

Alma Venus
Prolegomena to the Common
Antonio Negri

1. The guiding light of materialism is the eternity of matter. The eternal is the common name of the materialist experience of time. From an ethical standpoint, the problem faced by materialism is to hold singularity responsible for the eternal. These truths stemming from the materialist tradition are confirmed in the experience of *kairos*.

2. Among the other meanings that could be attributed to the eternal—in the materialist tradition—we sometimes find the name of the infinite, as if the two were synonymous. Is matter therefore infinite? We concede this only if we subsume the infinite under eternity and break with their synonymous relationship, since materialist production and the unfolding of the eternal are infinite. But each production is singular and finite: today the course of the infinite may be less, tomorrow it may be greater. This finitude and singularity can only be considered as infinite if the presence and power¹ of the eternal take them on. Once the infinite is taken out of the context of the name of eternity, it then solely consists in the idea of temporal transcendence and, as such, cannot be predicated of materialism (that is, materialist production).

2b. Since the infinite is an ambiguous name, and can only be understood in its subsumption under the eternal, it is better not to use it.

2c. Ethical experience has nothing to do with the infinite. Ethical "experience establishes itself in eternal presence.

3. Even if transcendental philosophy assumes the infinite as a principle that governs all of its maneuvers, it has taken little interest in the infinite in reality. Like a garment worn only on festive occasions, the idea of the infinite is left to poetry, to theology, to mysticism, and to all obscure discourses. For everyday use, transcendental philosophy prefers the idea of the infinite. What is the indefinite? It consists in the idea of an infinite that can be measured. But one cannot measure the eternal, or matter that is eternal, for it is measureless. This is because the eternal is always confronted with the future, and this very relationship is measureless. The indefinite is therefore an illusion. But it becomes an effective illusion when it ushers in transcendence as a measure for immanence. For here the illusion turns into a transcendental mystification: it becomes a continuously repeated attempt to subordinate the present under the sign of the infinite and not under the eternal, and is thus an attempt to subordinate the singular to a measure.

3b. In materialism, ethical experience is always faced with measure-lessness,² in the opening up of the eternal towards the future.

4. The eternity of matter reveals itself as temporal intensity, as innovative presence; the full present of eternal time is singularity. 'Singular' and 'eternal' are interchangeable names, their relationship is tautological. Whatever has happened to it, each singular instant is eternal. Each singular instance is eternal here and now. The eternal is the singular present.

4b. In materialism, ethical experience is the responsibility for the present.

5. *Kairos* is presented to us as an irreducible singularity. Yet in the production of the eternal, we saw that the monads of *kairos* joined together in common events that they impelled towards a common name. This is to say, we are immersed in the common because *kairos* is the hovering dust of monadic exposure that intertwines and links together over the void that time's arrow indicates to us, thus building the coming future. Hence singularity is the experience of the common.

5b. This commonality cannot be reduced to an essence or to any preconceived notion. There is no *das Gemeinste*, or what could be presupposed as "the most common," as Kant would have it, unless we translate it as a mere concatenation. (Such is the case for Colli, who translates the first instance of the "common" (*koinos*) as "that which is concatenated"; it is this sense that the materialist tradition has transmitted to us via Heraclitus.) The monads of *kairos* are common insofar as they produce and reproduce life, exposing themselves on the present edge of eternity; thus the future's measurelessness is what creates the common.

5c. In producing the eternal, singularity assumes the form of the common. The production of the world (of man and of his environment, his Umwelt) renders those elements constitutive of singularity all the more common. This is why commonality indicates a teleological process, but of which teleology?

5d. In materialism, ethics is the responsibility for the present qua innovation of being. But if the innovation is common, then ethics is the responsibility for the common. And if the common is teleological, materialist ethics must confront teleology, but which teleology?

6. Teleology is the name that suits materialism inasmuch as it is the name that suits the common. Materialist teleology is exempt from any final cause from or towards which it would tend: on the contrary, it is the form through which the eternity of matter progressively constitutes itself, thus constituting the horizon of the world, without any axiological qualification. The eternity of matter 'constitutes itself, in the present, i.e., the present takes shape, establishes itself and innovates in itself, through singular common figures. It does so 'progressively', i.e., according to the direction of time indicated by temporality's arrow. Time progresses. Regression in time is not due to time, but to the human activity of time (the isolation of a moment in time, the accumulation of time's moments, memory). The singular horizon of life is therefore the increasingly common form of being in time. It is the totality of time fulfilled in the actuality of the common.

6b. In taking upon itself the direction of time's arrow, ethics posits the common as teleological, that is, it considers matter to be increasingly common.

