

Antonio Negri

# THE WINTER IS OVER

WRITINGS ON TRANSFORMATION DENIED, 1989-1995



SEMIOTEXT(E) FOREIGN AGENTS SERIES

Originally published as *L'inverno è finito: scritti sulla trasformazione negata 1989–1995*. © 1996 Antonio Negri.

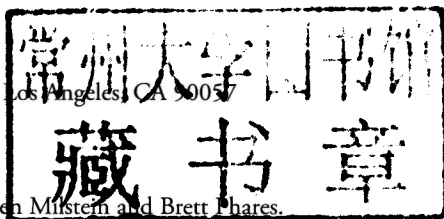
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Published by Semiotext(e)

2007 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 427, Los Angeles, CA 90057

[www.semiotexte.com](http://www.semiotexte.com)



Special thanks to John Ebert, Glen Milstein and Brett Phares.

Cover art by Claude Lévêque, *Mon Repos aux Tuileries*, 2007.

Installation in situ, Jardin des Tuileries, FIAC, Galerie Kamel Mennour, Paris.

Tube Citroën, lustre, réverbères parisiens. Collection de la Ville de Paris

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Back Cover Photography by Marco Dotti

Design by Hedi El Kholi

ISBN: 978-1-58435-121-4

Distributed by The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England

Printed in the United States of America



# THE WINTER IS OVER

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**Antonio Negri**

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Jason E. Smith

## To Build a Fire, or Striking the Metropolis

Often, in trying to make an image of historical time, we turn to the heavens. It is well-known that the term *revolution* entered our political imaginary through the idiom of astronomy. Our fumbling attempts to get a handle on the irreversibility of an historical event needed recourse to the perfectly described circles of heavenly bodies, returning ever to their assigned places in the sky. The inversion proper to this type of figuration, casting the crisp cuts of historical breaks in the language of natural pulsations, their rises and falls, their ebbs and flows, their heatings up and coolings down, has haunted recent political sequences—or, rather, our attempt to map them—in particular, with some of the more determinant historical phases and punctuations of the past forty years being painted in climactic terms: the paradoxical heat of Italy's 1969 *Hot Autumn* is echoed in the recent popular rebellions of the *Arab Spring*. The shape of historical time is in this way folded back onto the thumping circuits of natural cycles: birth and death, slumber and awakening, surging and retreating waves. The pattern of the seasons have a special power to concentrate this cyclical imagery. When Saint Just wrote in his journals—at the beginning of 1794—that *the revolution is frozen*, he was forecasting a long winter whose frost was just beginning to settle over Europe. Our



own historical period, defined by the falling off of the intense conflictuality of the period stretching from 1968 to 1977, can be thought of as still another long winter. When Félix Guattari spoke of the 1980s as “the winter years,” he was not only describing a defeat and retreat of the antagonistic forces that consolidated themselves in the previous decade, he was also underlining the existential fallout of this withdrawal, the libidinal collapse into a kind of historical, and not simply psychic, depression, an hibernal rut. These winters can only be waited out, underground. A surviving remnant huddles close together sheltered from the snap of the bone-chilling historical winds, bent over and blowing lightly on—to keep alive—the cinder and ash left over from the last summer’s fire.

There can be winters within winters as well. The title of Antonio Negri’s *The Winter Is Over: Writings on Transformation Denied* refers in fact to two winters, to two historical time scales. Collecting essays and short interventions written during the period between 1989 and 1995, this title evokes the period coming after the collapse or suppression of the Italian Autonomia movement in the late 1970s, a time of massive state repression, prison and exile for Negri among others, as one winter embedded within the longer, secular freeze of the Soviet 20th century that comes to an end during this same period. The winter years of the 1980s are defined by these essays as an historical parenthesis marked in Italy by the emergence of Berlusconi in the field of electoral politics and by the triumph of what is called “weak thought” in Italian philosophy, and on a geopolitical scale by the foundering of the Soviet bloc and its state capitalist (“really existing socialist”) satellites, various foreign incursions by the U.S. and the West (Iraq, Kosovo), and the formation of a European polity and economic configuration

