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The Age of Immanence:
Postoperaismo, Postcapitalism and the Forces and Relations of Production

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Abstract

This working paper relates the movement between Marx and Spinoza in the postoperaismo of Antonio Negri to its subsequent reception on the contemporary left via the intellectual regeneration offered by postcapitalist and ‘post-work’ thinking. The latter, we argue, translates Negri’s Spinozism into a hopeful assessment of political possibility not reflected in preset conditions. In postoperaismo, and in particular the turn to Spinoza in the work of Negri, key categories of Marx’s critique of political economy are reevaluated in line with a utopian analysis of the potentialities of contemporary capitalism and its immanent tendency towards a postcapitalist transformation. Through a close reading of Negri’s three translated books and collections dealing with Spinoza, the paper critiques the underlying ideas and consequences of this appraisal. In so doing it is informed by a countervailing appreciation of value, labour and class in capitalist society grounded in the ‘critique of political economy as a critical social theory’ approach. The working paper argues that Negri, owing to his positing of Spinozian plane of immanence of which all social principles are an ontologically equivalent part, essentially ends up at a conservative position that takes the world as it is, and reflects it back on itself. A political vision based around the immanent power of the multitude, constrained only by limits of its own self-valorising creation, possesses intellectual resources only for a very passive form of resistance which merely affirms capitalist development. From unorthodox beginnings, Negri’s worldview ends up little different to the most crudely deterministic historical materialism, paradoxically combining resigned quietism with revolutionary over-optimism. The wrong kinds of theory impoverish the critical resources undergirding political praxis, and Negri’s ideas, whilst innocuous in and of themselves, cascade through contemporary left politics. His celebratory account of societal and technological change is carried over in the left ‘accelerationism’, ‘postcapitalism’ and ‘Fully Automated Luxury Communism’ discussed in the concluding section of this paper. It is suggested that the development of an alternative to technological utopianism is a necessary step for left renewal following the defeat of Corbynism and the failure of a policy agenda inspired in part by the worldview surveyed here.

Key words
Postcapitalism, Post-Work, Postoperaismo, Marx, Negri, Spinoza, Critical Theory, Labour

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1. Introduction: Postoperaismo and postcapitalism

This working paper examines how Antonio Negri’s appropriation of Spinoza, bolted onto revisionist interpretations of Marx, implies an immanentist view of social change hinged on the development of the forces of production and the new class subjectivities it brings into being. The basis for this reconciliation of Marx and Spinoza is an optimistic portrayal of the possibilities of social transformation that we find mirrored today in the positive appraisal of the prospects for radical social change among a left that is, somewhat contrarily, experiencing a moment of generational defeat in the face of a rising right. The theoretical reconstruction undertaken in this paper surveys the philosophical resources through which this optimism is justified intellectually. In so doing, we focus specifically on the work of Negri in particular, the development of which tracks his own life on the late-twentieth-century European left, specifically around a prison spell bridging his re-evaluation of Marx in his 1978 lectures on Marx’s Grundrisse, and his later Spinozist turn, up to his later work with Michael Hardt. This provides a lens through which to determine the relevance and value of his Spinozist spin on traditional Marxism to the present political and intellectual conjuncture and the new Anglophone left that represents its most popular radical tribune.

The working paper argues that Negri, owing to his positing of a Spinozian plane of immanence of which all social principles are an ontologically equivalent part, essentially ends up at a conservative position that takes the world as it is, and reflects it back on itself. Purportedly constrained only by limits of its own self-valorising creation, a political vision based around the immanent power of the ‘multitude’ and similar political subjectivities possesses intellectual resources only for a very passive form of resistance, one which merely affirms the development of the world it supposedly resists. From unorthodox beginnings, Negri’s worldview ends up little different to the most crudely deterministic historical materialism, with all its paradoxical combination of resigned quietism and revolutionary over-optimism. But errant theoretical understandings also leave us bereft of practical political resources for confronting the reality of contemporary capitalism – this makes their critique essential. Today, Negri’s ideas cascade through contemporary left politics, whether directly or by resemblance. In a context of generational defeat, is suggested that the development of an alternative to technological utopianism is a necessary step for left renewal following the failure of Corbynism in the recent UK General Election, and the failure of a manifesto inspired in part by its worldview. We must start, we argue, by debating this thinking from its theoretical foundations up – of which Negri is a key part.

In surveying this emerging hegemony this paper builds on previous work analysing, first, the political claims made in the contemporary Anglophone left’s heady mix of populism and postcapitalist utopianism, and, second, the empirical assumptions about the realities of contemporary labour and the future of capitalism on which these imaginaries are based. It provides resources for future work on both fronts by digging into the philosophical framework through which Negri, and with him a continuing line of postoperaist thinkers, interprets the possibilities of change afforded in capitalist society. With Empire at the leading edge, the ‘postoperaismo’ Negri helped spawn makes the essentially empirical claim that new conditions of labour content characterised by immateriality place modern work ‘beyond

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3 Negri (1992a); Marx (1993); Hardt and Negri (2001); Hardt and Negri (2004); Hardt and Negri, (2009). The latest instalment, Assembly (Hardt and Negri 2017) was published during the writing of this paper. Whilst the underpinning philosophical positions remain much the same as those surveyed here, Assembly shows interesting signs of having absorbed some of the insights of the ‘postcapitalist’ and ‘accelerationist’ literature the earlier works helped inform, in addition to a few surprising volte faces. It will be dealt with in a future contribution, forthcoming in a special issue of Political Quarterly.

4 Pitts (2017); Pitts (2018a); Dinerstein and Pitts (2018)
measure’ and catalyse a crisis not only in the law of value but the Marxian theory that claimed to capture it conceptually.\textsuperscript{5} This crisis plays out in the possibility of a transformation of informationalised capitalism into a postcapitalist society, the latter lurking within the former waiting to be unleashed. This vision of the future is derived from Marx’s ‘Fragment on Machines’, a part of Marx’s \textit{Grundrisse} which forecasts a reduction in human labour sparked by the rise of new technology.\textsuperscript{6} Negri’s Spinozist reading of the Fragment perceives what in Marx’s posthumously published notebooks was seen as a far-off future as a presently unfolding reality.\textsuperscript{7} Crucially, this reading has mediated the reception of the Fragment on a contemporary left wrapped up with an imminent, and not hypothetical, postcapitalist and ‘post-work’ future.\textsuperscript{8}

The roots of these ideas lie, we argue, in Negri’s turn to Spinoza, which, whilst a tendency present in his writing from at least the late sixties, takes full shape shortly after his 1978 lectures on Marx’s \textit{Grundrisse}. It is expressed most clearly in his 1980 writings on Spinoza, completed in prison and published in English as \textit{The Savage Anomaly}, and, later, in the collections \textit{Subversive Spinoza} and \textit{Spinoza for Our Time}.\textsuperscript{9} Negri’s spell in jail for his alleged part in the kidnap and murder of the Italian Prime Minister, Aldo Moro, is the context for a ‘radical break’ between Negri’s early Marxism and later Spinozism.\textsuperscript{10} Out of a basic irreconcilability of his developing thinking with the letter of Marx’s law of value as expressed in his lectures on the \textit{Grundrisse}, Negri sought new conceptual glue in Spinoza. In Spinoza, Negri found a ‘justific\[cation\] for his own political and philosophical position’. The theoretical discourse of potential against power and ‘world-constituting practice’ ground his reevaluation of Marx in a political project.\textsuperscript{11} The groundbreaking synthesis presented in \textit{Empire} realizes a direction of travel projected in Negri’s earlier prison-era work, the appropriation of a notion of self-volatisation and the ‘creativity of desire’ from Spinoza providing a lens through which to read anew concepts of class and social change from Marx.\textsuperscript{12} It also marks an important pivot between earlier \textit{operaismo} – focused on class struggle – and the \textit{postoperaismo} that eventually came to lay claim to class struggle’s supersession with the development of twenty-first century capitalism.\textsuperscript{13} Negri’s reception of Spinoza is central in the story of how this came to be – a trajectory this paper sets out to critically reconstruct in order to address several theoretical impasses of the present that flow from postoperaist influences on the contemporary left.

These notions gain purchase today via inheritors of Negri’s theoretical legacy, like Paul Mason, in particular the latter’s \textit{Postcapitalism}.\textsuperscript{14} It spreads through broadsheet coverage, and grants left policymaking a postoperaist inflection, eulogising the end of work and envisioning a universal basic income (UBI).\textsuperscript{15} And, in the struggle to intellectually define the political project around Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the UK Labour Party, one of its competing sides, horizontalists against the Leninist hard-left, defended Corbynism as the expression of a ‘counter-power’ and posited Corbyn himself as a placeholder for a wider political project of an automated post-work society.\textsuperscript{16} Winding a route of increasing reconciliation with electoral