7. When materialism follows a teleological progression in its definition of the common, then it proceeds in a direction opposite to the one proposed by the metaphysical tradition. In Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics, the effects of which are felt until the final avatars of Hegelianism, teleology is not progressive. In fact, it presupposes an arche: in teleology, it is the arche that moves, in order to place being in actu within arche's preconstituted hierarchy. The fact that the Greek verb archein means both to initiate and to rule, can be seen as the most evident proof of the teleological fiction of the metaphysical tradition. Teleology has thereby become the theoretical praxis that subordinates the principle to the command and which thereby defines the limit before the development, the order before the production. The tradition of classical metaphysics finds its confirmation in the processes of modern transcendentalism. The Hegelian Geist is a transvestite that dances to the rhythm of a Platonic-Aristotelian flute; insofar as every transvestite always caricatures an original, here, the original is the State, that is, the most explicit and violent limit of the development of the common.

7b. In materialism, ethics grounds itself in the unlimited production of the common.

8. In materialism, the telos is the product of common existence. It is therefore not a preconstituted value, but a perpetually progressive production of the eternal, just as a child matures and becomes a man, or, similarly, that birth is followed by death once life has run its course. In the same way that the adult is not a value principle greater than the young boy, death is not the negation of the value of life. On the contrary, everything is eternal. I am here, and this is all: this and only this is the Da-sein of the eternal.

8b. The common produced by the movement of man and his Umwelt is not a value but a destiny. However, the word 'destiny' must be torn away both from the blindness of chance and from all possible predetermination; rather, it should be redefined in the constitutive perspective of the common. 'Destiny' will refer to the whole of man's actions, taken as a generic multitude, in which nothing is presupposed, except for the environmental conditions that man continually alters and that, insofar as they are modified, in turn effect communal existence. Ethically, 'destiny' is the common name for 'man' inasmuch as he materially constructs himself.

8c. Starting with the destiny of the centaur (man fused with nature), man then reaches the destiny of the 'homo-homo'³ (man made through praxis), until he arrives at the destiny of the 'man-machine' (man transformed through production, artificially developing his being): these are his second, third, and nth natures. In each one of these stages, the common progressively takes on a different form, but not metaphysical, nor axiological, nor historicist, nor eschatological. The 'centaur-being', the 'man-man being', and the 'man-machine being'¹ are given as progressively as the progression of time leading from life until death.

9. From Democritus to Epicurus, from Lucretius to Giordano Bruno, from Spinoza to Nietzsche, from Leopardi to Deleuze, from Hölderlin to Dino Campana, this production of the common life until death has been taken as a sign of eternity. A sign that, once again, is not axiological, but on the contrary, reveals the

ontological intensity of production in time. If the direction that time imposes on the actuality of production is increasingly common, this means that the experience of singularity has an increasingly greater grasp of eternity. The actuality of production confers eternity, and the common disposes of time in as much as it reveals time as eternity.

9b. The world is not a practical-inert background but a context of activity, a texture of *kairos*. With each instant the world is created once again—in its totality, in a movement of dilation of the common. In this context, human praxis, in its destinality, cannot be represented as that which is constituted, for human praxis is constitutive, or rather, it constitutes an ever-more common context.

9c. In this movement, the more the common constructs itself, the more the world becomes measureless.

9d. If, in materialism, ethics is forever faced with measurelessness, then resistance is action 'out of measure', while constitutive power is action 'beyond measure'.

10. In the teleology found in the materialist tradition, the relation between eternity and existence has always been expounded in an adequate and sufficient manner. Yet on the other hand, materialism runs into aporias when it confronts eternity with the time of innovation— when, on the edge of being, the eternal comes up against the future.

10b. The crisis experienced by materialism emerges in the domain of ethics. At present, indeed, the eternal is confronted with the measurelessness of singular acting, in actuality, and it appears incapable of containing it. But should the eternal really contain this lack of measure?

10c. From what we have said, it is evident that when we say "at present," "in actuality," we mean "the present." In this way we unravel the ambiguity of metaphysical 'actuality*' and we give a meaning to the absolute common name. It is "absolute" because here, now, in the time of both the name and of the event, the common name exists. And this fact is apodeictic.

