the question of nakedness, you often speak of the nakedness of poverty. At one point, for example, you write that, far from being an object constituted by the suffering inflicted by biopolitics, the poor are precisely the biopolitical subject, and, moreover, that “the poor are the naked eternity of the power [potenza] to be.” As I was reading these passages, it occurred to me that your insistence on the question of nakedness here is a reference and a reply to the nakedness of Agamben’s naked life.

an: Yes, I completely agree: the fact that I took this term up again and redeployed it is a clear indication of Giorgio’s presence and influence in my work—and I must say I am pleased about it, and I am glad that you noticed it. Undoubtedly, there is always ongoing dialogue, exchange, discussion between Giorgio and myself.

cc: What is the nature of the exchange in this specific case? What is the difference between the nakedness of poverty and the nakedness of naked life?

an: The nakedness of poverty is immediately linked to love, that is, to a positive power [potenza]. Such nakedness is always already there as element of being.

cc: And hence it is part and parcel of constituent power—the concept with which we began this conversation and which you claim differentiates your project from Foucault’s as well as from Deleuze and Guattari’s projects. Unsurprisingly, the concept of constituent power also turns out to mark a crucial difference between your project and Agamben’s project. Agamben has commented on this matter. In *Homo Sacer*, he briefly discusses your *Insurgencies*, and, in particular, he critiques the way in which you separate constituent power and constituted power from each other in that work: he maintains that you are not able to find a plausible criterion according to which a distinction between these two powers can be made, and, furthermore, that it is not possible to sustain or
even to posit any separation between them anyway. What do you think about such a critique?

AN: I am not really sure. Giorgio has always tried to show how juridical categories as well as the juridical as a category cannot be raised or made to answer to coherent metaphysical criteria. His critique, in other words, is a purely negative critique: what I mean by this is not that he criticizes the substance of what I say about constituent power; what I mean, rather, is that he does not want to solve this problem, that he believes it is not even advisable to look for a solution to this problem at all. In the end, I find this type of critique to be rather banal.

CC: Could you be more specific?

AN: Giorgio’s main critique of my positions consists of arguing that constituent power and constituted power cannot be distinguished from each other according to any juridical-political criterion. Well, thank you very much! That’s entirely obvious—and, in fact, my analysis of constituent power begins precisely from this problem. All jurists argue that constituent power does not exist unless it is codified, that it ruptures the juridical system and its continuity, that it cannot come into being unless it has been recognized and validated by constituted power. According to such arguments, therefore, constituent power paradoxically can take two forms at once: on the one hand, it lives outside the Law, and, on the other hand, it lives inside the Law, that is, in the form of the Supreme Court’s power to innovate the legal system [*ordinamento giuridico*].

CC: And in the latter case constituent power is already part and parcel of sovereign power. So, if I understand you correctly, you are suggesting that this problem—namely, the problem of ascertaining, defining, and containing the existence of constituent power—is not at all constituent power’s problem; it is, rather, a problem for constituted power.

AN: Yes, precisely! Constituent power does not need to ask itself whether or not it exists: it does exist, and it leads a parallel life with respect to constituted power. The enormous social phenomena that are in the process of determining themselves nowadays—such as the antiglobal movements—bear witness not only
to the fact that constituent power exists but also to the fact that constituent power makes its influence felt on constituted power: these movements, in fact, express extremely powerful juridical as well as political aspirations that inevitably affect the legal system and that hence will end up having to be acknowledged in some way or other. These new movements, in other words, always contain a constituent function. Such a reply to his critique, however, is completely beside the point, because it does not address what is most problematic about his critique in the first place. Giorgio’s most serious problem ultimately is that he does not allow for any kind of constitution of the political whatsoever. And this is why his critique remains external to my arguments, foreign to my way of reasoning: more than a critique, it constitutes an opposition, a counterpoint.