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\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{5} Pitts (2018b); Caffentzis (2005)
\item\textsuperscript{6} Marx (1993); Pitts (2018a)
\item\textsuperscript{7} Hardt and Negri (2001)
\item\textsuperscript{8} Mason (2015a), Mackay and Avanessian (2015), Bastani (2019)
\item\textsuperscript{9} Negri (1991); Negri (2004); Negri (2013)
\item\textsuperscript{10} Abse (2016); Ryan (1992, xxviii-xxx, 191-221, 216)
\item\textsuperscript{11} Ryan (1992, xxviii-xxx, 191-221, 216)
\item\textsuperscript{12} Hardt and Negri (2001, 51-52)
\item\textsuperscript{13} Wright (2002); Thoburn (2001)
\item\textsuperscript{14} Mason (2015a). Mason’s latest, the brilliant \textit{Clear Bright Future} (2019), which was published towards the end of the period in which this paper was written, takes a more circumspect Marxist-humanist perspective. We will address this in a future piece forthcoming in a special issue of \textit{Political Quarterly}.
\item\textsuperscript{15} Mason (2015b), see also Pitts and Dinerstein (2017), Lombardozzi and Pitts (2019)
\item\textsuperscript{16} Mason (2016); Bolton and Pitts (2018)
\end{itemize}
compromise, these movements mainlined postoperaismo into the intellectual undercurrents that have driven the Corbynist left in the UK. In each iteration of this recuperation, we see Negri’s ‘multitude’ recoded as, variously, the ‘99%’, ‘the people’ and, most notably among the current crop of interpreters, a figure best captured in Mason’s ‘networked individual’. In each, the recoded multitude occupies a privileged ontological and epistemological position that supports specific political outcomes. We can hear this echoing in the hopeful pronouncements of populist postcapitalism today, at the heart of the once-ebullient intellectual project around Corbyn. This resonance is largely unremarked upon in accounts of the intellectual constitution of the most interesting and youngest quarters of the new left constructed around Corbynism. But, traversing a route via the alterglobalisation movement and, later, Occupy, it is our contention in the final part of the paper that it constitutes a vital tributary in this flow of new thinking around the changing world of work and the proposal of policies such as the UBI. Policies coloured by this vision of the future populated Labour’s manifesto in the recent General Election, and the party’s comprehensive defeat has been associated with the public perception that its pledges were too busy preparing for the development of a new world in the shell of an old one from whose realities they seemed somewhat unmoored. Unfortunately, the new left thinking that drives this agenda carries all the flaws of the intellectual edifice from which it takes at least some of its inspiration: Negri’s turn to Spinozist immanence and the concept of the multitude, and the orthodox Marxist hangovers this, somewhat contradictorily, implies.

In considering this contradictory outcome, the paper’s analysis draws upon what can be broadly characterised as the ‘critique of political economy as a critical social theory’ approach that unites over a common frame of reference in a first-generation Frankfurt School reading of Marx’s mature work two strands of contemporary Marxian thought: the Neue Marx-Lektüre, or New Reading of Marx, and Open Marxism. The insights of this tendency into value, class and labour in capitalist society will be returned to throughout the paper to support the critical close reading of Negri’s Spinozian works. Where this tradition, spanning Adorno, Benjamin as well as contemporary thinkers like Werner Bonefeld emphasises the negative dialectic through which capitalist society’s social constitution in the class antagonism is mediated, Negri’s approach takes an immanentist standpoint where all things are as one, selectively affirming parts of the capitalist totality in such a way so as to ultimately affirm the whole. Reflecting the world back upon itself, Negri’s standpoint takes all things as a singular monad. The dialectical movement of contradictions is dispensed with. But an irony remains that the further from Marx Negri travels by means of Spinoza, the closer to certain disavowed precepts of orthodox Marxism he becomes, their worldview brought back to the surface by Spinozist optimism.

After introducing the critique of political economy as a critical theory of society in more detail, the main part of the paper considers this coincidence of Marx and Spinoza in Negri’s work across four main issues: first, the multitude and the move from an operaist politics of struggle to a postoperaist politics of celebration and creativity; second, the concept of immanence and the ‘affirmationist’ supersession of antagonism it represents in Negri; third, the disavowed dialectic between the forces and relations of production Negri derives from Spinoza; and fourth the consequences of a philosophy of pure immediacy for common forms of political mediation. Situating these in the context of an increasingly populist left, the final concluding section considers how the consequences of these issues are felt in contemporary postcapitalism.

17 Mason (2015a, 114-5).
18 Nandy (2019)
19 Bonefeld (2014), Bellofiore and Riva (2015), Heinrich (2012), Bonefeld, Gunn and Psychopedis (1992); Adorno (1973)
2. The critique of political economy as a critical theory of society

We will first begin by setting out the theoretical touchstones of our own critical reading of Negri. In examining the roots of postoperaismo and the political implications of his embrace of Spinozist immanence, the paper is inspired by the conceptual framework of a countervailing tendency in revisionist attempts to renew the Marxist inheritance for new times, namely what we called above ‘the critique of political economy as a critical social theory’. This is represented in, respectively, the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, or New Reading of Marx, a Frankfurt School-influenced school of Marx interpretation gaining increasing currency in the Anglophone world after its initial conception in Germany, and Open Marxism, a heterodox school informed by the NML but that has, significantly for this analysis, one theoretical foot in the tradition of autonomist Marxism of which postoperaismo and its *operaist* progenitor are a part. Gaining increasing academic purchase with the flurry of publications issued by leading theorist Werner Bonefeld in recent years, the approach offers none of the easy solutions to the contemporary questions of class, labour and capitalism postoperaismo has found an eager audience in addressing. The arc of this critical theory’s reception, unlike that of the thinkers associated with postoperaismo, is made all the harder by its pessimistic assessment of the prospects for change. But at a time when political upheavals inspire anything other than optimism, the cold water it pours over wishful thinking is a prerequisite for any serious left political alternative.

A radical alternative to the new hegemony of immanence on the left we assay later in the paper, the critique of political economy as a critical theory of society links the Frankfurt School-influenced value theory of the NML and the radical theory of struggle ‘in, against and beyond’ capital offered in Open Marxism. The latter, interestingly, arises out of the same autonomist moment as postoperaismo, albeit translated beyond the Italian context. Indeed, in the foundational series of eponymous edited collections that define Open Marxism, operaist and postoperaist theory make appearances – most significantly Negri’s outline of his nascent reinterpretation of class and labour in the last decade of the twentieth century. However, through a fidelity to the negative dialectics of Frankfurt School critical theory, Open Marxism, like its bedfellow the NML, diverges significantly from the direction Negri and his associates were taking at the time. The critique of political economy is useful to us today precisely because it embraces the negativity and criticality we will go on to identify as a key casualty of Negri’s Spinozist embrace of the immanent power of the multitude to change the world. This approach focuses, methodologically, on ‘the negative dialectics of economic objectivity’. According to Adorno, dialectics is the ‘ontology of the wrong state of things’. It decodes a world of real appearance, wherein things exist as themselves and something else all at once. It is, as Bonefeld writes, ‘the cunning of reason in a bewitched society’. Negative dialectics is the critical application of dialectics. It extends its cunning to the active ‘presentation of the wrong state of things’. It demystifies a reality in which the results of human practice pose themselves above and against its performers. It explodes the economic abstractions through which humans subsist in capitalist society.

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20 Bonefeld (2014). This section draws upon Pitts (2017, Ch. 5).
21 Bellofiore and Riva (2015)
22 Bonefeld, Gunn and Psychopedis (1992)
23 Bonefeld (2014); Bonefeld (2016a); Bonefeld (2016b)
24 Cleaver (1992); Negri (1992b)
25 Adorno (1973, 11)
26 Bonefeld (2016b, 65-66)
It does so through an ‘ad hominem critique of political economy’. It is ‘ad hominem’ in that it deals in the dirt of life, the ‘muck of ages’, as Marx puts it.\(^\text{27}\) It contends that our access to the means of life is mediated through the conceptual apparatus of economic categories. The ad hominem critique assesses these categories with reference to that which they sublate and deny. It suggests that this conceptual apparatus rests in our relationship with ‘sensuous things’. This relationship, however, proceeds through ‘supersensible’ things. But, for Bonefeld, it remains the case that ‘[t]he actual relations of life are the non-conceptual premise of the economic categories’ that constitute this 'supersensibility'.\(^\text{28}\)

Thus focus falls, on one hand, on the continuing abstract forms of social mediation and domination in capitalist society. On the other, it falls on their non-conceptuality in continuing modes of concrete practice and coercion. This provides a radical counterpoint to the postoperaist fixation on change. Changes in the immediate content of labour do not imply changes in forms of abstract social mediation like value. Equally, changes in the value relation do not disclose changes in the fact we must work to live. Only dialectics- specifically in its negative guise- can grasp this. However, as we shall see, dialectics is discarded by Negri and his intellectual descendants owing to an acceptance of Spinozian immanence.

The ‘incomprehensible economic forces’ that rule over subjects in capitalist society, Bonefeld suggests, rest in human practice and can be explained through human practice.\(^\text{29}\) The ‘relations of economic objectivity’ abstract from lived experience. But they are also a mode of existence of the latter. In this way, they represent an ‘inverted and perverted world of definite social relations’ rooted in everyday life. In decoding this, Bonefeld writes, negative dialectics opens out upon political questions about the delineation of the good and right life in a wrong world. Far from mere theory, it constitutes what Alfred Schmidt calls a ‘conceptualised praxis’.

It thereby provides not the 'impoverished praxis' popularly associated with critical theory, but poses precisely the key ‘question’ of praxis: ‘what really does it mean to say ‘no’ in a society that is governed by the movement of economic abstractions?’ \(^\text{30}\) This praxis consists in a method that critiques and negates what is. This, as we shall see, differentiates it from Negri's postoperaist approach. The latter takes an immanentist standpoint where all things are as one. Whilst there is a strong commitment to political resistance and transformative social change running through Negri’s work, the increasing advocacy of an immanentist understanding of how this comes about has a tendency to selectively affirm parts of the capitalist totality in such a way so as to ultimately affirm the whole. It reflects the world back upon itself, where critical theory breaks the mirror. In negating the world, by passing judgement, critical theory also describes the way that world really is.