11. In classical materialism, the theme of innovation or change is both central and unresolved. From Democritus to Epicurus, the atomistic construction of the world is immersed in eternity. As for freedom, it is the conduct of life in accordance with the metaphor of the cosmos. In this flattening-out, freedom fades away and innovation becomes incomprehensible. It is only with Lucretius that freedom strives to break with the meaninglessness of metaphor so as to act independently of the physical totality of atomism, and tear the fabric of eternity asunder. Yet Lucretius poses his *clinamen* on the tip of his tongue, *sotto voce*, almost hoping to cancel out the violence of the tear coming from this barely perceptible deviation that lets the world change, and lets it grasp the singular and along with it the meaning of freedom. A tiny yet enormous glow shines through the rainfall of atoms; thereby, poetry is exalted, philosophy humiliated, and the problem posed. Modernity inherits the problem unresolved.

12. Only with Spinoza is the problem transformed. Here, indeed, the ontology of materialism does not feel the light touch of the *clinamen*, but is instead invested and grounded anew by desire. The rhythm of the constitution of the world is sustained—amid the confusion of forms—by a living force that unfolds in the world and constitutes itself as divine. Freedom is constructed in this development, the continuity of which it interprets in the absolute productive immanence of a *vis viva*, a living force, that unfolds from a physical *conatus* to human *cupiditas*, to divine *amor*. Ethics constitutes the physical world prior to interpreting the human world and sublimating itself in the divine world. Eternity is lived as presence. The development of the common takes place wholly within the development of ontology. The composition of bodies is common, the object of *cupiditas* is common, the figure of the divine is common. The common is ontology considered from the standpoint of passion, of the force that agitates and constructs both the world and divinity.

13. In the shift from classical materialism to Spinozist materialism, this problem undergoes a powerful displacement. The problem of innovation is no longer posed in terms of a deviation from the course of life, it is posed within the horizon of eternity. Absolute immanence is the dynamism of life and gives life its power. Singularity begins to acquire a shape in the ocean of being, or we can say that it begins to reveal itself in the overall dynamic of materialist teleology. But is this radical displacement enough to resolve the problem? Is a physics of desire enough to bestow upon eternity the figure of freedom? Is it enough to imprint the discontinuity of innovation upon the world, thereby going beyond the aporia of materialism and the crisis of the common? Spinoza's asceticism has the character of a *diktat*, an imposition of immanence as the specific plane of materialist discourse that establishes the force of life therein. The common is thereby affirmed. But nevertheless, despite all this, one must acknowledge that

Spinoza's asceticism is incapable of granting a full meaning to its progression, for it forms an image of beatitude that does touch on its genuine notion (sc., beatitude), by drawing away from the production of desire, but never manages to fully appropriate it. Just as in Lucretius, with Spinoza we witness a series of imperceptible qualitative leaps within the very continuity of ontological experience; these leaps attempt to reek out of the monolith of materialist metaphysics and carve it into a physics, an ethics, and a theology. This also occurred with the clinamen in the atomic turbulence of Lucretius. But within the merciless hold of ontological necessity, as experienced in traditional materialism, this change is still hesitant, when it is not downright meaningless. Once again, the progression of the common, that is, the unity of eternity and innovation, is not granted a creative dimension. The problem lies precisely here: to produce freedom by the same token as eternity, and to make the common the active key of the construction/reconstruction of the world, and not just its flat result. By contrast, these philosophies of absolute immanence surreptitiously reintroduce an axiological moment. Then, classical and idealist teleology, along with the idea of the infinite, spew their transcendent venom into the radicality of the materialist way of proceeding. The eternal is once again shattered by a value determination that is external to it.

14. In modernity, that is, with the advent of the 'homo-homo', axiological transcendence insinuated itself into even the most powerful of materialist teleologies. This can be explained by the conditions under which the progression of the ontologies of the common deployed itself in that era. The relation between experience and the common was indeed contradictory, on the very terrain on which it had located itself, that of praxis. The aim was to locate transcendence squarely within experience, but this reduction (presented in a revolutionary, i.e., open manner) was nevertheless held back by the unsustainable weight of the indefinite (which is always characteristic of ascetic praxis) and thus still recognizably transcendent. Thus the texture of immanence could not become common, except through the hypostasis of the common. Philosophy wanted the common, but in wanting it, it transcendentalized it. A hiatus or, even worse, a genuine opposition took shape between the experience of the common and the teleological tension of materialism.

14b. It is within this tension that the aporia was created the imbalance that, in modernity, the metaphysical tradition puts forth again, in the context of social and political philosophy, as a thinking of individualism and of the State. But the individual is only an aporia of the singular, and the State, the mystification of the common.

15. In postmodernity, that is, the era that began in the Sixties and in which we still live today, the ethical and ascetic illusion of modernity seems to have come to an end, and along with it, the metaphysical madness of transcendence and of ruling has withered away. Now the common can appear in the full plenitude of its definition.