cc: This claim regarding Agamben’s failure to think the constitution of the political has made me think of the sentence with which he ends his discussion of your arguments about constituent power. Let me read it to you. He writes: “Until a new and coherent ontology of potentiality (beyond the steps that have been made in this direction by Spinoza, Schelling, Nietzsche, and Heidegger) has replaced the ontology founded on the primacy of the act and its relation to potentiality, a political theory exempt from the aporias of sovereignty remains unthinkable.” On the one hand, I completely agree with what he is saying here, and, on the other hand, I would like to take all this in different directions from the ones I think he pursues. I do share his concerns regarding that dominant ontological tradition that is willing and able to conceive of potentiality only as mere means to that all-important end that is the act—thereby not only subordinating potentials to acts but also failing to understand and indeed to think potentiality tout court (even though, as Agamben rightly points out, the foundational text of this tradition—namely, Aristotle’s Metaphysics—is far more complex and astute with respect to the question of potentiality than such a tradition has often dared to admit). Such concerns lead him in the end to attempt to produce a concept of potentiality without making recourse to the mediating passage or transformation from potentiality to act—that is, to conceive of potentiality no
longer in relation to the act, and, indeed, to think potentiality at once without any relation and without any act whatsoever.\textsuperscript{14} (And, clearly, this is also tantamount to producing a concept of means without end.) Whereas I agree that it is necessary to banish this mediating relation from any thought of potentiality—a relation that in the end has always had the effect of enslaving potentiality to act—I also feel that by getting rid of the relation one does not somehow get rid of the act too, that it is one thing to dispense with this relation and quite another to imply that the whole question of actualization will also vanish into thin air or become irrelevant once such a relation has been finally dispensed with. On the contrary! Doing without this relation should lead to a radical and global reconceptualization of both potentiality and act as immanent to each other, that is, as distinct yet indiscernible from each other. It is only by rethinking both at once in such a way that a “new and coherent ontology of potentiality” can at all come into being. And this is why, whereas Agamben suggests in the above sentence that such an ontology is yet to come, I think that it already exists in some form, and that, in particular, Deleuze took important steps in this direction. If we understand Deleuze’s deployment of the dyad of “virtual” and “actual” as one of his ways of posing the question of the relation between potentiality and act, for example, we can see that Deleuze does not dispense with the actual just because it has only too often been used to suppress and indeed repress the virtual, and does not theorize the virtual in isolation from the actual. In Deleuze, the virtual and the actual form an immanent circuit, in the sense that each of the two is the obverse side of the other—and hence the actual always has virtual facets, always leads parallel virtual lives, and vice versa.\textsuperscript{15} The virtual and the actual, thus, are two different ways of apprehending the very same thing. Importantly, this also means that the actualization of the virtual never constitutes an impoverishment or mortification of the virtual, because such an actualization always produces in its turn still other virtual realities. In Agamben, on the other hand, one often gets the feeling that potentiality always pulls back at the last moment from realizing itself in the act precisely because he understands such a realization to
constitute nothing other than the depletion and death of potentiality: it’s as if potentiality, by realizing itself in the act, would be relegated to playing the role of a haunting yet fossilized presence within the act, not unlike a mummy within the sarcophagus, or, better yet, within a pyramid. And yet, having said all this, I also think that there are elements in Agamben’s work that point in different directions, which might be more reconcilable with Deleuze’s positions on this matter (I am thinking, for example, of that beautiful chapter on the question of halos in Agamben’s *The Coming Community*, about which I have commented elsewhere).¹⁶

AN: Well, I am not sure about this last point; that is, I am not sure that Agamben’s and Deleuze’s positions are reconcilable in the end. In any case, I agree with much of what you just said, but I would push it even further. The act always contains a surplus, always constitutes surplus.¹⁷ That which is realized has a surplus with respect to that which is possible (and I intend this surplus as a very specific and precise concept, which is something I have worked on in *Kairòs, Alma Venus, Multitudo*, among other places). In undergoing the process of actualization, potentiality repotentiates itself, re-creates itself to the second power: far from being mortified, potentiality thus becomes more powerful precisely by actualizing itself. But such an ontology of potentiality is nothing other than Marxian ontology: the productive act does not decree the death of labor; the productive act, rather, is that act which exalts and accumulates labor—and once it does that, one can then take off once again, starting from a new and higher level. Live labor can never exhaust itself, can never be consumed! Neither its mortification nor its consumption can take place: there is only multiplication and expansion.

CC: And surely this is how things look from the standpoint of labor rather than from the standpoint of capital.

AN: Well, obviously! I am speaking of live and not of dead labor! Capital can only subtract life, can only mortify labor.

CC: In a sense, then, that act which mortifies labor not only is not a productive act but also cannot be said to be—strictly speaking—an act at all: it is, rather, the manifestation of a limit; it is itself a limit to being. An ontology of potentiality founded on a reconceptualization of potentiality and act as immanent to each other,
on the one hand, would understand potentiality as being reborn richer and fuller through the act, as expanding each and every time it determines itself in a process of actualization, and, on the other hand, would understand the act as giving more power to power, more life to life.

Notes

This is an excerpt from a longer conversation that took place in Rome during the summer of 2001. The conversation originally took place in Italian and was subsequently translated into English. We would like to thank Brynnar Swenson for his invaluable help with the editing of this piece.

3. The English term power corresponds to two distinct terms in Italian: potenza and potere (roughly corresponding to the French puissance and pouvoir, the German macht and vermögen, and the Latin potentia and potestas, respectively). Potenza can often resonate with implications of potentiality as well as with decentralized or mass conceptions of force and strength. Potere, on the other hand, refers to the might or authority of an already structured and centralized capacity, often an institutional apparatus such as the state. We have translated potere as “power” throughout, and potenza at times as “power” and at other times as “potentiality.” Unless otherwise noted, we have indicated in the text the instances in which “power” and “potentiality” translate potenza.
6. Virno and Hardt 1996, 1
8. Deleuze, “Control and Becoming.”
10. For the theory of the two modernities, see Hardt and Negri 2000, 69–90, but see also Hardt and Negri 1994, 283–86.
12. Ibid., 83.
14. Ibid., 47.
15. See, for example, Gilles Deleuze’s remarks on this question in Cinema 2, especially 68–70 and 78–83.
17. Here and throughout this paragraph, “surplus” translates the Italian term eccedenza.
Works Cited