Against the singular monad presented in Negri’s Spinozism, the negative-dialectical approach encounters reality through its contradictions. Contradiction is the mode through which dialectics analyses the world. It appreciates that things may be one thing and another at once. A negative-dialectical approach problematizes all identity whatsoever. As will be shown in the reading of Negri’s work on Spinoza that follows in the main part of this paper, it thereby runs against the grain of Negri's immanentism whereby all things are as one and in common.\(^\text{31}\) But only in a refusal to accept identity at face value can theory get to capitalism's rotten core. This consists, for Bonefeld, in one component above all others. Namely, that the results of human

\(^{27}\) Marx (1845)  
\(^{28}\) Bonefeld (2016b, n. 11, 72)  
\(^{29}\) Bonefeld (2016b, 66-65)  
\(^{30}\) Bonefeld (2016a, 237)  
\(^{31}\) Bonefeld (2014, 69)
practice, of human creativity, come to assume an alien force over us as capital.\textsuperscript{32} It is the contention of this paper that this irony cannot be appreciated in the confines of postoperaist theory and the politics that today follow from it.

3. Multitude: The move from operaismo to postoperaismo

To explain postoperaismo, it is necessary to first explain its progenitor, \textit{operaismo}. The autonomist Marxist tradition of which postoperaismo and, by extension, much of the current ‘postcapitalist’ literature covered in the final section, is a part owes its origins to 1960s Italy and first-wave operaismo, characterised by a critique of the centralised, orthodox Italian Left.\textsuperscript{33} It sought to build a politics autonomous from traditional forms of representative democracy, and emphasised direct action- in its early forms characterised by subversive struggle at work, often unmediated by traditional trade unions. By the 70s \textit{operaismo} had evolved into a post-\textit{operaist} politics. This embraced a wider conception of anti-capitalist struggle beyond the immediate content of capitalist exploitation at work as a response to the automation of the Turin car plants. It also contained a corresponding redefinition of the working class triggered by technical change towards what was labelled the ‘social worker’ who labours in society at large.\textsuperscript{34}

A wider ‘post-workerist’ re-orientation on the radical left was popularised by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their masterwork \textit{Empire}, a surprise bestseller highly influential among those inspired by the anti-globalisation movements, and later the post-2008 crash Occupy protests and militant campus agitators of the last decade. Key ‘post-workerist’ interventions whose influence carries right through to today’s suite of leftist demands include Negri’s theorisation of the social factory, Hardt and Negri’s conceptualisation of the new class subjectivity of the ‘Multitude’, Lazzarato’s delineation of the concept of ‘immaterial labour’, Vercellone and Virno’s conceptualisations of the ‘general intellect’, Terranova’s theorisation of free labour, and Fumagalli and Lucarelli’s advocacy of a \textit{UBI} to recompense the spontaneously productive labour of the New Economy.\textsuperscript{35}

\textit{Empire} still represents the classic distillation of these ideas. With Hardt, Negri proposed a break with the category of the working-class in the wake of a crisis of work in capitalist society. This was encased in an enthusiasm for the New Economy’s ‘multitude’ of ‘immaterial labourers’. The concept of ‘multitude’ taken over from Spinoza is a new social subject synonymous with changes in production. Work becomes increasingly concerned with creativity, communication, cognition and affect. Life becomes indistinguishable from work, and vice versa. By living, the multitude works, and by working, it lives. As such, the eulogising of the postmodern multitude’s spontaneous productiveness and the unencumbered ‘creativity of desire’ we find in the pages of \textit{Empire} and other later works of Negri suggests that changes in the content of work reflect the immanent drive of workers themselves to self-actualize through more communicative, cognitive and creative work.\textsuperscript{36} Negri classifies the working-class capacity to valorise in a ‘self-defining, self-determining’ way, ‘autonomously from capitalist valorization’ and beyond the capacity of capitalist measure to capture it.\textsuperscript{37} Capital develops accordingly. The

\begin{itemize}
  \item Bonefeld (1994)
  \item Wright (2002); Cleaver (2000, 64-77); Cleaver (2011, 51)
  \item See Pitts (2017 Ch. 6); Cruddas (2019); Cruddas and Pitts (2018)
  \item Fumagalli and Lucarelli (2008); Lazzarato (1996); Marazzi (2008); Marazzi (2010); Negri (1992a); Terranova (2000); Vercellone (2010); Virno (1996).
  \item Hardt and Negri (2001, 51-52)
  \item Cleaver (1992)
\end{itemize}
development of the multitude thus propels that of ‘Empire’ not from without, but from within. The two are synonymous- as Sherman asserts, ‘subjectivity is depicted in objectivized terms and the qualities of subjectivity migrate into capital itself’, such that as Negri puts it, ‘there is an unmediated relation between power and subjectivity’.  

As such, Negri’s Spinozist appraisal of the capacity of social actors to effect wider change casts the multitude as ‘entirely positive’ in compelling capitalist progress. On one hand, this consoles us that, as for Pangloss in Voltaire’s *Candide*, all is for the best and we live in the best of all possible worlds. On the other hand, this is little more than a more theoretically sophisticated statement of the old Marxist belief that where the cause of class struggle is concerned, the worse, the better. Because the multitude is seen as the cause of all capitalist development, everything can be cast as rebellion and any and all change or resistance is sufficient unto itself to enact a positive realisation of the postcapitalist potential of the present. Thus Negri derives from Spinoza a political prospectus that is paradoxically both utopian but also complicit with the state of things as they are, insofar as ‘[a]ll we wish is to keep on rebelling, here and now, enmeshed in this reality’. When reality itself is imbued with the positivity that attends the vision of a world shaped by the multitude’s self-valorising power, there is also a paradoxical resignation at play here that offers precisely the ‘false hope and illusionary comfort’ Negri complains of being accused of peddling by the likes of Tom Nairn. This resignation is exactly the ‘redemption’ that Nairn quite accurately sees lurking in the ‘spiritual or spiritualistic […] salvation movement’ *Empire* and *Multitude* posit. There is, of course, something to be said for level-headed resignation when the conditions rule out redemption. But in Negri the former takes on the distorted appearance of the latter, reading into reality the results of a perpetual resistance identical with the terms of capitalist development. Whether resigned quietism or redemptive revolutionism, this worldview offers adherents a questionable comfort.

The problem is that the ontological purity afforded the multitude in Hardt and Negri’s presentation is possible only by shaking off the social mediation of labour and life in capitalist society that proceeds through forms such as the state and the commodified objective relations in which labour results and through which workers subsist. In an age of ‘taking back control’, there are limits to how much control can be taken back without confronting processes of commodification and exchange, not to say ownership and property relations. At first glance the comprehensively mediated totality scrutinised by Frankfurt School critical theory might appear akin to the inescapable immanent unit Negri posits between all social phenomena. But the attack on any concept of mediation characterising Negri’s work establishes a clear point of differentiation. Rather than an world of immanence within which power and resistance are immediate and internally related without transcendence or mediation, as we find in Negri, critical theory instead interprets the world as one in which opposing principles and forces are mediated in social forms that constitute their mode of existence, temporarily sublating and fixing in place antagonisms with no promise of their eventual dialectical resolution. These forms of mediation - the state, the commodity - do not exist on a plane of ontological immanence with the social relations they mediate and the actors subject to them, but are rather assume an alien, alienated and alienating existence that stands apart from and dominates lived
experience, preserving its contradictions.\textsuperscript{45} Such a reading, owing in equal part to Frankfurt School critical theory as well as Marx’s critique of political economy, tells us that there is something fateful about the forms our human activity takes that force us to deliberate between better and worse ways of being separated and alienated from ourselves, others and the things we individually and collectively create. This approach implies a disenchanted perspective nowhere to be found in the optimistic prognoses of the postoperasist and postcapitalist left. When this abstract and alienated mediation of human life is reinstated as a principle of analysis, the prospects for transformative social change appear less likely than postoperasismo suggests. They uncomplicatedly place all powers of creation in the hands of the new revolutionary or popular subject. This elides how the results of human practice take on forms turned against us in capitalist society. By seeing labour as existing solely for its own sake, they cast history as unfolding entirely according to our design. But, as Sherman argues,

By talking about “the multitude” (which obscured the differences among groups that do not have a stake in Empire’s rule), “immaterial labor” (which obscures the fact that Empire’s rule has not only revitalized the ugliest forms of brute material labor domestically, but has also proliferated them abroad), and a “value theory” beyond measure (which obscures the fact that it is unclear to what extent Marxian value theory is even relevant here), Hardt and Negri obscure the mediated nature of what they are investigating.\textsuperscript{46} Obscuring the social world in such a way, Negri’s immanentist understanding of historical development opens up intellectual space for the cultivation of an ‘artificial positivity’ that, as Sherman puts it, simply ‘recapitulates the very worst aspects of Empire’s logic of domination’ but as a subject of celebration rather than critique.\textsuperscript{47} An optimistic politics is made possible when one purports, as Hardt and Negri claim to have done, to have ‘gotten beyond “the perverse dialectic of enlightenment”’ which for Adorno and Horkheimer forces us to face up to how ‘the fallen nature of modern man cannot be separated from social progress’.\textsuperscript{48} In this positive portrait of progress, all that remains of the dialectic is the worst part of it: the inevitability of vulgar ‘dialectical materialism’, in that, for an immanentist perspective, ‘the decline of Empire is in the ontological bag’ because of the positive ontological priority granted the multitude.

