

Political action aimed at transformation and liberation today can only be conducted on the basis of the multitude. To understand the concept of the multitude in its most general and abstract form, let us contrast it first with that of the people.¹ The people is one. The population, of course, is composed of numerous different individuals and classes, but the people synthesizes or reduces these social differences into one identity. The multitude, by contrast, is not unified but remains plural and multiple. This is why, according to the dominant tradition of political philosophy, the people can rule as a sovereign power and the multitude cannot. The multitude is composed of a set of *singularities*—and by singularity here we mean a social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different. The component parts of the people are indifferent in their unity; they become an identity by negating or setting aside their differences. The plural singularities of the multitude thus stand in contrast to the undifferentiated unity of the people.

The multitude, however, although it remains multiple, is not fragmented, anarchical, or incoherent. The concept of the multitude should thus also be contrasted to a series of other concepts that designate plural

collectives, such as the crowd, the masses, and the mob. Since the different individuals or groups that make up the crowd are incoherent and recognize no common shared elements, their collection of differences remains inert and can easily appear as one indifferent aggregate. The components of the masses, the mob, and the crowd are not singularities—and this is obvious from the fact that their differences so easily collapse into the indifference of the whole. Moreover, these social subjects are fundamentally passive in the sense that they cannot act by themselves but rather must be led. The crowd or the mob or the rabble can have social effects—often horribly destructive effects—but cannot act of their own accord. That is why they are so susceptible to external manipulation. The multitude, designates an active social subject, which acts on the basis of what the singularities share in common. The multitude is an internally different, multiple social subject whose constitution and action is based not on identity or unity (or, much less, indifference) but on what it has in common.

This initial conceptual definition of the multitude poses a clear challenge to the entire tradition of sovereignty. As we will explain in part 3, one of the recurring truths of political philosophy is that only the one can rule, be it the monarch, the party, the people, or the individual; social subjects that are not unified and remain multiple cannot rule and instead must be ruled. Every sovereign power, in other words, necessarily forms a *political body* of which there is a head that commands, limbs that obey, and organs that function together to support the ruler. The concept of the multitude challenges this accepted truth of sovereignty. The multitude, although it remains multiple and internally different, is able to act in common and thus rule itself. Rather than a political body with one that commands and others that obey, the multitude is *living flesh* that rules itself. This definition of the multitude, of course, raises numerous conceptual and practical problems, which we will discuss at length in this and the next chapter, but it should be clear from the outset that the challenge of the multitude is the challenge of democracy. The multitude is the only social subject capable of realizing democracy, that is, the rule of everyone by everyone. The stakes, in other words, are extremely high.

In this chapter we will articulate the concept of the multitude primarily from a socioeconomic perspective. Multitude is also a concept of race,

gender, and sexuality differences. Our focus on economic class here should be considered in part as compensation for the relative lack of attention to class in recent years with respect to these other lines of social difference and hierarchy. As we will see the contemporary forms of production, which we will call biopolitical production, are not limited to economic phenomena but rather tend to involve all aspects of social life, including communication, knowledge, and affects. It is also useful to recognize from the beginning that something like a concept of the multitude has long been part of powerful streams of feminist and antiracist politics. When we say that we do not want a world without racial or gender difference but instead a world in which race and gender do not matter, that is, a world in which they do not determine hierarchies of power, a world in which differences express themselves freely, this is a desire for the multitude. And, of course, for the singularities that compose the multitude, in order to take away the limiting, negative, destructive character of differences and make differences our strength (gender differences, racial differences, differences of sexuality, and so forth) we must radically transform the world.²

From the socioeconomic perspective, the multitude is the common subject of labor, that is, the real flesh of postmodern production, and at the same time the object from which collective capital tries to make the body of its global development. Capital wants to make the multitude into an organic unity, just like the state wants to make it into a people. This is where, through the struggles of labor, the real productive biopolitical figure of the multitude begins to emerge. When the flesh of the multitude is imprisoned and transformed into the body of global capital, it finds itself both within and against the processes of capitalist globalization. The biopolitical production of the multitude, however, tends to mobilize what it shares in common and what it produces in common against the imperial power of global capital. In time, developing its productive figure based on the common, the multitude can move through Empire and come out the other side, to express itself autonomously and rule itself.

We should recognize from the outset the extent of capital's domain. Capital no longer rules merely over limited sites in society. As the impersonal rule of capital extends throughout society well beyond the factory walls and geographically throughout the globe, capitalist command tends

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to become a “non-place” or, really, an every place. There is no longer an outside to capital, nor is there an outside to the logics of biopower we described in part 1, and that correspondence is no coincidence, since capital and biopower function intimately together. The places of exploitation, by contrast, are always determinate and concrete, and therefore we need to understand exploitation on the basis of the specific sites where it is located and specific forms in which it is organized. This will allow us to articulate both a *topology* of the different figures of exploited labor and a *topography* of their spatial distribution across the globe. Such an analysis is useful because the place of exploitation is one important site where acts of refusal and exodus, resistance and struggle arise. This analysis will thus lead to the critique of the political economy of globalization based on the resistances to the formation of the body of global capital and the liberatory potentials of the common powers shared by global laboring multitude.

2.1 DANGEROUS CLASSES

Stalin's basic error is mistrust of the peasants.

—MAO ZEDONG

We are the poors! —PROTEST SLOGAN IN SOUTH AFRICA

THE BECOMING COMMON OF LABOR

Multitude is a class concept. Theories about economic class are traditionally forced to choose between unity and plurality. The unity pole is usually associated with Marx and his claim that in capitalist society there tends to be a simplification of class categories such that all forms of labor tend to merge into a single subject, the proletariat, which confronts capital. The plurality pole is most clearly illustrated by liberal arguments that insist on the ineluctable multiplicity of social classes. Both of these perspectives, in fact, are true. It is true, in the first case, that capitalist society is characterized by the division between capital and labor, between those who own productive property and those who do not and, furthermore, that the conditions of labor and the conditions of life of the propertyless tend to take on common characteristics. It is equally true, in the second case, that there is a potentially infinite number of classes that comprise contemporary society based not only on economic differences but also on those of race, ethnicity, geography, gender, sexuality, and other factors.