Julien Allavena and Matteo Polleri

Co-research as Counterinstitution

The critical practices situated within the contemporary movement of antagonism, as well as those housed within the academy, face a series of impasses today. On one side, there is the progressive, though nonuniform, decline of the developmental model of the "Fordist compromise" initiated at the end of the 1970s, which marks the end of the traditional worker's movement within societies at the "center" of the world system. On the other side, there are the social movements formed between the late 1990s and the early 2000s based on the labor force's new conditions of precarity and mobility under globalization and the mass mobilizations that emerged in response to the management of the 2008 financial crisis. These movements are confronted today with an authoritarian restructuring of the neoliberal project and its reorientation around a patriarchal and neo-disciplinary axis. Meanwhile, the economy of Logistics 4.0 has finally been joined together with the verticalization of political decision-making processes and the updated authoritarianism of state apparatuses. From the United States to China, from Latin America to Europe, a new reactionary political period has thus begun, redefining the forms of global capitalism.

This does not mean, however, that the situation is entirely free from tension and conflict: the current transnational feminist movement, the experimentations with the social and metropolitan forms of strike in numerous countries, the various spaces of leaderless self-management and self-government that have emerged in recent years, and the "Zad" experiments—that is, autonomous occupied zones—in France and the United States bear witness to an open field of possibilities. In this same situation, a positive

return can be distinguished—in the militant communities where young, precarious researchers are the most active—of a reflection on the practice of "political inquiry." This is a form of research, inscribed "at the bottom" and "from below," of political and potentially critical behaviors. Different projects and experiments have effectively emerged within this horizon[1] but are still struggling to build the infrastructures capable of solidifying and reinforcing their power (*puissance*). The objective of this article is to provide theoretical and historiographic support for these experimentations. We will focus in particular on the organizational aspects of two practices that seem to us to present the most productive paths of reflection in this direction.

We therefore propose to discuss the methods and stakes of "co-research," developed and implemented by Romano Alquati in the framework of Italian workerism (see, e.g., Sacchetto, Armano, and Wright 2013), and of the practice of inquiry that comes out of the Prison Information Group (*Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons*; GIP) organized by Michel Foucault between 1971 and 1972.[2] Indeed, each of these projects seems to us to have developed original forms of research inscribed within power (*pouvoir*)[3] and exploitation relations and to have succeeded in subverting both these relations themselves and the economies of knowledge that uphold them (Sibertin-Blanc and Legrand 2009). Being committed, respectively, to the field of the forms of labor and production and that of the mechanisms of social reproduction and political control, these examples allow us to think the different modes of co-research capable of intervening to arm, both practically and theoretically, the battle being deployed in the current historical phase.

Inquiry as Antisociology

Despite the profound differences that separate these two experiments, we can right away note that they share a number of characteristics. The first of these is the opposition to the standard sociological schema of the field inquiry (*enquête de terrain*). To identify these procedures with imperfect or incomplete forms of sociology would thus mean overlooking the fact that they are, from the first, inscribed in a field that is separate from sociology. Although, in the inquiries of Alquati and Foucault, there is indeed a step-by-step procedure at work that includes the collection, interpretation, and restitution of empirical "data"; this takes place according to a configuration that articulates each of these moments with an immediate political aim in a way that is foreign to academic sociology.[4] It also follows that the procedures of Foucault and Alquati do not correspond to some umpteenth redistribution of

the critical functions of sociology, to the extent that they do not continually push action into the sphere of cultural or academic debate. In these experiments of "inquiry-intervention," the power-knowledge configuration that is primarily implemented is in opposition to one which would distinguish the agents of the production of knowledge both from those who have been the objects of study and from those who will subsequently act with this knowledge serving as their guide.