16. The qualifications of being have become entirely common. We live in the common. Our experience provides clear proof of this, for common being indeed appears in the three determinations of linguistic being, being as production of subjectivity, and bio-political being. These three determinations are absolutely equivalent with each other and the sequence of argumentation is purely expository.

16b. Language is common. The tool in the relationship between man and nature, or between man and man, has entirely changed. We no longer need tools in order to transform nature (and tame the centaur) or to establish a relation with the historical world (and perfect the askesis of the 'homo-homo'); we only need language. Language is the tool. Better yet, the brain is the tool, inasmuch as it is common. The tool's becoming-immanent in the guise of the brain deprives the metaphysical illusion of any foundation. Moreover, when the only tool that is left is linguistic, there is no longer any tool—because the tool was until then something different from the agent, and has now given way to a set of prostheses that have accumulated, adding up and thereby multiplying the productive potential of the agent. Their power is common. It is born and develops, only in and from the common. Nothing is produced if it is not produced through the common: there is no merchandise that is not a service, no service that is not a relation, no relation that is not a brain, no brain that is not common. Language is no longer just a form of expression, but the sole form of production of man and his environment. Language is therefore the way of being of the common being.

16c. The common is a production, and as with everything that is produced, it must be related to the common. But production is made up of a multitude of linguistic acts, monads of kairos which, because

they expose themselves on the edge of being, constitute new being within the common name. The production of subjectivity gives meaning to this network of singular innovations. Indeed, the experience of subjectivity lies in recognizing that if being is language, linguistic production can only be a productive force of language, that is, a production of productive force. But if productive force emerges from the common network of acts and relations of the monads of kairos, at the very moment when these monads launch themselves against the void, there is always an instant in this event that corresponds to a moment of imputation of production: precisely that of subjectivity. Subjectivity assumes responsibility for the production of a productive force that itself can only be subjective. Thus subjectivity brings together the various linguistic acts that create the innovation of being into one. It does not halt the movement of production, but, by slowing it down, it identifies this movement as active force. This chain of reasoning thus enables us to say that subjectivity is nothing other than the imputation of common experiences—that is, of a common productive force, that identifies, and thus names to the agent of linguistic productions. It follows from this that subjectivity is not something 'internal' set before something 'external', that would be language; rather, qua language it is another modality of common being, and nothing more. The production of subjectivity, that is, the production of needs, affects, desire, activity, and techne, takes place through language and, better yet, the production of subjectivity is language in the same way that language is subjectivity. This density of productive relations is always in movement, and this common movement is eternal, but it is always inscribed within the subjectivities that innovate within the eternal.

16d. Life's being rendered common constitutes the third modality of common being. This is simply the consequence, tautological if one wishes, of what has been said so far. Common being is tautological. However, this tautology is a strange one because it is powerful, and shows us that language and the production of subjectivity, as modalities of the common, together recompose the multitude of linguistic acts and the production of life. This recomposition (that is, the productive tautology considered from another angle) is the polis, or in other words, the political. Common being invests the political with such intensity, but also redefines it as the common name for a multitude of linguistic acts and productions of subjectivity. But then, life and politics, these two old fetishes that had been separated by the disciplinarization of the transcendental knowledge of modernity, become indistinguishable from each other. There are no political realms, just as there are no realms of nature or of production that are not recomposed as a multitude within the production of being of the common name. The political then presents itself as a modality of being, indiscernible from language and from the production of subjectivity. And the world is this coming together, the world is the bio-political.

16e. These are the conditions under which the destiny of the 'man-machine' appears. The production of man as a multitude gathered up in the common name becomes indistinguishable from the production of the natural and historical Umwelt. The polis is hence not an arche but a bio-political production. The world is invested by the teleology of linguistic and subjective prostheses. This is what we term 'machine', i.e., the production of the world that man carries out through a highly material production of artifacts that adhere to his nature: bio-political artifacts. At present, eternity is developed by and through "machinic" power. The common organizes itself as a machine, a bio-political machine.

16f. Are the traditional aporias of materialism and the ensuing crisis of the common overcome in this fashion? In a certain sense, yes. Yet later on, once this initial phenomenological approach to the common is completed, we will have to return to the aporias and the crisis, and resume a demonstration that until now has only barely touched on the materiality of the processes. For now, it is enough to keep in mind that if production is communication, then the world of nature and artifacts must be wholly related to the production of subjectivity, and that subjectivity establishes production in the bio-political.

17. Through these modalities of material being, we are able to see the horizon of life progressively construct itself as a common horizon. The telos of this progress is not in any way external to the movement of the constitution of the common itself, nor is it in any way the force of something preconceived actualizing itself, but it is simply the common name of a material acting. This telos could only have refrained from giving itself if time were an unnecessary dimension of material being. But inasmuch as time is a necessary dimension, it is equally necessary for the intrinsic finality of acting in time to become actual. We verify the fact that it has become actual, and that the living constitutive force has attained the formal fulfillment of its common expression.