today coming apart at the seams. The hibernal period that takes hold in the late 1970s is not, however, simply a season among others, in a local historical cycle, but the terminal phase of a much larger arc. The capitalist response to the conflicts of the late 1960s and early 1970s was a profound restructuration that entailed, or was occasioned by, the decomposition of the workers' movement whose first riotous phase—the so-called *time of riots*—gave rise to the bloody defeats of the European rebellions of 1848 and to the formation of an organized, international movement in the second half of the 19th century. The winter that settles over Europe and the globe during the late 1970s and 1980s (the first frost having appeared as early as 1973) is therefore not one winter among others: it marks the end of the line for a cycle of struggles that developed and deepened over the course of a century and a half, a spiraling movement marked by local ebbs and flows but whose general movement was one of expansion and intensification. The winter referred to in Negri's title is first and foremost *this* winter, the epochal transformation induced by the capitalist restructuration of the 1970s that puts to rout the consolidated forces of the workers' movement. And it is with the wave of strikes in France in December 1995 that, as Negri's opening essay to the collection ("A New Public") makes clear, the discontent of the winter years begins to melt away, and the first shoots of an antagonistic new spring peek through.

The ice breaks in 1995 because, for Negri, the public sector strikes that hit Paris and France at the end of that year announced a new cycle of struggles founded on a fundamental principle: the involution of the spheres of production and circulation, a new topology of antagonism that foregrounds the *metropolis* as the privileged site of contemporary struggles. The wave of strikes that

Negri discusses began as a seemingly defensive response to a government proposal to roll back pension benefits among workers in the transportation sector. But the strikes quickly spread to other sectors, primarily in spheres tasked with providing services that contribute to the reproduction of the capitalist class relation: education and hospitals, as well as workers in telecommunications, the postal service and even the energy sector. But it was in the transportation sector—railways, subways—that the struggles took their most visible form, in part because of the response of the *users* of these services. While the government strategy was to split the users off from the striking workers, encouraging them to perceive the latter as adopting a defense of privileges denied those in the private sector, the response was the opposite: by the hundreds of thousands, users of these services organized and improvised forms of transportation (including the most primitive: walking, biking, hitchhiking) that made the perpetuation of the strikes possible. Oriented by the slogan *All together!—Tous ensemble!*—these strikes represented, according to Negri, a novel form of struggle in the history of worker antagonism. The users of these services, in organizing their own transportation during this prolonged strike, have in fact *co-produced* the strike, were themselves on strike. And this strike, which brought together service workers and users of services in a single, sustained action—the paralysis of a city—was a strike no longer localized, as in the classical form, at a point of production (the factory, say) that could be separated from the texture of social life, from the tissue of the metropolitan fabric. Where the classical form of the strike implies a separation between the production of value and the reproduction of the society, between the fabrication and the circulation of commodities—between the factory and the city—the service sector strikes of 1995 had a *diffuse*

spatial character, *embracing the whole of societal life*, becoming *part of everyday reality*. Negri coins a name for this conflictual figure, a form that will shape and define the nature of conflicts to come in a new cycle of struggles: *to the dictionary of strikes invented by the proletariat in struggle (sectoral strikes, general strikes, wildcat strikes, sit down strikes, etc. . . .) we now have to add a new term, the metropolitan strike*.