In a parallel way, this method is distinguished just as explicitly from the apparatuses of the collection of knowledges that operate in the service of a command, whether it be that of the factory or the prison. In the 1960s, Alquati insisted on the capacity of the Taylorist factory model to recuperate and integrate the knowledges of workers, that is, micro-behaviors resulting from the refusal of labor, thus allowing for time to be saved in the rhythm imposed by the factory framework (Balestrini and Moroni 2017). It is precisely through inquiries conducted by industrial sociology that this "valorizing information" is harnessed in the service of the restructuring of the mechanisms of the extraction of surplus value and subsequently integrated into the machine or the organization of labor (Alquati 1975a). For Foucault, similarly, the "judicial inquiry" is called into question. In "Truth and Juridical Forms," he defines the relation between inquiry and the exercise of power as follows:

> the inquiry is absolutely not a content but, rather, a form of knowledge (*forme de savoir*)—a form of knowledge situated at the junction of a type of power and a certain number of knowledge contents (*contenus de connaissance*). . . . It seems to me that the real junction between the economico-political processes and the conflicts of knowledge might be found in those forms which are, at the same time, modes of the exercise of power and modes of the transmission of knowledge. (Foucault 2000: 51–52)

It follows that *inquiry is to be understood not as a neutral scientific instrument but as a site of the condensation of relations of force*, a stake entirely at one with the struggle against domination. Against inquiry's function of "epistemological" power and its technique for the "capture" of subaltern attitudes, it is a question of developing its strategic divergence (*détournement*) into "co-research," that is, a counter-employment of this model directed toward the production of knowledges by and through subversive praxis. Indeed, another affinity that arises from comparing Alquati and Foucault's work is a shared consideration for the structural ambivalence of inquiry. The schema common to Alquati and Foucault, developed in opposition to the procedures we have mentioned, rests, first of all, on a demand for immanence to the

processes of collective subjectivation that take place within structures of exploitation and domination and, second, on the development of inquiry's role in political organization. Each thinker thus defines a double function of inquiry that corresponds to its different political uses: the technique of the "extraction" of subaltern knowledges in the service reinforcing exploitation, on the one hand, or a "co-evolution" of the researchers and subjects of inquiry with a view to autonomous subjectivation, on the other.

In a more theoretical register, this perspective indicates that a paradoxical epistemological partiality supports each of these practices of inquiry. In no way are these "objective," axiologically neutral studies, intended to stabilize a comprehensive sociological mold of carceral and factory conditions. On the contrary, beyond refusing its function, they also refuse the *gaze* of industrial sociology and of criminal psychiatry, which the normative position of both the "orthodox" and "heretical" models of Marxism directed toward revealing the mechanisms of the mystification of exploitation alone. Thanks to this double, anti-objectivist shift, the Alquatian practice of "co-research," as well as the practice of the GIP's "intolerance-inquiry," do not rely on a dogmatic, preconstituted content, and take on an essentially instrumental function. These are, indeed, mere tools, *theoretical and political means of production* intended to weave organizational links between the subjectivities that meet over the course of the inquiry. But the role of the intellectual in this apparatus (*dispositif*) is not, for all that, to instill subversive science into its subjects by redirecting a power-knowledge assemblage (*agencement*) resulting from domination. The epistemological presupposition in question entails, rather, that the knowledge of forms of domination and exploitation is already present for the subjects who live with them on a daily basis. As Foucault (1994) writes, "It is a matter of letting those who have an experience of prison speak. Not that they need our help to 'become conscious' of their conditions—the consciousness is already there, in full clarity, and they know exactly who the enemy is." This dimension of inquiry invites us to reevaluate the relationship between partisanship and epistemology that is characteristic of these procedures. They can never be identified with mere protests, as long as they are considered within the framework of a "materialist epistemology," that is, according to the Marxian precept that the knowledge of the world is inseparable from the practice of its transformation (see, e.g., Macherey 2008). Moreover, in the discourses of these two thinkers, we find, in Foucault's case, the demand for a higher level of scientific engagement grounded on an axiological nonneutrality, accompanied by a critique of social science and its disciplinary virtues, and, in Alquati's case, for a Lukácsian thinking of the relation

between partiality and totality. In this way, each of them accomplishes the "Copernican Revolution" of Marxism brought about by Mario Tronti (1966: 89), namely, the idea that "capitalist development is subordinated to workers' struggles; it comes after them and must make the political mechanism of production correspond to them." The only difference is that, for Foucault, this applies to subalterns in general rather than to workers alone.