17b. We asked ourselves if, in following the progression of the common, we had not reached a crucial turning point (always previously missed in the experiences of materialist thought) at which eternity and innovation meet; and we acknowledged that we were face to face with the formal conditions of this conjunction. But in order to become real, the formal conditions of expression of the common must be tested in the ethico-political realm, and thereby verified on the eternal edge of being.

18. Let us return to the problematic of the conditions of the common material telos as it is recounted in the various tendencies of post-1968 thought, i.e., postmodern thought. Does this problematic provide a satisfactory response to the ethical-political question?

18b. The postmodern philosophers who take communication as the exclusive horizon of being posit the reality of the common. Nevertheless, it is difficult to take their assertion positively. Indeed, their presupposition is one of a completed teleology—and nothing more. They stultify any research on the actual edge of being, and they do not lean or tend any further. The result is the exhaustion of the ontological sphere, the end of history, and an omnivorous tautology of demonstration. If the common lends itself to these conditions, it will thereby present itself as the end of the common.

18c. Some authors of postmodernity look for a possible opening in the margins of the model that has gradually been determined so far. But the margin is a liminal transcendence—an immanence that is a quasi-transcendence, an ambiguous place in which materialist realism must comply with mysticism. Some endlessly play with this margin (Derrida); others fix on it as though the issue were to delicately take hold of the power of a negative that has been grasped at last (Agamben). Unless, in the anxiety of the expectation of the other (as we find in Levinas), this thinking of the common reeks of mysticism outright.

18d. Lastly, certain thinkers have attempted to run through, to traverse this completed teleology by projecting onto the thousand plateaus of a singular power: it is here that the physical and psychic tensions of worldliness diminish and loosen themselves. But if this approach enables innovation and eternity to be articulated with one another according to a genealogical rhythm, it nevertheless presents the common as a circle without a possible opening. The edge of time is crushed, and duration makes its appearance again (Deleuze and Guattari).

18e. Each and every one of these figures of materialist teleology thus interprets the exuberant richness of the postmodern experience of the common, yet somehow remains a prisoner of it. In this way the eternity of matter is traversed by teleology, but the visibility of innovation and the ethico-political point of view itself are eliminated. We have returned to the heyday of Democriteanism and Epicureanism.

19. Here we grasp the aporetic element with which the theories of the eternity of matter ran up against innovation (sc., they made innovation aporetical). This element is the world's measurelessness. Even though materialism has always been a theory of the world's measurelessness, this measurelessness has always remained an unsatisfied dimension in the materialist experience of the world. The renewal of materialism must include the recognition of the fact that, through innovation, the eternal is faced with measurelessness.

19b. And the common? Even it becomes increasingly common, on the condition that it be acknowledged as an unmeasurable, measureless opening. The measurelessness of the eternal alone constitutes the common and ensures the progression of the constitution of the common. The measurelessness is there, just beyond the door opened by materialist teleology, across the threshold of each singular present.

19c. Ethical experience is a liberation because it is a creative communication, a production of common subjectivity, and the constitution of a bio-political temporality in the measurelessness of the future.

20. In the measurelessness of the world, innovation and eternity are expressed by love. It is love that brings innovation and the eternal together, in the multitude of singular thresholds faced by the teleology of the common.

20b. It then becomes clear why the eternal is not equivalent with the infinite. Love, indeed, is not infinite but eternal, it is not a measure but rather measurelessness, not individual but singular, not universal but common, not the substance of temporality but the arrow of time itself.

20c. "Alma Venus": where the discourse of materialism began, there it will begin again.

Notes:

1. [Hereafter 'power*' should be taken in the sense of potentiality.—Trans.]

2. ['Dismisura', playing on the French 'démésure', which can also be rendered as the incommensurable', the immeasurable', the out-of-measure'; as an anthropological trait, the notion is akin to hubris, and as an ontological trait, it bears resemblance to the sublime.—Trans.]

3. [This notion, which could also have been rendered in translation as "man-man," is derived from Charles de Bovelles or Bovillus, a disciple of Nicolas of Cusa, who develops a notion of humanity commingled with artifice, giving rise to a "doubly human being," which he calls "homo-homo." See his // *libra del sapiente*, ed. E. Garin (Turin: Einaudi, 1987), ch. 22, p. 73.—Ed.]

4. [In the sense of impeding its progress.—Trans.]

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