In the history of working-class insurgency it has always been the case, Negri underlines, that the *ability to block the circulation of commodities has been fundamental* and that railway workers in particular have had a special place in this history. A fundamental condition for the classical general strike: workers, denied transportation, cannot go to work. But while the form of the transportation strike remains superficially the same in 1995, the paralysis it induces has a different valence, touches a different nerve. The strategic significance of these networks of transportation and communication was italicized by the capitalist restructuring of the 1970s, with its fragmentation of the production process through outsourcing, the dissolution of worker identity, the casualization of work, the supplementation of wages with private debt, the corresponding explosion of the financial sector, and perhaps most importantly with its total integration of the spheres of capitalist production and circulation. The increasing importance of containerization, supply-chain management, just-in-time and pull production (Toyota, Walmart) combined with the increasing inaccessibility of the point of production—either relocated, in a new a global division of labor, to East Asia or itself distributed across global supply chains—signals, for Negri, that the sphere of circulation is no longer simply one moment in the total process of capitalist valorization, but *the global form that structures production*

*itself*. To strike capital in the sphere of circulation, that is, not at an increasingly unlocatable point of production but in the metropolis, the site where life and work tend to pass over into one another, their difference effaced, will be a fundamental vector of contemporary struggles. To attack the global form of production is to *affect the entire chain of production*.

In fact, Negri's approach to the metropolitan strike underlines two fundamental novelties playing themselves out in it. In addition to the involution of the different segments of the valorization process, the paradigmatic nature of the public sector strikes of 1995 is also found in the fact that the services suspended during this episode are themselves not simply produced by the workers who provide them, but are co-produced by the users of the services themselves. And it is this intrinsically *public* (or what Negri would today call *common*) character of this form of work that is implicitly recognized, according to Negri, by those users who went *on strike* with the transportation workers. What Negri suggests—and this is the leap his reading of the strikes makes—is that the *immaterial* and *interactive* character of the labor performed in the service sector constitutes the global form of an increasingly interactive and even *democratic* form of production in a post-industrial or post-Fordist environment. Emergent in these struggles is therefore a form of publicness that would be antagonistic both to the state (historically the provider of these very services) and to a capitalist command that is increasingly *parasitic* and predatory in its relation to the self-organized sociality and co-operation exhibited in immaterial labor. It is in this democratic co-production of public services that it will be necessary, in turn, to seek out a properly democratic form of politics. Or instead: to insist that the figure of the anti-state public that briefly exhibited itself in this provisional

suspension, in this shutting down of the post-Fordist city, names the very indistinction between the economic and the political, between the democracy of production and the political form of democracy.

In an unsigned text published in the April 1962 issue of the *Internationale Situationniste*, *The Bad Days Will End*, the authors identify the uncertain emergence of a new cycle of struggle that mirrors, in its frenetic capacity for destruction, the larval phases of the 19th century workers' movement. Just as the riotous days that accompanied the initial implantation of mechanized production—primitive forms of automation replacing human labor—were characterized by direct, violent attacks on the *machines of production*, the early 1960s according to the S.I. were witnessing similar tactics not in factories or at the point of production, but in the city itself: a *wave of vandalism against the machines of consumption*. A series of incidents is cited. In Naples, workers lay siege to a streetcar garage, light buses on fire and, in confrontations with police throughout the city, shatter shop windows and neon signs. In France, miners inexplicably attack twenty-one automobiles parked in front of their workplace and belonging to their fellow employees. In Belgium, during a general strike, workers destroy the machines used in the production of the newspaper *La Meuse*. In each case what takes place are acts of destruction that are, we are told, incomprehensible from the point of view of classical, *demands-based* forms of struggle: not only because these actions do not take the form of a work stoppage or strike meant to leverage or pressure wage-increases, but because their site is no longer the site of work but of the space and time of non-work (transportation,

communications). In these first acts of insubordination, which echo the machine-breaking of the early 19th century, we see the still illegible signs of a new cycle of struggles that has as its target the spectacular city and the *new poverty* that is its crucial feature. Instead of striking at the point of production—or in addition to this classical tactic from the first cycle of workers' struggles—the contemporary period will instead be defined by a lashing out into the city itself: the *metropolis* and its networks and infrastructures, its capacities for communicating commodities, bodies and information.