4. Immanence: Affirmationism and antagonism

The multitude is a convenient alibi for meeting the present with unbridled positivity. That the present can be imbued with such positivity owes not only to the politics but the particular kind of ontology Negri derives from Spinoza. Negri structures his main work on Spinoza, \textit{The Savage Anomaly}, around Spinoza’s ‘first’ and ‘second’ foundations. The first ‘gives rise to an ontology of the radical immanence of being, from which human praxis appears to emanate as an epiphenomenon or after-effect’.\textsuperscript{49} Spinoza’s ‘ontological argument’- that ‘God is not distinct from the world, but immanent in it’, implies that immanence swings two ways, on one hand placing God in what is, and on another placing what is in God.\textsuperscript{50} Unlike extant philosophy

\textsuperscript{45} Bonefeld (1994)
\textsuperscript{46} Sherman (2004, 146-7)
\textsuperscript{47} Sherman (2004, 168)
\textsuperscript{48} Hardt and Negri (2001, 25); Adorno and Horkheimer (1997, xiv)
\textsuperscript{49} Editors preface to Negri (2004, viii)
\textsuperscript{50} Scruton (2002, 35)
The Age of Immanence

which had suggested that the existence of God shows that ‘at least’ one thing exists, Spinoza takes God as the basis for a claim that ‘at most’ one thing exists, which both sits in God and in which God sits.\textsuperscript{51} We might also say that ‘God’ and ‘Nature’ are two words for the same things: the totality of being. The second foundation, meanwhile, centres on ‘a radically constructive materialism of bodies and surfaces’:\textsuperscript{52} The broader notion of ‘substance’ that underlies Spinoza’s ontological argument for the existence of God permits that there is only one substance and that substance owes to no external cause. Thus, it by definition has no externally imposed limit and is ‘infinite in its own kind’.\textsuperscript{53}

Negri stakes out a set of empirical and theoretical claims around the alleged incapacity of capital to capture and measure the self-valorising creativity and productiveness of the multitude as a new class actor. The theoretical supports for this are established in \textit{The Savage Anomaly}, where Negri approvingly cites a series of propositions from Spinoza’s \textit{Ethics} to support his evolving reading of capitalist development as subject to a crisis of what might best be termed, following Spinoza’s ontology of God, infinitude. Here finitude and negation are thrown out for infinitude and affirmation: ‘Since being finite is really, in part, a negation, and being infinite an absolute affirmation of the existence of some nature, it follows that every substance must be infinite’.\textsuperscript{54} What Benjamin Noys calls ‘affirmationism’ will become a recurring theme of Negri’s work thereafter, reaching a culmination in \textit{Empire}.\textsuperscript{55} The ascription of infinitude for Negri, as for Spinoza, necessitates the affirmation of substance. Infinitude also implies in turn that the substance itself is indivisible, such that substance is singular and has no cause outside its own infinite productivity. Here the monism inherent in Spinoza’s ontology is carried over into Negri’s conceptualisation of the relationship between multitude and Empire as two heads of a single beast the development of each synonymous with the development of the other - class desire and capitalist progress. Existence itself is here power \textit{tout court}, because existing is by definition a kind of proactive, productive act all of its own making. And because existence is infinite, so too is the power wielded in existing. Moreover, the world being of one substance - for Spinoza, God, for Negri, multitude and Empire as the two heads of power- this power acts everywhere and at all times without limit or negation- a boundless, positive force.\textsuperscript{56}

The positive relationship between Empire and multitude therefore resonates with Spinoza’s standpoint on what Scruton characterises as the relationship between the ‘club’ and its ‘members’.\textsuperscript{57} Analogously to the whole and its parts, for Spinoza ‘the club…is dependent for its existence and nature on the activities of its members. It is only because they do things that the club does anything. In Spinoza’s idiom, the club is ‘in’ its members\textsuperscript{58} Indeed, Negri draws a link between the conceptualisation of power in its dual identity as Empire and multitude and Spinoza’s ontological argument vis-à-vis God and immanence. The positivity inherent in Negri’s ontology maps onto Spinoza’s insofar as, citing a proposition from the latter’s \textit{Ethics}, ‘For the necessity alone of God’s essence it follows that God is the cause of himself and of all things. Therefore, God’s power…by which he and all things are and act, is his essence itself’.\textsuperscript{59} To this extent, then, by the letter of the ontological argument of Spinoza’s \textit{Ethics}, God necessarily exists, and more importantly God is infinite, and therefore there cannot be anything which is not part of God as this would place a limit on his infinity. Therefore there is one

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} Scruton (2002, 38)
\item \textsuperscript{52} Editors preface to Negri (2004, viii)
\item \textsuperscript{53} Scruton (2002, 46)
\item \textsuperscript{54} Negri (1991, 49)
\item \textsuperscript{55} Noys (2012)
\item \textsuperscript{56} Negri (1991, 49-52)
\item \textsuperscript{57} Scruton (2002, 40); Negri (2013, 52)
\item \textsuperscript{58} Scruton (2002, 40)
\item \textsuperscript{59} Negri (1991, 54)
\end{itemize}
substance which is the *immanent* cause of itself and of all things.\textsuperscript{60} This positivism is also present in Negri’s conceptualisation of the multitude in his works jointly authored with Michael Hardt, as a social force defined by its self-valorising activity, which takes place over a temporal and spatial terrain so wide as to never be plausibly denied. These affinities do a lot of theoretical work in the development of Negri’s political thought. As a handmaiden to a transformation in Negri’s work away from antagonism and towards affirmation, Spinoza’s philosophy forces focus on the immanent power of human creativity, desire and democracy, applied in Negri to what he sees as the symbiotic relationship between resistance and power, multitude and Empire, class desire and capitalist development. Whilst in the last of these postoperaismo takes forward the key insight of operaismo, the turn to Spinoza allows Negri to suspend, at the level of theory, the antagonism with which the earlier operaist tradition from which his work derived was preoccupied, regardless of whether it persists in practice.

Through this lens, resistance comes to look a lot different. The most effective means to achieve social change is to simply go with the flow. Resistance, therefore, does not conform to the account of revolution offered by Walter Benjamin in the wake of the rise of fascism: ‘Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake’.\textsuperscript{61} Rather than press the emergency brake on the trainwreck of progress, in the Negrian account resistance hits the accelerator—a perspective carried over in the contemporary ‘accelerationism’ we discuss in the concluding section of this paper. Noys locates in this a certain ‘affirmationism’.\textsuperscript{62} Seeing development as springing from the multitude, in turn identified as an entirely positive force, has the effect of affirming that development. This normativity induces affirmation of those changes, regardless of whether they change for better or for worse. Bestowing undue influence in the hands of human practice, it affirms the world that springs from it, at the expense of the critical moment that, in first-generation operaismo, was still intact. As Cleaver notes, the displacement of work refusal and class struggle was already foreshadowed in the embrace of Marx’s Fragment as a portrayal of a ‘self-valorising’ capacity on the part of the multitude.\textsuperscript{63}

This affirmationism is already very much in evidence in Spinoza, and specifically Negri’s own deep textual interpretation of Spinoza’s work. What the identification of God with the world central to Spinoza’s ontology also implies is that every act within that world is somehow holy and done ‘to our salvation’. Hence Negri’s affirmationism is a Spinozist inheritance hardwired into his thought not simply as a political imperative but an ontological foundation. As we will see in the next section, this affirmationism runs close to the same orthodox and determinist Marxism to which postoperaismo sets out its stall in opposition, and it is in Spinoza that its seeds lie. Not only is this Spinozist framework affirmationist, but also determinist insofar as God is identical with the world and exists necessarily, and in turn all acts within the world are themselves not only ‘done to our salvation’ but also carried out not out of freedom but necessity. In short, ‘every human action, as a mode of God, arises out of the same unbreakable chain of necessity’.\textsuperscript{64} A similar teleology can be seen at play in the work of Negri. The consoling belief that everything happens for a reason extends to crisis, which no matter the consequences is ‘subsumed’ within ‘the route of the continuity of the revolutionary process’.\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{60} See Scruton (2002, 45-6)
\textsuperscript{61} Benjamin (2004, 402)
\textsuperscript{62} Noys (2012)
\textsuperscript{63} Cleaver (1992)
\textsuperscript{64} Scruton (2002, 51)
\textsuperscript{65} Negri (1991, 20)
ontology of the *Ethics* as the source from which Spinoza’s politics are derived— and, in turn, Negri’s. By rereading Spinoza’s *Ethics* as both ontology and an image of politics, Negri derives the theoretical supports for a certain way of understanding capitalism and, moreover, the Marxist critique of it, that perceives in contemporary work, employment and economic life an immanent possibility of a postcapitalist future. But there is a general methodological problem with ontology itself, as Sherman asserts: ‘it recapitulates the sciences’ most objectivistic aspects by positing as invariant sociohistorically generated needs and problems’. The real problem is the politics invited by eternalising claims such as that Negri draws from Spinoza insofar as ‘from an ontological point of view, the negative does not exist’. From this flows a political call, turning Gramsci on his head, for a Spinozian ‘optimism of the intellect’. The ontological basis for this politics circumvents the accusation of uprootedness from reality by assigning to reality itself an inherent positivity - rendering not the optimists but the pessimists the ones out of touch with things as they are.

As Noys writes, in this view, ‘every liberatory initiative, from wage struggles to political revolutions, proposes the independence of use value against the world of exchange value, against the modalities of capitalist development- but that independence exists only within capitalist development itself’. At singularity with multitude and its desires, society is affirmed as is. For such a politics, ‘[t]he more capital dominates in real subsumption, right down to the roots of existence, the more potential there is for resistance; the worse the better’. And, by bestowing all momentum in the hands of the multitude, ‘this penetration of capitalist relations right down into the body is in fact a sign of the immeasurable power of naked life’. The only limits confronting us are those we set ourselves. In this way, capitalist social relations ‘figure only as the self-imposed limit of the multitude to its own powers’. Indeed, ‘they are its own powers’. What a critical Marxism takes negatively, this rebrands as self-valorisation. But, seeing positive development everywhere, labouring under this logic the left is cast politically and theoretically adrift, grasping only at a moribund ‘monism of positivity’. On this account, all things are as one, and we move within it, propelling it forward. This, Noys argues, against ‘all the evidence’ of domination and misery, suggests ‘capital is mere expression of the underlying power of the multitude’. When all power springs from the multitude, reality is met with a sunny lack of circumspection. Indeed, there is seemingly no way to adopt a critical position for the lack of a standpoint external to the singularity of multitude and Empire. This absence of an external standpoint raises a vital issue with the immanentist approach. For Spinoza, there is no standpoint possible outside the singular substance of which the ontological fabric is weaved. But as Hegel asserts in the *Science of Logic*, to gaze as Spinoza does upon the ‘indivisible totality’, the ‘absolute’ of substance, requires some kind of ‘external thinking’ quite counterintuitive to Spinoza’s ‘appeal[] to a form of thought dichotomously opposed to any conceivable form of thought within substance’. Hardt and Negri overcome this with reference to what Sherman calls the ‘pointless point of view’ of the multitude, which is both vague and all-encompassing. In the final section, we explore some of the impasses of such a position for contemporary left politics.