An Epistemology of Praxis

The analysis of domination cannot, in this sense, form the primary object of inquiry. Rather, that analysis is only a collateral consequence of the primary objective of intensifying practices of insubordination. The initial methodological presupposition is, in fact, radical: *there is no neutral science of social reality,* nor are there analyses originating from an external, totalizing point of view. There are only partial analyses, determined by the field of powers that they study. *The political apparatus of inquiry is thus affirmed as an organizational process*, which socializes the "point of view" of subjectivities immersed in the materiality of the relations of force that structure capitalism. Using the vocabulary of Foucault's late writings, one could say that in co-research, the production of truth is validated through the production of political subjectivity, and the "knowledge" (*savoir*) that results, although "minor," reveals itself to be strategically situated and deployable in struggle.

The status of this knowledge is thus considerably affected; it must be distinguished from the knowledge belonging to scientific forms understood as processes of domination. This means, effectively, that from the perspective of co-research, theoretical development does not take on a guiding role within social struggles. Rather, it is involved in a game of direct relations of dependence with these struggles. Operating in the service of the mechanisms of political activation, its content varies according to the intensity and efficacy of these mechanisms (Alquati 1975a: 87–92). Consequently, we must note that the position that Alquati and Foucault adopt does not proceed "from above" but is developed "from below," taking hold within the plurality of relations that define the social composition of living labor and the "objectivation" effects produced by the carceral power-knowledge complex.

However, this immersion in the social group "from below" is not comparable with standard sociological "participant observation"; it does not take form in an effort to interact with the group in question so as to understand its structures alone[5] but, rather, to engage fully in its struggles, as an actor at times external to the sector, but always internal to its horizon of struggle.

The researcher's intervention is thus the occasion to form a new collectivity, freed, at that moment, from the demands that ordinarily weigh on the group under inquiry.

In this perspective, Alquati describes the immediately collective dimension of his practice, against the grain of the participant observers' isolation as they seek to diminish the ways in which their presence influences the behaviors under observation. Alquati (1993: 37–38) specifies that co-research "consists of producing (collectively, communally, and through group discussion) an initial set of provisional hypotheses tending toward systematicity." The moment of data collection thus goes through the formation of a collectivity in which the researcher is situated on a plane of immanence with respect to the inquiry's subjects. A collectivity is thereby formed which is no longer that of the labor force confined to a specific position but already that of the class, united, for example, by a moment of struggle such as a meeting or a strike. The restitution of interpretations takes place according to a similar logic, through the same types of gatherings. Moreover, this would constitute the, strictly speaking, "transformative" moment, as it would be most conducive to an encounter between the inquiry's researchers and its subjects. As Alquati (1993: 52) writes,

> A transformative circulation. . . . What do you do with the new, more powerful (*potente*) knowledge (*conoscenza*) you have obtained, of a more conscious means of development? You apply it in the process of transformation. . . . Yet this [the moment of collective interpretation] is, if you like, the moment that could be most properly qualified as applicative: the renewed knowledge (*conoscenza*) from within the transformation of reality is now applied to this same transformation all the more knowingly.

In this perspective, the knowledge obtained is in no way fetishized, just as the practice of research is never reified—*political coevolution is also epistemological*. This means that, for Alquati, the fundamental demand is not to "overfill the abyss between analysis and intervention," but to recognize that which links the knowledge of the social world with movements of insubordination. As a consequence, theoretical progress is identified with the progress of latent critical attitudes and the development of the "invisible organization" of workers (Alquati 1975b). For Alquati and Foucault, *the modality of verification is effected through praxis and not through empirical data alone*. This means that it lies in the political result, *in the establishment of the apparatus of inquiry at the level of a counterinstitutional dynamic*[6] joined together with the utopia of a science inseparable from social needs.

