

Matteo Polleri

Introduction:
The Subterranean Current
of Political Inquiry

Reviving a discussion surrounding the practice of “inquiry” in a dossier on contemporary politics may at first seem paradoxical. One might remark that in the history of Western thought the practice of inquiry into social reality as a tool of political theory has existed at least since the foundation of “social philosophy” as a field within the discipline of philosophy. In this view, inquiry would date from the intersection of modern political thought and classical economics, between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, marked in particular by the contributions of Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Karl Marx. Following this sequence, which various commentators define differently, it seems that no political theory can emerge that would abstract from the social and historical world in which it arises. No axiomatic “state of nature” is acceptable any longer, unless it is explicitly qualified as a mere theoretical hypothesis. Likewise, the inquiry into the stratification of subjects’ concrete forms of existence, their inequalities and sufferings, functions as the point of departure for each proposition that falls under the heading of political theory. This, indeed, is the perspective at work from Hobbesian anthropological studies to Hegel’s observations regarding the state of conflict in the “moment” of civil society. The contributions of Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Marxism in general certainly marked an acceleration in this direction. In these discourses, the contamination of social theorization with the analysis of material conditions of existence becomes a systematic research program, which, in this

respect, leads to reflections surrounding the relationship between empirical research and the study of capitalist society in its totality. The first generation of the Frankfurt School became an excellent model for this genre.

In light of this history, what is the value of returning to the research practice of inquiry, embedded as it is in the evolution of modern political thought in general and, more specifically, in the history of the critical theory of society? For us, it would be a matter of determining what strategic function inquiry might take on in the contemporary world, among its tensions and struggles.

A shift in perspective, one which goes beyond Adorno's speculations on the correct circulation of empirical particularity in the social dialectic, is required to respond to this question. It is a matter of turning our gaze not only toward sociological strains of heterodox Marxism—and the role of the field inquiry (*enquête de terrain*) within them but particularly toward a subterranean current of critical and materialist thought, which took the practice of inquiry as both its method and its utopia. This current is related to Marxism by kinship, taking up some of Marx's original insights while breaking with the discursive regimes of official Marxism so as to oppose it directly. From the first outlines of the "worker's" inquiry" formulated by Marx to the experimentations with "co-research" implemented within experiments of struggle in Italy and France during the 1960s and 1970s, including certain American Marxist tendencies and the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, these construction sites of "political inquiry" effectively called into question the fundamental categories on which the social theory of historical materialism is founded. To the conception of inquiry as a neutral and sociological tool, they oppose a polarized vision surrounding its immanence to the relations of force that structure the political. Here, the "totality" of social reality and the "partiality" of the researcher's gaze enter into a new relationship—one that is marked by rupture and discontinuity rather than by the logical necessity of reciprocal integration.

A double deviation—at the level of the subject and that of the aim of inquiry—marks the specificity of the theory and praxis emerging from this current. In this sense, the work on "co-research" by Italian workerist Romano Alquati, one of the initiators of this procedure, is exemplary. Indeed, this work provides a methodological model of militant inquiry that remains open both to its restructuring and to its contamination. As the brief excerpt from Alquati that concludes this dossier demonstrates, the flexibility of this style of inquiry and the function by which it breaks with the social and epistemological economies of capitalist society bear witness to its distance with respect to the traditional schema of workers' inquiry and, importantly, to its productivity from a contemporary point of view.

Regarding the first of the two deviations that define the subterranean current of political inquiry, articulated at a theoretical level, one of its characteristic traits is the new “point of view” that the researcher adopts. The abstract subject, disembodied and constituted a priori, which is found in the sociological and philosophical tradition, is here radically called into question. This point of view, therefore, is not merely a matter of departing from the narratives of the alienation of exploited subjectivities within the process of capitalist production and reproduction. It is a matter of recognizing, on the contrary, that *the dynamic of research is identified with a dynamic of organization and political subjectivation*. Moreover, it is in this aspect that the aim of the practice of collective research lies. From the singular fragment of social life, from its situated gaze, it becomes possible to achieve a collectivization of experience, and even the augmentation of the potential for resistance and struggle. Marx’s propositions, as well as those of Claude Lefort and Michel Foucault, their respective differences notwithstanding, move in this direction.

At this level, the stakes that emerge for the present moment are those of redeploying this incomplete and partial “point of view” that is at once posed and presupposed by inquiry in its development. While in the 1960s and 1970s the perspective of Marxist researchers who practiced “co-research” remained tied to a model of militant organization structured and shaped by the class composition of Fordism and Taylorism, the neoliberal transformations beginning at the end of the 1970s called for a new reflection, not only in terms of a theory of capitalism but also regarding the mutations of the composition of oppressed classes, their behaviors and desires, in a framework where the subjectivities put to work correspond to multiple figures and histories. It follows that the perspective of inquiry has to be modified in turn; the pluralization and complexification of the “point of view” must follow those of the space of experience of contemporary proletarians.

In this sense, tracing the genealogy of the subterranean current of political inquiry must lead to a consideration of its historical limits, while simultaneously retracing its contemporary horizon. Right away, a question that might be called cartographic arises: What are the different models of inquiry developed and mobilized within this subterranean current? From this point, we would need to pose the problem of the possibility of transforming and reinventing these models: How can inquiry be put into practice in the framework of the dissolution of the Fordist wage relation and society, where the very field of inquiry has been deterritorialized and reterritorialized in unforeseeable ways? How does one integrate into the procedure of

co-research—originally shaped around a type of waged factory labor that was masculine and legally recognized—factors of gender, race, and their interrelation with the contemporary chains of valorization of capital? More precisely, what would practicing inquiry mean within the multiplicity of contemporary logics of exploitation and domination, in the context of productive cities, or immanently to the trans and feminist movements in progress worldwide?

The recent period of the authoritarian and patriarchal reconfiguration of forms of political and economic governance within global capitalism certainly calls for a revival of reflection on the history and theoretical models of militant inquiry. But this reflection is above all a matter of practicing inquiry politically, understanding it as a primary center for the autonomous production of knowledge and the horizontal organization of subalterns. Materialist thought and praxis have indeed been revitalized in the last decade, following the collapse of the myth of the “end of history.” However, they now reveal to an unprecedented degree the depth of the impasses and aporias that traverse them, without truly responding to the more reactionary movements incumbent on the crisis of neoliberalism. The fundamental insight of political inquiry, namely, the idea that all forms of critique and struggle begin and are socialized from below and that militant research participates in this unforeseen production of subjectivity may thus assume a new strategic centrality. How do we imagine and implement a practice of inquiry that would do justice to the contemporary situation in its complexity, while avoiding using it as an instrument for the a posteriori verification of theoretical hypotheses? How do we revive the political productivity of inquiry in the contemporary scenario? Without claiming to provide complete answers to these questions, the dossier that follows attempts to open problematics and paths of research, ranging from the archeological to the contemporary, capable of formulating their conditions of possibility.