The attacks on the streetcars, buses, automobiles and *apparatuses of information* identified in the early 1960s by the S.I. will in turn be echoes in the struggles that emerge in Italy after the exhaustion (or expansion) of the factory-based struggles in 1969's Hot Autumn. The slogan *Prendiamoci la città!—Let's take the city!*—emerged in the early 1970s to group together a range of proletarian practices that proliferated in the urban fabric itself, outside the factory struggles that had themselves become, for the classical organs of the workers' movement, increasingly hard to manage. The wildcat strikes of FIAT nevertheless gave way to a diffuse form of struggle centered in and on the metropolitan infrastructure, a shift of the site of antagonism away from struggles around the wage to an array of tactics intervening in the spheres of circulation and reproduction. Perhaps the most important of these novel forms of conflict were the auto-reduction practices that unilaterally determined, based on a proletarian assessment of worker needs, the price of certain public services often administered by the state (housing, energy, public transport). This tactic mirrored in its one-sidedness the worker assertion of the wage as an *independent variable*, defined not by productivity or market

rationality but by an independent assessment by workers themselves of the levels of wages necessary to reproduce, and perhaps overcome, the capitalist class relation. But this measured attack on public services—organized self-reduction of prices rather than the pure and simple torching of the machines of consumption—was always necessarily accompanied, in certain parts of the city and among certain milieus, by the direct expropriation of commodities, the organized and immediate consumption of—looting, setting fire to—goods no longer mediated by exchange and money. To take the city necessarily meant not only a move away from the factory, the wage, and the figure of the strike, it also signaled a certain abandonment of the workers movement and its strategic framework. To speak of a *diffuse* form of struggle meant the deployment of a range of tactics that were disseminated outside of any recognizable strategic horizon, without any consideration of a fatal weak link. To take the city meant then not to seize the city at its crucial chokepoints, in order to overturn an existing form of power and reformat a city now managed by its former plebs. To take the city is simply to render it untakeable, a diffuse, unconcerted production of the *ungovernable*.

While Guy Debord and the S.I. did not consistently use the term metropolis to refer to the spectacular city, Debord's reference to a *managed territory* that reformats all of the classical distinctions inherited from Marxism that structure our analysis of class antagonism (production, consumption, distribution, circulation, reproduction). Marx once remarked that the key to opening up a communist future was the abolition of the opposition between the city and countryside, between the urban proletariat and the rural peasantry. It was in fact capitalism itself in its mature—or late—form that pulled off this abolition in a negative form and integrated these



poles into a single, total circuit dedicated to the self-valorization of capital.

It is, however, the specifically Italian form of Marxism called *operaismo* that offered the most powerful theorization of this new metropolitan integration of the historically opposed spheres. Mario Tronti first developed the thesis of the *social factory* to theorize the way that the contemporary social whole had been paradoxically subordinated to one moment of its total process, the factory; it was Antonio Negri who, taking this thesis a step further, saw in the capitalist metropolis not a paradoxical dialectic of part and whole—in which the social or urban totality is subsumed beneath a key part of that whole, the point of production, and restructured in view of capitalist valorization—but rather the total convergence of the productive capacities of the factory and the sociality as such. This meant that the metropolis came to name not simply a particularly complex topological tension between factory and society but the diffusion of production across the social whole itself, in such a way that the separation between the times and space of work and those of the reconstitution of labor-power become increasingly eclipsed. The figure of the worker that corresponds to this spatial redistribution and integration of the moments of capitalist valorization was in turn retheorized by Negri as the *socialized* worker who on the one hand comes to be exploited outside the formerly defined space-time of the wage and work, and on the other hand is increasingly capable of self-organizing its own productive capacities outside the mediation of capital. It is precisely this figure of the socialized worker that re-emerges, according to Negri, in the transportation and public sector strikes in late 1995. It is this worker—the striking workers in the transportation sector, but also the users of those same services,