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66 Negri (2013, 52)
67 Pitts (2018a)
68 Sherman (2004, 148)
69 Negri (2013, 53)
70 Negri (2004, 99)
71 Noys (2012, 114)
72 Bonefeld (1994)
73 Noys (2012, 114)
74 Hegel (1989, 536); Redding (1996, 32); Sherman (2004, 165)
5. Dialectics: The forces and relations of production

The identification of the movement of the multitude with the movement of capital marks an assault on the dialectical analysis of mediation that characterises the German idealist tradition of which Marx’s work was an immanent critique. Until his Spinozist turn, Negri maintains a Marxian fidelity to the dialectic. Later, Negri characterises Spinoza’s as ‘precisely the opposite of a dialectical method’. This is because there is a complete absence of any ‘science of appearances’ or ‘sciences of oppositions’ with which we can associate, respectively, the Kantian and Hegelian inheritances upon which Marxism draws. In the ‘constitutive process of ontology’ found in Spinoza there can be none of the ‘negativity’ or ‘emptiness’ on which any such science of either appearance or opposition could rest. A reality governed by the insurgent potential of the multitude is ‘irreducible’ to any ‘dialectic process of mediation’. For Negri, in Spinoza there is no ‘sign of mediation’, only a ‘philosophy of pure affirmation that reproduces itself with increasing intensity at always more substantial levels of being’, rather than less, and that appear and act exactly as they are and were meant to be with no mediation or abstraction, of which ‘[e]very sign [...] is taken away’. This stems from Spinoza’s statement that ‘[b]y reality and perfection I understand the same thing’. For Negri, this indicates that ‘the existence of the world demands no mediation for its ontological validation’. This is because ‘corporeal singularity’ itself ‘expresses God’s essence’ and the latter contains an ontological necessity. Things are therefore sufficient unto themselves, neither requiring nor enduring any mediation, alienation or abstraction.

The Spinozist rejection of dialectics, mediation, alienation and abstraction all make possible Negri’s attempted and ultimately incomplete break from orthodox Marxism. But the incompleteness of this break becomes clear where the Spinozian rejection of dialectics in favour of immanenentism is taken, in turn, to free Negri’s analysis from teleology. Negri makes the bold claim that ‘Spinozian immanentism can finally liberate us from all forms of dialecticism, from all teleology’. The implication here is that Negri’s Spinozian immanentism is not teleological itself. And, indeed, Negri forewarns about the possible recuperation of immanence in support of some kind of historical necessity akin to that espoused in teleological determinism of the orthodox Marxist variety. But, contrary to its stated intentions, the radical break with Marx by means of Spinoza in Negri’s work, and the apparent assault on traditional Marxist productivism it enables in contemporary postoperaismo, actually lead back to resonances more in keeping with the contested legacy of Marxism’s most orthodox twentieth-century appearance.

Indeed, as we will go on to suggest, it is possible to trace the reception of this set of ideas on the left in the contemporary time to the particular form in which they survive Negri’s Spinozist turn, and the incompleteness of the break with the orthodox version of Marx that this turn is typically taken to represent. Negri bemoans how under Hegel’s watch ‘Spinozism is therefore reduced from the beginning to a philosophy of the relation between productive force and relations of production.’ This is because ‘Spinosa’s thought is something altogether different!’, as he puts it. It is curious, then, to see Negri base so much of his appeal to Spinoza in the

75 Cleaver (1992, xxi)
76 Negri (1991, 50)
77 Ibid., 149
78 Ibid., 213
79 Ibid., 72
80 Ibid., 47, 52
81 Ibid., 60
82 Negri (2013, 20)
83 Ibid., 41
conceptualisation of a relationship between the forces and relations of production that owes in
equal part to the cold dead hands of Marxist orthodoxy and has been critiqued in such terms by
critical Marxists beginning with Walter Benjamin. The break with aspects of dialectical
Marxism that Spinoza affords Negri is incomplete in the vital respect that it retains the
determinism of the forces-relations view of history as present in Marx’s contested 1859
Preface. The incompleteness of this break is the underlying cause of a series of theoretical and
political problems which in turn help shed some light upon major impasses in the worldview
of the contemporary ‘postcapitalist’ left.

Somewhat curiously considering the exact role Spinoza plays in Negri’s intellectual
development away from Marxism, where Negri and the contemporary postcapitalists convene
most closely is in a continued fidelity to the ‘fetters’ theory of historical development found in
Marx’s 1859 Preface, whereby the ‘forces’ of production, as the dynamic motor of history, are
constrained by the ‘relations’. The textual stature of the Preface is similar to the aforementioned
Fragment on Machines that elsewhere in the postoperaists oeuvre nourishes the same sentiment
of epochal transformation afoot in the present, and with similar effect. In the case of the
‘fetters’ theory, Negri moves through Spinoza only to find in the latter a route straight back
into one of the foundational tenets of orthodox Marxism. Indeed, in Negri’s sole-authored work
on Spinoza, this constitutes the most obvious guise in which the disavowed and largely hidden
quasi-dialectic of historical unfolding that Negri purports to have eschewed reappears. In his
work on Spinoza, Negri maintains a dogged commitment to the conceptualisation of the forces
and relations of production commonly associated with a certain orthodox stripe of Marxist
teleology, but instead of characterising it as a dialectic, which he dismisses as ‘reformist
teleology’, uses an immanentist framework to describe how the forces are ‘transformed’ into
relations by means of a process of subsumption towards the singularity of social principles,
whereby ‘organisation’ becomes ‘command’ and so on. In positing such a relationship Negri
proposes that Spinoza realises what is implicit in Machiavelli: that the multitude, synonymous
with the forces of production rather than (class) relations, produces the very relational forms of
command to which it is subject. This is reflected back on Marx in the form of an interpretation
that stresses how ‘it is struggle that molds the visage of institutions’- in other words, that ‘it is
the forces of production that produce and eventually overturn the social relations within which
they are paradoxically clamped and restrained’. This immanent relationship between
productive forces- or multitude- and the relations that follow in their wake Negri repeatedly
classes as a ‘rapport’ between two poles. This is as opposed to any conceptualisation that sets
out to antagonistically ‘subject the productive forces to the domination of the relations of
production’. In fact, it is the productive forces that dominate and drive the relations, in much
the same way as the most conventional account of Marxist historical materialism would hold.
As we shall see, this blinkers us to the persistence of the relations of production.

In Spinoza, the forces produce the relations and are endowed with the ontological necessity of
‘multitudes open to the constitution of the political’. In this way they are positivised in much
the same way as they have been in the history of Marxism and are still to a large extent valorised
today in what we will go on to characterise as a new voguish leftism based in the technological

84 Benjamin (1999, 249–50); Gunn (1992, 36–37, n. 12)
85 Carver and Blank (2014); Heinrich (2013a). The same might also be said for the sections on the ‘Law of the
86 Negri (1991, 69); Negri (2004, 84)
87 Negri (2013, 40)
88 Ibid., 12
89 Negri (2004, 88-9)
90 Negri (2013, 39)
91 Negri (1991, 223)
possibilities of contemporary capitalism. This proceeds on the basis of the slenderest of textual bases in Marx’s contested 1859 Preface. For Spinoza, writes Negri, the ‘constitution of society’ is nothing less than the ‘mapping of the development of the productive forces’. Stripped of any negative dialectical reference to mediation, ‘productive force is subjected to nothing but itself’, ‘a movement of the infinite’ without ‘domination’ by the relations of production. Indeed, it is the power awarded the productive forces in Spinoza, Negri asserts, that ‘gives Spinoza’s philosophy and its conception of being an inexhaustible richness’ and a ‘savage determination’. The utopian conclusion of this, of course, is not simply that the multitudinous forces of production determine the direction of the relations, but that they are capable of being set free from them, no longer dialectically co-constituted but an absolute singularity, immanent in the truest sense.

Interestingly, rather than making the heralded break with traditional Marxism that Negri’s late work promises, this retains some of the main articles of faith twentieth-century followers of Marx have taken from his posthumously repackaged works. The Spinozian attack on all limits and order in the name of their supersession makes possible a turbocharged version of the idea that an incipient communism lies concealed within the present, most famously outlined in the famous Fragment on Machines from which postoperaismo and its adherents draw a prophetic and rhetorical power misapplied to present empirical conditions. Because ‘[i]mmanence signifies that this world here has no beyond, that it is only possible to live (move, create) inside this world, here below’, communism is not necessarily imminent but is immanent, contained within present circumstances- not a break with this world but buried within it. All that is left to do is for the productive force of the multitude to make it happen: ‘We are living through the era of revolution taking place: our determination is merely to realize it’. This is nothing less than a rehashed version of communism as the ‘real movement’ of history’s unfolding which Marx and Engels mention in what is now known as the German Ideology, and which Negri himself cites approvingly in his work on Spinoza. History is seldom so favourable Benjamin wrote of the left of his own time: ‘Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological developments as the fall of the stream with which it thought it was moving’.