The ordinary temporality of sociological production is thus shattered: there is no possibility here of separating the moments of data collection, interpretation, composition, and action, nor of attributing these steps to different actors. Rather, it is a matter of *forming an apparatus that aims to render the inquiry performative*. Therefore, the collection of data is in itself subversive, and its interpretation constitutes social transformation. The Adornian insight that we have not changed the world because we have not interpreted it sufficiently is thus reversed: the social hermeneutics that takes place over the course of the inquiry is itself already a practice of transformation. Distributing questionnaires to prisoners means realizing the potential organization borne by them and those who surround them, including families, friends, supporters, and partners. But it also means transgressing the structure of inclusive exclusion that the prison-form represents and the societal assemblage that is both external to it and determined by it. An internal document of the GIP notes: "Starting from the presence of militants in queues and waiting rooms, sites of almost total censorship have this year become places where prison is spoken of. . . . Linking prisons together. . . . Organizing families." For Alquati, arranging times for collective discussion with subjectivities means, above all, gathering together atomized labor forces and contributing to class formation beyond the recognition of different workplaces. It thus means playing the "political composition" of the class against its "technical composition." In this sense, the principal difference of the GIP assemblage with respect to that of Alquati ultimately lies in its recognition of apparatuses of circulation that are secondary to the ends of political pressure and the mobilization of supporters—a necessity incurred by the struggle against the societal structure that authorizes the carceral institution. From this perspective, this tactical difference refers, in fact, to the same strategic demand.

In both cases, the objectivation and public circulation of the knowledges specific to these experiments, on the basis of which we evaluate them today, cannot conceal the importance of the productive assemblage—at once centripetal and centrifugal—in which they emerged, and particularly the precedence it has over these knowledges themselves. Therefore, the results of the inquiries carried out by the GIP and by Alquati can by no means be considered to be data. Rather, they are traces, archives of collectives in processes of formation and struggle. Here, for once, we have archives that come from below, from the dominated, and not from the administrative "beam of light" thrown periodically on captured infamous lives, which shows them to us through the gaze of the authorities (Foucault 2000: 157–75).

And what, in the end, do these archives show us? Not, as the so-called sociology of critique does (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), how the dispute is settled, that is, how a form of domination momentarily in crisis is restored but, rather, how to incite crisis on the basis of the insubordinations that extend through such domination: first, therefore, by harnessing these insubordinations, and then articulating them in an assemblage, arranging them. For Foucault, this arrangement takes place through writing, in the free narratives of prisoners, pure negativity escaped from confinement and circulated as such, to extend the crisis already provoked within the prison by the inquiry itself outside of its walls. Publications, media interventions, and public events thus correspond to so many acts of destructuring of the prison as a global social form. For Alquati, it is the dialectical confrontation with the workers and the communal organization of class autonomy that take charge of this same function. These two critical strategies are thus empowered to intensify the behaviors capable of escaping the real—meaning, ultimately, disciplinary and biopolitical—subsumption to capital.

Inquiry as an Antagonistic Apparatus

Another common trait distinguishes Alquati and Foucault from other historical practitioners of inquiry:[7] their practice is not limited to a "receptive" operation, that is, to an a posteriori redevelopment of the data collected from narratives, as in the case of the model of inquiry proposed, in particular, by Claude Lefort (1952).[8] It is achieved, on the contrary, in its full development, through the production of political effects, whether they take place in the short, middle, or long term. Yet in order to move beyond the stage of reception and enter into a procedure of production, inquiry as co-research asserts itself as a form of *apparatus* (*dispositif*), that is, to take up Foucault's (1980) definition of this term: "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid . . . the system of relations that can be established between these elements." The structuring of Foucauldian co-research into an "information group" ("*groupe d'information*") directs this organization of the research collective toward a productive aim of mobilizing knowledges and practices of the said and the unsaid—dialogues, writings, and assemblages. Presenting the GIP in a radio interview, Foucault insisted on the "non-official" and informal dimen-

sion of the work he was conducting. On the one hand, the GIP is not reducible to an intellectual pressure group seeking to influence public opinion. Rather, it is an "information group that researches, provokes, and distributes information, and which identifies the targets of possible action" (Foucault 1971). On the other hand, according to the group's founding manifesto, the action of "making" penitentiary reality "known" already contains an inherent call to fight against this structure in practice and to support concretely inmates' forms of self-organization.[9]

Alquati's practice is similar to the collaborative model of the GIP, and its assemblage as an apparatus is no less effective. On this point, it must first be noted that in the context of the Marxist pragmatic research of the 1960s and 1970s, co-research is immediately distinguished from the practice of the establishment:[10] the researcher here is indeed exterior to workers' society, and makes of this exteriority a resource for epistemological productivity. For example, regarding the way in which the researcher should "gather" workers' knowledges, Alquati (1993: 45) writes:

> thus: a second moment of research is generally the stage during which one must collect the primary information and, I will add, the knowledges (*saperi/conoscenze*) "already available." What does collecting them mean? Does it mean that one goes to a place where all this information and knowledge (*saperi/conoscenze*) is lying on the ground, already prepared, and that one must simply gather it up and carry it away? Is it available in this sense? In fact, collecting it often also means producing this information.

Such practices of dialogical production are facilitated by the fact that the researcher does not pretend to belong to the community of workers but immediately asserts a position of heterogeneity, not to observe but to organize politically with the subjectivities in question, within their very "invisible organization." What follows is the production of dialogue sequences, outside of labor time, even at the very moment when the labor force breaks from the factory's command to reconstitute itself as a class, that is, as a subversive socialization. Alquati's intervention thereby generates so many moments of decline with respect to the factory's discipline, whether this takes place during the collection, interpretation, or restitution of data from the inquiry, with each step submitted to collective discussion. It is important to stress, as Sergio Bologna does, that inquiry appears in this framework as a provocation of oral history, of narration, promoting the use of language and carrying it beyond the field to which subaltern expression is ordinarily confined (Wright 2002: 24).

In this respect, *co-research too intervenes as an apparatus of struggle*, a system of relations composed of heterogeneous elements equipped with a productive aim of narratives, knowledges, and practices inscribed within the class and not within capital, toward a goal that is both epistemologico-practical and non-disciplinary. Once again, co-research shares, here, the perspective of the Foucauldian information group, which subverts the mode of constitution of the carceral community through disciplinary techniques, in order to establish a counterinstitution that joins together rebellion and the constitution of knowledges.[11]

Moreover, it is this ideal of the reversal of objectivizing modes of socialization that gives rise to the need to create political infrastructures distinct from existing vocal institutions already charged with a regulatory function in the factory as well as in the prison. In this way, Alquati breaks with Raniero Panzieri's procedure, which consisted in an alliance with the CGIL trade union[12] at the Fiat plant aimed at gaining access to workers in exchange for assistance with the restructuring of the union (Wright 2002: 35). Although Alquati agrees, at first, to going through the militants of the Italian Socialist Party (Wright 2002: 53), nonetheless the latter does not play a directly administrative role with respect to capital in the way that the union does in the Keynesian framework, but merely forms a group for the independent politicization of the factory's administrative modes. Likewise, the Foucauldian procedure breaks with the administrative systems for prisoners' grievances, which are confined by the penitentiary and judicial administrations, and ineffective for the struggle against the carceral institution to which they contribute entirely.