In this sense the ‘fetters’ theory of history fails to capture the complex dialectical character of the relationship between the forces and relations of production, by which antagonistic social relations specific to capitalist society and the social forms they assume both constitute and constrain the development of the productive forces with unpredictable and by no means inevitable consequences. The contention that social transformation can be accomplished automatically elides the social forms that express and temporarily fix in place these social relations: value, money, commodities and the state as itself a form of capitalist social relations. Together these forms play a vital role in maintaining what Adorno calls the ‘static side’ of the dialectic, at the expense of the very ‘dynamic’ in which Negri, like others before him, places so much faith. In this ‘static’ state the relations of production, however ‘objectively anachronistic’ ‘debilitated, damaged and undermined’ they are, persist in overdetermining the forces of production largely because they ‘no longer function autonomously’. The state steps in to superintend, just as in Hegel’s Philosophy of Right the state is ‘summoned […] to assist
the intrinsic dialectic of society, which he believed would otherwise collapse’. As Bonefeld explains:

According to Hegel, the accumulation of wealth renders those who depend on the sale of their labour power for their social reproduction insecure in debilitating conditions. He concluded that despite the accumulation of wealth, bourgeois society will find it most difficult to keep the dependent masses pacified, and he saw the form of the state as the means of containing social antagonism, curbing the rebelliousness of the dependent masses.

But where Adorno builds upon this is to note that the state need not always superintend the dialectic’s positive unfolding, but also retard and contain it in its negativity. Adorno’s rejection of the primacy of the forces of production revolves around the contention that social and political power can control and constrain economic tendencies, just as the relations of production do the forces. This, for Adorno, was key to understanding why the ‘pauperisation thesis’ of traditional Marxism had not come to pass. In short, by seeing the forces of production accomplishing changes in its relations, traditional Marxism here ‘presupposed’ precisely the same ‘undisturbed, autonomous running of the mechanisms of the economy postulated by liberal theory’.

But, in reality, ‘the ruling class is not just governed by the system; it rules through the system and ultimately dominates it’. In this regard, it acts against pauperisation, which ‘must not become visible lest it blow the system apart’. Hence, schemes of ‘extraeconomic’ support paid by the state are concerned only with ‘the system’s consciousness of the conditions that enable it to be perpetuated’. As Adorno puts it, ‘the ruling class is so well fed by alien labor that it resolutely adopts as its own cause the idea that its fate is to feed the workers and to “secure for the slaves their existence within slavery” in order to consolidate its own’. And, in so doing, it secures also the subsistence and social reproduction of the worker-the human who subsists as labour-power- within the same system.

6. Continuity and change in the immediate content of labour

These continuities, secured by the social relations mediated in the form of the state, are not adequately captured in how Negri presents historical development, which tends to focus on small changes at the level of everyday life in the workplace elsewhere in order to present a world of ceaseless change. Conceiving of this historical development, Negri sets out to distance his theory from a ‘molar’ historiographical perspective that explains history along the lines of ‘large aggregates or statistical groupings’. This, they claim, portrays a world of continuity rather than change, ‘a history of purely quantitative differences’. A molecular perspective, meanwhile, qualitatively uncovers change rather than continuity. It refers to ‘micromultiplicities, or rather singularities, which form unbounded constellations or networks’. This is the approach Hardt and Negri choose in Empire. From the molecular perspective, change issues in an emergent manner from the constituting movement of the multitude of immaterial labourers. The historically specific conditions under which this occurs owe to this immanent relationship. The multitude’s movements are at one with those of capital.

100 Adorno (2003b, 122)
101 Bonefeld (2014, 213); Hegel (1967, 122-9)
102 Adorno (2003a: 104)
103 Adorno (2003a: 105)
104 Pitts (2017, Ch. 7)
105 Negri (2008, 50-2)
Value moves beyond measure and potentiates postcapitalism because the multitude makes it so.

As Pilling suggests, just as Marxian analyses concern less the productivity of labour in a given branch of the economy than ‘the productivity of labour on a social scale’, ‘[i]n dealing with ‘microscopic’ entities we are forced to consider phenomena of a ‘macroscopic’ dimension’. By abandoning the latter, the molecular perspective moors accounts of capitalism’s epochal crisis and transformation in a rejection of capitalist continuities on two counts. It both elides the persistence of the abstract rule of value as a form of social domination, sounding its death knell prematurely, and overlooks the continuation of the social relations that undergirds it. In other words, it ignores both economic objectivity and the antagonistic undertow in separation, hunger and dispossession it is the necessary appearance of. The macro is dispensed with for the micro, the molar for the molecular. In this way the molecular vantage point Negri’s postoperaismo adopts represents a reverse productivism. It permits the extrapolation from compositional changes in labour’s content systemic observations about capitalism. But the labour process is merely a carrier of the valorisation process. This implies the persistence of certain social forms and relations over and above the content of a given labour process. What matters is the form it assumes at the level of capitalist reproduction as a whole- a ‘molar’ perspective that is inaccessible to proponents of an epochal crisis sparked by the advent of new forms of work.

Responding to these visions, Angela McRobbie highlights in postoperaismo a myopic focus on immediate changes in the content of production itself in abstraction from the wider political-economic context of social reproduction and circulation in which it is actually situated. McRobbie makes the astute point that postoperaist thinkers like Hardt and Negri remain wedded to a disavowed masculinist productivism that exaggerates paradigmatic shifts in capitalism from immediate changes in the practice and experience of certain kinds of work performed by certain kinds of worker. Labour, here, is suggested to be central to society and characteristic of capitalism, and not the radical situation of precariousness that compels us to labour in the first place, nor the specific kinds of forms assumed by the results of that labour. Indeed, as McRobbie suggests, the spheres outside the workplace, in the street and in the home, are recoded as part of the ‘social factory’ only so as to become subject to the same productivist reading as waged labour within the factory itself is subject. McRobbie notes a confluence between these ideas and mainstream accounts that celebrate an already-unburdened creativity that in reality struggles against its denial in the contradictory situation faced by creatives whereby in order to ‘be creative’ they must enter into contractual arrangements that stifle the creativity they seek to realise. Because postoperaists like Negri are centred on immediate micro-level changes, they do not capture the mediation of everyday life and labour in the social forms assumed by capitalist social relations. As McRobbie stresses, where postoperaists see a plane of pure immanence and subsumption she sees ‘a field of ambivalence and tension’. It is on this field that left politics must operate, for better or for worse.

By eliding this ambivalence and tension the narrow productivism of both postoperaismo, which finds purpose in the immediate actions of those engaged in labour itself, helps radicals gaze upon the present from a rosy prospectus of novelty and change. The political consequences of this consist in a complicity with capitalist vagaries. Whatever form taken by human production becomes not only an explanatory factor. It is eulogised as an example of the free and

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106 Pilling (1972, 288)
107 Arthur (2013)
108 McRobbie (2018, 93)
unburdened ‘creativity of desire’ that Negri, in pursuit of Spinoza, celebrates.\textsuperscript{109} Seeing capitalist production as an expression of the multitude’s immanent force, every bump in the road is for the best. Success and crisis are met, respectively, with compliance and celebration. The constitutive power of human labour does not exist for itself in a positive sense. What the analysis above shows is that it is imbricated otherwise. It exists through and for a society where its products rule over it negatively.\textsuperscript{110}

In today’s ‘postcapitalist’ literature, as in previous iterations of such productivist utopias of the kind postoperaismo presents, the ‘forces’ of production are seen as synonymous with the technological affordances of contemporary capitalism. But owing to the limits and constraints articulated above, rather than an automated postcapitalist or ‘post-work’ utopia, what the dominance of the relations of production fix in place without promise of resolution is more likely what Marcuse characterised as a halfway house ‘form of drudgery […] expressive of arrested, partial automation, of the coexistence of automated, semi-automated, and non-automated sections’.\textsuperscript{111} This unhappy compromise directly facilitated by the preservation of the present state of affairs implies that

\begin{quote}
Within the technological ensemble, mechanized work in which automatic and semi-automatic reactions fill the larger part (if not the whole) of labour-time remains, as a life-long occupation, exhausting, stupefying, inhuman slavery- even more exhausting because of increased speed-up, control of the machine operators (rather than of the product), and isolation of the workers from each other.\textsuperscript{112}
\end{quote}

This is far from the liberated and self-valorising ‘creativity of desire’ Negri celebrates in his Spinozian outlook on the potentialities of contemporary capitalism. The consequence of underplaying the static side of the dialectic whilst seeking to ride the wave of its dynamism with well-meaning political movements and policy ploys is that the struggle to subsist continues under the shadow of the competition between man and machine, a competition captured in time by the configuration of social support offered. What this suggests is that should the relations of production be ignored in favour of an advocacy of the extension of the forces, technological development and the interventions of those concerned with its impact can have disastrous consequences. This is because the dialectic is not always dynamic, and often static-negative, even. In a world criss-crossed, and constituted in, the class antagonism, the course of progress does not run as smooth as some would have us believe, and is constrained by capitalist society’s central contradiction of a world where workers must subsist through their exploitation and submit to social domination as a condition of living at all.

Elsewhere, Marcuse notes, technological fantasies of automated worklessness can have the equally unhappy consequence not only of remaining contained within the contradictory social conditions of capitalist society, but of seeking their liquidation in false forms of social unity in which relations are cleansed of all contradictory or antagonistic intent. Whereas ‘[i]n the present situation, the negative features of automation are predominant: speed-up, technological unemployment, strengthening of the position of management, increasing impotence and resignation on the part of the workers’, there are ‘other trends’ in what appears at first glance a more favourable direction, namely ‘a larger interdependence which integrates the worker with the plant’, driven by the increased technical oversight and decision-making ability afforded by the superintendence of machines.\textsuperscript{113} By encouraging this participation- akin to that

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{109} Hardt and Negri (2001, 51-52) \\
\textsuperscript{110} Bonefeld (1994) \\
\textsuperscript{111} Marcuse (1972, 33) \\
\textsuperscript{112} Marcuse (1972, 33) \\
\textsuperscript{113} Marcuse (1972, 37)
\end{flushleft}
described in Marx’s account of technological liberation in the Fragment- ‘[t]he new technological work-world thus enforces a weakening of the negative position of the working class: the latter no longer appears to be the living contradiction to the established society’. The word ‘appears’ is doing a lot of work here. For, as much as it may seem to leave the contradiction ajar for the time being, the fact of class society remains clear for all to see. The worker is only there as labour-power, employed in its consumption by the capitalist- with all the pain and misery that makes it possible to begin with.