Such institutions function as so many factors of domination on the basis of a clean separation of the instituted and the instituting. *What co-research opposes to these institutions is a form of coevolution of these two entities— an institution in the processual sense of the term*, in which power (*puissance*) is not exhausted in the act. It is a praxis that maintains the balance between the instituting and the instituted, a collective formed by the joining together of the researchers and the subjects of inquiry, and a structure for the production of knowledges and practices. It is only in this way that action manages to escape the capture which the Keynesian State effects in the form of an integration into social regulation. Such action asserts itself as a pure vector for inciting crisis in specific sectors, without claiming to work toward any particular resolution. It is also in this respect that these experiments of co-research appear as counterinstitutions, the first lynchpins of a counter-society immanent to the crisis of capitalism.

Conclusion

For us, it is now a question of envisioning Alquati and Foucault's experiments with inquiry as invitations to conceive of co-research in three different but related aspects, which represent this practice's many lines of development in the current context of the social composition's fragmentation.

In the first place, there is the characterization of inquiry by its *scientific and political productivity*. The knowledge that inquiry brings forth is partisan and capable of contributing to dynamics of confrontation, while helping to clarify the fault lines within the complexity of contemporary capitalism on which to build critical subjectivation, political breaks, and the affirmation of other modalities of social organization.

In the second place, there is the definition of this productive model as the process of constructing a mobile organizational infrastructure, which functions in the multiple contexts of exploitation and domination endemic to the productive and reproductive dynamics of capitalist society and allows for the cohesion of heterogeneous practices, discourses, claims, and lines of flight. Inquiry thus understood as an *apparatus of struggle* may constitute a primary implementation of the program of linking together areas of conflict—those in conflict with one another—which develop along different planes of minorization. Indeed, since the principal instrument of the neoliberal offensive has resided in the division of fronts of struggle, the revival of the schema of militant inquiry must take this fact into consideration. *The flexibility and heterogeneity of the practice of constructing an antagonistic "point of view" thus emerge as the two challenges to be faced,* with a view to constituting a form of co-research capable of overcoming the end of the essentially homogeneous social composition of the "Fordist compromise."

Finally, there is the affirmation of this apparatus of struggle as one of the primary instruments for the *reinvention of the Leninist tactic of "double power"* in the current moment, as a theoretical and practical support for emerging horizontal and counterinstitutional (non-sovereign and anticapitalist) experiments. Such a redevelopment seems possible today due to the relative stabilization, and even the reinforcement of existing autonomous and collaborative structures (Hardt and Mezzadra 2017). However, it cannot avoid constructing economies of knowledge proper to these structures that are still susceptible to appropriation for the ends of widening new gaps that may open in the mesh of contemporary power.

Notes

1   For examples, see *Viewpoint Magazine, Notes from Below, Plateforme d'Enquêtes Militantes de Paris*, the website *ASAP Révolution* (https://asap.noblogs.org/); the *Commonfare Book Series*, a recent example of co-research produced in the framework of the Basic Income Network, Italy, and the contributions arising from Argentina's social movements, such as Colectivo Situaciones 2003.

2   For a history of this experiment, see especially Artières and Zancarini-Fournel 2003.

3   Unless otherwise noted, "power" translates the French *pouvoir* in this essay.—Trans.

4   Let us put aside the practices known as those of sociological intervention, which follow an entirely different logic from that of the politics of co-research (see Hess 1981).

5   On this subject, see Beaud and Weber 1999, the work that currently serves as a "manual" in French Bourdieusian departments of social sciences.

6   On the concept of "counterinstitution" see Hardt and Negri 2017.

7   Regarding different models of political inquiry, see Lassere and Monferrand in this issue.

8   Elaborated in Lefort 1979: 71–97.

9   The manifesto of the GIP is very clear on this point. See Foucault 1994: 1043. A full English translation of the manifesto can be accessed in *Viewpoint Magazine* at viewpointmag.com/2016/02/16/manifesto-of-the-groupe-dinformation-sur-les-prisons-1971/.

10   On this subject, see Dressen 1999.

11   Jacques Rancière's insight regarding the importance of the proletarian literary narrative as a strategy of resistance is not so far from this procedure. See Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* (New York: Verso, 2012).

12   The Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro, the major Italian union on the left, was closely linked, at that time, to the Italian Communist Party.

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