In this way, a ‘fully automated’ programme for social transformation such as that we survey in the final section of the paper not only remains contained with one set of contradictions around the constrained social basis of production and consumption in class society, but seeks their sublation in a set of other relationships that retain the contradiction in a potentially more dangerous - because concealed - form. Only a negative-dialectical standpoint attuned not only to its dynamic, positive aspect, but its static and negative side, can grasp the peril this status implies.

7. From production beyond measure to politics beyond mediation

The hopeful portrayal of human liberation inherent in postoperaismo and other leading contemporary strands of Marxism see a teleological line charting a clear path to and through the future where none actually exists. To coin a phrase, contrary to the theoretical and empirical optimism of all sides of the Marxist left, ‘things don’t only get better, they get worse’.114 Politics must remain aware of this contingency and the experience of defeat and be realistic in its objectives. The teleological determinism implicit in Negri and given political expression in contemporary postcapitalist thinking provides little role for actual struggle – for politics. The laws of history unfold and take us to the world of communism or postcapitalism. But not everything follows from the rational progression of the forces of production. Rather, the material world is co-constituted by superstructural relations of culture, identity and ideology that any left politics must address and seek to mediate. There is a tendency in the Spinozist turn and its ramifications in postcapitalist vistas to reject mediation of all kinds. Whilst the implications of this attack on mediation are transparent enough in the primacy awarded the forces of production against their mediation by the social forms assumed by the relations of production in capitalist society, and the extrapolation from the immediate character of a changing workplace wider epochal changes in capitalism as a whole, there are also political consequences with import for the contemporary left. Specifically, Negri’s turn to Spinoza can allow us an insight into the deep-lying theoretical imperatives driving this rejection of forms of political mediation.

In purporting to cast off the dialectic and with it mediation, Negri derives from Spinoza not only a methodological imperative but responds to an ‘ontological commitment’ which bears significant political implications.115 As Sherman suggests, for Hardt and Negri ‘the emancipatory moment that will burst capitalism open’ can only be understood ‘within a postmodern materialist ontology that has transcended “the cursed dialectic” of modernity. Whereas the ‘cursed’ dialectical interpretation of capitalism’s development has tended to emphasise the ‘domestication’ of subjectivity as a feature of modernity, Negri rejects this dialectic for a conceptualisation of capitalist development whereby workplace change not only, as Sherman puts it, ‘gives rise to […] an oppositional working class subjectivity’, but,

114 Glasman (2016)
115 Sherman (2004, 166)
moreover, expresses that oppositional subjectivity.\footnote{Ibid., 145-6} This rejection of the dialectic rejects also the mediation of subjectivity, insofar as the multitude is ‘immediately “insurgent”’ and not mediated in any way by the formal legal and political infrastructure through which class struggle proceeds in liberal society.

There are a series of implications to this assault on mediation and what it says about humans and the kinds of politics made possible to them. The unit of political action and analysis derived from Spinoza’s monist interpretation of social change is not the individual but the monad of which individuals find themselves part, man ‘no more important a feature in the scheme of things than are rocks and stones and trees’.\footnote{Negri (2004, 14)} Here resounds a resonance with the ‘flat ontology’ of so-called ‘speculative realism’ and ‘object-oriented ontology’, which grant accelerationism, in both its right and left variants, its philosophical underpinnings for empirical and political claims about the coming singularity of man and machine.\footnote{Pitts and Dinerstein (2017)} We might also cite here the emergent philosophical movement of posthumanism, a similar ‘flat ontology’ in which ‘agency’ is dispersed across everything.\footnote{Cruddas (2018); see also Mason (2019) for an excellent critique.} Indeed, the resonances carry further insofar as the flattening of the individual human being alongside all manner of other things writes out of historical development the role of moral or ethical deliberation as we travel along with the trajectory of time or technological unfolding without the ‘slightest choice’ in whether or not it should happen.\footnote{Scruton (2002, 56)} In Spinoza too are such determinations absent, history a positive force with which we are compelled to go along irrespective of politics. But there is also a liquidation of difference and antagonism inherent in this set of ideas. For instance, in endowing the world with positivity, as Sherman suggests, the concept of the multitude, like the state for Hegel, represents the resolution of contradictions and reconciliation of ‘splits within civil society’ in an ‘abstract construction, posited from above’ that overcomes negativity.\footnote{Sherman (2004, 166)} But such a construction would claim to overcome negativity prematurely, and perhaps impossibly.

In this we alight upon a political affinity associating the Spinozist Negri with the contemporary sensibilities of an increasingly populist left. In Negri’s hands, by abolishing mediation and liquidating splits in civil society under the sign of immanence, Spinoza gives a philosophical justification for the elimination of the separation between state and society, and therein civil society and the rule of law. This poses a direct resemblance between individuals, the ‘people’ and power held in common with contemporary populisms. Rather than an impersonal deliberative mechanism, Negri reads in ‘Spinozian immanentism’ the advocacy of a ‘politics of the "multitude" organized in production’ without mediation through the formal channels of liberal democracy.\footnote{Negri (1991, xviii)} This unmediated ‘productive, immanent, transparent, and direct constitution of the world’ also ‘immediately eliminates even the abstract possibility of the rule of law’ as a means of articulating and working through social antagonisms and contradictions elided in the identity posed between multitude and power, society and state.\footnote{Ibid., xxii}

This liquidation of antagonism and contradiction reappears in Hardt and Negri’s aforementioned delineation of multitude and Empire as two heads of the same beast that grows as one, and chimes with the identity between people and state around which contemporary left and right projects of national renewal circulate. There is no longer any possibility of mediation in a democracy that no longer ‘conceals and mystifies the relations of production’, but also no

\begin{thebibliography}{1}
\bibitem{116} Ibid., 145-6
\bibitem{117} Negri (2004, 14)
\bibitem{118} Pitts and Dinerstein (2017)
\bibitem{119} Cruddas (2018); see also Mason (2019) for an excellent critique.
\bibitem{120} Scruton (2002, 56)
\bibitem{121} Sherman (2004, 166)
\bibitem{122} Negri (1991, xviii)
\bibitem{123} Ibid., xxii
\end{thebibliography}
longer any possibility of alienation— for Spinoza humans act directly upon the world, constituting ‘the collective and the State’ in their image. This follows the rejection, with all dialectics, of that between subject and object central to the tradition of critical thought that includes Hegel, Marx, and the Frankfurt School, and with this any recognition of the possibility that what humans make of the world might not be good, but bad. But it also moves past ontological claims to stake political claims around the pre-existence of democracy as the foundation of politics, rather than politics presenting the possibility of democracy. Automatically and without effort, ‘[d]emocracy is the foundation of the political’. As Negri writes, exuberantly, of Spinoza’s thought: ‘freedom, the true one, the whole one, which we love and which we live and die for, constitutes the world directly, immediately. Multiplicity is mediated not by law but by the constitutive process. And the constitution of freedom is always revolutionary,’ regardless of outcome. This is nothing less than the rhetorical construction of a new proletariat for which any and all social consequence is justified by its self-movement towards socialism. No matter the result, ‘the law is democratic because it is men who have constructed it’.

The refutation of the working through of societal antagonisms and contradictions through deliberation and mediation between society and state implies a majoritarian political ethos that by identifying the multitude with historical development sees whatever the mass of humans does as expressing an ontological need. This much is made clear in Spinoza’s statement that ‘If two men come together and join forces, they have more power over Nature, and consequently more right, than either one alone; and the greater the number who form a union in this way, the more right they will together possess’. In The Savage Anomaly, Negri suggests this passage is ‘fundamental’ insofar as it represents how the multitude’s ‘collective dimension dislocates the antagonistic process of being’ and liquidates negativity. And without antagonism, there is no need for civil society to mediate differences between individuals and the state. The relationship is direct, and the separation between state and society abolished. For Spinoza, ‘civil society and the political State are completely woven together, as inseparable moments of association and antagonism produced in constitution. The State is not conceivable without the simultaneity of the social, and neither, inversely, is civil society conceivable without the State’.

This lends insufficient weight to how the separation between state and society constitutes the space within which radical politics operates through and by means of formal, impersonal structures of representation and deliberation. In Negri, as in Spinoza, the two are collapsed into one another both as an empirical claim and a political aim. This is part and parcel of an attack on what Negri calls ‘contractarianism’. Negri poses against liberal democratic norms ‘the immanentist refusal of any form of “contract” between State and society’ . Instead of depending on contracts which establish a formal legal equality between social agents (even where this is the basis for the exploitation of one by the other), Negri wishes to substitute a system of ‘consensus’, and ‘the method of collectivity for that of individuality’.

124 Negri (2004, 14)
125 Ibid.
126 Negri (1991, xxi)
127 Negri (2013, 74-5)
128 Spinoza, quoted in (Negri, 2004, 16)
129 Negri (1991, 194)
130 Ibid., 200
131 Negri (2013, 7)
132 Negri (1991, 195)
There is no mediation inherent in this idea of politics, only the political as something active, that happens—something direct and personal rather than indirect and impersonal as in liberal society. The potency of this ‘action’ makes mediation- and, in turn, measure-impossible.\(^{133}\) This is much the same as the claims made by the current wave of populists left and right to represent a national and classless singularity free of internal antagonism, and no longer in need of the mediation of differences within society. Society restored in the image of this people, resembling what the unified multiplicity with which Negri associates the multitude, is then posed against some external menace.\(^{134}\) That being said, in more recent writings on Spinoza, Negri makes the important distinction between the multitude and the people, the former impossible to reduce to the latter owing to its existence in ‘the differences of the singularities’ of which it is constituted. For this reason, ‘the dynamic of the multitude cannot be locked into the fixity or into the formalism of the juridical, constitutional, and bourgeois concept of “the people”‘.\(^{135}\) It might be said, however, that this does not prevent advocates of such an intellectual imaginary from establishing some kind of political and theoretical confluence between the two. Indeed, there is something absolutist and totalitarian contained within the lines of Negri’s reading of Spinoza that presages the same shifts in left thought that have followed in the wake of his work in recent years. Negri seems aware of the negative resonances of some aspects of the conceptualisation of the multitude in a passage following on from that previously quoted. It communicates the political recklessness inherent in an affirmationist account of constituent power that greets every turn no matter how bad as a necessary part of the path to something better:

> If evil (or fascism) is lying in wait to seize its chance in the space that leads from being-multitude to making-multitude (whether it be the fascism of animality or humanity, or just the formal automatism of obedience); if our life is continually obliged to face up to certain regressions […]: well, all that is not enough to cast the movement of the multitude, or its striving toward liberty, into doubt. Unless we think that man desires not life but death—and consider that resistance is not an ethical act but an act of suicide.\(^{136}\)

There is the injunction here to be positive, to believe all is for the best. There is no notion here that things may not turn out the way we intend. Given expression in the optimistic outlook of postoperaismo, a break is made from the critical-theoretical underpinnings of the Marxist tradition.\(^{137}\) There is no reification or subject-object dialectic in play here. Spinoza aids Negri in annulling all that: ‘Man has no other boss than himself. All alienation is eliminated’.\(^{138}\) Hence Negri theorizes capitalist change through the role of an already-free revolutionary subject, for the release of which no work is needed. With this he passes Marx from the sphere of negativity into one of unbridled positivity.

### 8. Conclusion: Postcapitalism and postoperaismo revisited

This all has unexpectedly resonant political consequences today, specifically on the UK left, where the positivity with which Negri’s Spinozist turn is imbued chimes with contemporary recuperations of the slender few pages of Marx’s Fragment on Machines to foretell a utopian
future germinating in the present. In this concluding section, we will connect the critique of Negri given above to the critique of the popular-political appearance some of his key ideas have assumed on the left around this optimistic portrayal of the utopian potentialities lurking in capitalist society as it stands. The recuperation of the Fragment, mediated through Negri’s reading, marks an uptick in the reception of Marx on the contemporary left, but in reclaiming Marx this mode of ‘Fragment thinking’ follows Negri in discarding Marx’s injunction based on the words of Aesop: ‘Hic Rhodus, hic salta!’ This counsels us to always root our theorizations within and against the negativity of that which exists. We cannot will that world away. This prospectus produces an impoverished analysis. But, more pressingly, it produces an impoverished politics. As Noys writes, ‘theoretical interventions [...] also function [...] as forms of political practice’. And from wrong-headed philosophical illusions stem perverted and unsuccessful modes of praxis.

This is an important point impressing itself upon the left at the present time, as postoperaist ideas weave themselves seamlessly into the fabric of left policymaking, from the radical fringe to the mainstream. The influence of these ideas is not always explicit. Rather, postoperaist concepts and prognoses, and specifically those of Negri, implicitly wend their way through left thinking. Postoperaismo was popularised and rendered politically usable in the noughties by Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* – a work highly influential within the generational struggles behind the anti-globalisation movements of the time and, later, the militant millennials of post-crash occupations and campus agitation. Having wielded an influence on the alterglobalisation struggles of the early noughties and later the Occupy milieu, it resounds today in a somewhat different guise through the revitalization of a populist politics of hegemony-building around a techno-utopia of automation and UBI. The feeling appears mutual, as Negri himself praises the new techno-utopian direction in which this shared terrain is taken. In a sign of the surprisingly electoralist configurations in which Negri’s optimistic portrayal of the possibilities of transformative social change has resulted, these ideas have found resonance specifically in the rise to prominence of a new generation of left intellectuals espousing a postcapitalist vision of the future all associated in some way with the Corbynist ascendency in the UK Labour Party, which at the time of writing is rapidly unravelling. Searching around for a solution to the intellectual and political crisis of social democracy, one of the richest and most stimulating sides of the contested theoretical project around Corbyn sprung from the reception of Negri’s work, whether the ‘postcapitalism’ of Paul Mason, ‘fully automated luxury communism’ of Aaron Bastani, or the ‘accelerationism’ of Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams. But as its partisans peel away from the remnants of the project, there is a need for something new to stand in the wreckage.

This would place no faith in the potential of technological development to achieve social transformation. Accelerationism presented a compelling case for automation as a means of human emancipation underpinned philosophically by ideas around ‘flat ontology’ that posit humanity and machines existing on a plane of ontological equivalence. This is twinned elsewhere with a theoretical hangover from orthodox Marxism shared with other touchpoints in the literature – namely, that the forces of production push against the relations of production and promise the eventual resolution of this contradiction in a radical social transformation to

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139 See Bastani (2019); Mason (2015b); Pitts (2018a)
140 Marx (1990, 269)
141 Noys (2012, 4)
142 Mason (2011); Mason (2016); White (2009)
143 Negri (2015)
144 Mason (2015a); Bastani (2019); Williams and Srnicek (2015)
145 Pitts and Dinerstein (2017)
accommodate new technological possibilities. Indeed, today, the recuperation of postoperaist thinking in contemporary ‘postcapitalist’ literature makes such an account of the forces and relations of production a key holdover from orthodox Marxism among the new left behind the rise of Corbynism. These two aspects – the positining of an immanence or equivalence uniting human and non-human actors, and the progressive relationship between forces and relations of production – as well as the envisioning of new social subjects matched to the epochal changes produced by workplace and economic change – carry over a series of themes from the work of Negri and other postoperaists that have constituted a transmission belt for this thinking on the left over the last two decades.

At the inception of such appeals, Noys suggests, Hardt and Negri offer ‘a more thoroughgoing version of the accelerationist politics of the worst’ which affirms change as a human creation even where this deepens our alienation as subjects in an essentially unchanged capitalist society. This is the coming politics of the left. It is already implicit in the appeals to postcapitalism and the ‘Fully Automated Luxury Communism’ that captures the imagination of younger, tech-savvy supporters of Corbyn in the UK. But the analysis given in this paper suggests that popularity of these ideas is in inverse proportion to their usefulness. Like Hardt and Negri’s original message, they uncomplicatedly place all powers of creation in the hands of the people. This elides how the results of human practice take on forms turned against us in capitalist society. They cast history as unfolding entirely according to our design. Today, the most interesting quarters of the Labour left adapt this to fit new times. Such sentiments are rife in the populist postcapitalism of the new left. Many of the impetuses of this new politics are present in Negri, and now a vital part of how political optimism seized the left as things fell apart. But, in wake of the defeat of this vision as it was encoded in Labour’s agenda at the last election, what the dispassionate critical Marxist analysis espoused in this paper tells us is that the world is not the way this would have us believe. We cannot rest on our laurels politically. Contra Pangloss, all is not for the best, and we do not find ourselves in the best of all possible worlds. Proponents of constituent power absent themselves from the negativity necessary to grasp this.

To combat this thinking, we must seek to cap it at its source. Hence it is necessary, as we have done, to reach back into the theoretical development of these ideas. This is a task which the study of Negri alone does not exhaust, but the mistakes he makes are among those that gave initial but eventually insufficient intellectual succour to Corbynism. Their exposure creates critical resources to remedy the latter’s errors and build better ways of understanding what is possible as the left re-evaluates in the wake of defeat. In this spirit, the foregoing critique has suggested that many of the impetuses of the new left politics and the seeds of their failure are present in Negri’s encounter with Spinoza. Seeing only subjects and their desires, Negri’s Spinozist slant on Marx elides their denial in the economic objective forms on which social domination centres in capitalist society. This contravenes the critical interpretation of the Marxist inheritance in which Negri, his later Spinozism notwithstanding, sits. By critiquing the latter, our contribution here provides resources for critiquing the current capacity of the contemporary left to translate theoretical schema into transformative social change. Importantly for the present moment, the wrong kinds of theory impoverish the critical resources undergirding political praxis. Percolating in electoral left politics as never before,

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146 Bolton and Pitts (2018)
147 Noys (2012, 114)
148 Bastani (2015)
149 Bonefeld (2014, 2016a, 2016b)
Negri’s ideas, whilst innocuous in and of themselves, have political consequences today that must be fought from their theoretical foundations up.

It may well be claimed that in making these criticisms of a reference point shared in common among this voguish new thinking we are among what Negri calls ‘the defeated’, a certain subsection of his critics who share ‘a dismal outlook on life’, opting to ‘lick[] their wounds’ rather than engaging in the ‘overflowing joy of multitude-making’. There is something in this. The great historian Christopher Hill described the generation who lived through and lost the political promise of the English Revolution as gripped by a profound ‘experience of defeat’. In the context of an increasingly post-liberal world with populism and fascism on the front foot, it may at some point be necessary to confront the same feeling ourselves. Paul Thompson, fifteen years ago, wrote with urgency of the perilous politics of Hardt and Negri’s overly positive ‘wishful thinking […] immune to the reality or language of defeat’. In spite of its tide of millenarian optimism, the left faces a challenging political environment where a simplistic and hopeful optimism is increasingly untenable. After Labour’s brutal defeat, the abandonment of this ‘wishful thinking’ is more pressing a task than ever in order to face up to the new, harsh, cold light of day.

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