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Q's General Intellect

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In the *Grundrisse*, Marx uses the English expression *general intellect* to define a form of social knowledge that has become a 'direct force of production', one that conditions 'the process of social life itself'.¹ We can find similar concepts in Paolo Virno's 'transindividual thought' or in Gottlob Frege's 'mind-independent thought'.² I would claim that the main feature of the general intellect in all its forms is its indeterminacy. Neither defining individuality nor a specific group, the general intellect represents a sort of passage between the singular and the multitude. In an article titled 'The Ambivalence of Disenchantment', Virno expands the Marxian notion of general intellect 'well beyond the idea of knowledge materialized in fixed capital'.³ The general intellect, Virno reminds us, 'includes the epistemic models that structure social communication' and it 'incorporates the intellectual activity of mass culture'.⁴ In other words, the general intellect exemplifies the irresolvable tension between human nature and its place in society.⁵ Until now, the discussion of the concept of the general intellect has been the prerogative of economists, sociologists, philosophers and historians. I intend to demonstrate how this notion has also influenced the literary field, and, in particular, how the general intellect is an active element in the narration of *Q*, the novel written in 1999 by the writers' collective 'Luther Blissett Project'.⁶

Q narrates a panorama of the historical events that took place in Europe at the time of the Reformation. These events are seen through the eyes and the adventures of two opposite

characters involved in a game of cat and mouse that lasts almost forty years. The story begins in Wittenberg in 1519 and ends in Istanbul in 1555. One of the characters is a nameless student of theology in Wittenberg who becomes a heretic and is subsequently forced to live his life as a fugitive. He takes a different name for each place he reaches and every new community he encounters; the other, simply called 'Q', is a spy of the Church of Rome whose task is to identify and report all heretic activity in northern Europe. Q obeys the orders of the Archbishop Gianpietro Carafa, soon to become Pope Charles IV.⁷

The complex—and always indeterminate—web of social and historical relations that constitutes the narration of *Q*, together with the notion of collective writing that lies behind its composition, illustrates Virno's definition of general intellect, in that it tends to represent 'the intellectual activity of mass culture, no longer reducible to simple labor, to the pure expenditure of time and energy'.⁸ I will argue that *Q*'s general intellect can be seen as the motor that propels the whole narrative. More specifically, I will show that proper names are the tools through which the general intellect is set in motion in the novel. Since the indeterminate characteristics of names in *Q* cannot be separated from the 'multiple name' that has been the banner of the Luther Blissett Project (the collective's signature has now changed into Wu Ming, 'no name' in Chinese), my treatment of proper names may be attributed rather interchangeably to the characters in the novel and the multiplicity that hides behind the names of Luther Blissett and Wu Ming.⁹ Both *Q* and the Luther Blissett/Wu Ming collective authors are clearly overdetermined by the use (or non-use) of names.

In an early review, Italian writer, activist and performer Bifo affirms that *Q* is 'the first Italian novel (and even the first European one, as far as I know) handling the experience of libertarian and autonomous movements'.¹⁰ He also writes that in *Q*,

Communitarian mythology arises from the ashes of oral culture and overlaps with the critique of the Power, turning the critique into a new dogmatism and revolt into totalitarian power. This overlap is the origin of all the delusions that have tormented the proletarian community for almost five centuries.¹¹

If it is indeed true that *Q* describes this coincidence as 'the origin of all delusions', we must not think that the novel portrays the sixteenth century as its originary moment. Rather, the overlap follows a repetitive historical pattern without a specific spatio-temporal point of departure. The narration of this pattern, together with the relations between the powerful and the subjugated,

as a *passage* in all its details—movement included—is one of the pre-eminent characteristics of the book.

The dynamic quality of the novel is rooted in the multiplicity of its characters, who lead double lives, hide under different names, and change their identity, professions and creeds with ease. The sense of passage is to be found also in the aimless itinerary that conducts the characters all over Europe and, in the epilogue, even outside its borders. The action unfolds, predictably, in the capitals of early modernity: Rome, Wittenberg, Strasbourg, Antwerp, Basel, Venice and finally Istanbul. Although the plot concentrates on the actions of two nameless individuals, the role of protagonist in *Q* is reserved for all historical conditions of movement and transformation: the heretic ferment of the cities of northern Europe; the web of printing and distribution of books; the increase of commercial routes into the New World; the conflicts and alliances among the Catholics, the Lutherans, the heretics, the Jews. *Q*'s general intellect, then, relates the passage of the characters to their continuously changing social environments. In its portrayal of a crucial moment for the history of Europe, *Q* conceives a genealogy (rather than a simple history) of the Reformation that includes the story of both the individuals *and* the multitudes that took part in it.¹²

In order to emphasise the foundational notion of change and indeterminacy that underlies the whole narration, *Q* insists in presenting the indeterminate qualities of the proper name as best adapting to the perpetually transforming environments. For example, the Sephardic Jew whom the main character meets in Venice, João Miquez, talks about the transformations of his own name in these terms: 'João Miquez, Juan Micas, Jean Miche, Giovanni Miches, or Zuan, as they call me here. There are as many versions of my name as there are countries that I've passed through. For the Emperor Charles VI was Jehan Micas.'¹³ Borrowing Virno's terminology once again, we can state that *Q*'s names are 'transitional objects', in that they represent the *passage, rather than the place* of the individual and of the multitudes in history.¹⁴ The insistence on the multiple referentiality of names, together with the stark contemporary language used in the book, illustrate the novel's political stance: multiplicity is a more powerful historical agent than the singular individual, and relentless movement is the multiple individual's inherent condition of existence. In the same passage quoted above, João Miquez continues:

The advantage of having such an extended family is that you have lots of extra eyes and ears ... you've got to move very fast. You've got to be faster than they are. You've got to blend into the crowd, have a goal to aim for, flatter your enemy and always travel light.¹⁵

In its narration of a (repetitive) pattern of movement, and its insistence on the power of the multitude, the novel presents an obviously allegorical value. Within the history of the struggles that characterised the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, *Q* privileges specific motifs—the attack against the bankers' financial power, the history of heretic rebellion to the centralised power of the Church of Rome, the insurrections of the peasants in the German cities—which can be easily related to the strategies of more contemporary radical movements. It should not surprise us then to find out that critics and reviewers have underlined the adaptability of the structure of the plot can be easily adapted not only to contemporary history, but to any history of subversion taking place (especially in Italy) in the last forty years.¹⁶

The allegorical reading of *Q* is necessarily rooted in the de-signification of proper names. The novel uses names as indeterminate and de-signifying objects to demonstrate crucial questions of identity and power relations. The de-signification of proper names becomes, in this way, the *general intellect* behind *Q*'s complex structure. When the book reaches a closure, the main character makes the following comment:

Details are escaping, the minor shades who populated history are slipping away, forgotten. Rogues, mean little clerics, godless outlaws, policemen, spies. Unmarked graves. Names which mean nothing, but which have encountered strategies and wars, have made them explode, sometimes stubbornly, as part of a deliberate struggle, at other times purely by chance, with a gesture, a word.¹⁷

The multitudes, the narrator insists, end their days under 'unmarked graves', and their proper names 'mean nothing'. At the same time, their continuous transformation and 'adaptation' is what creates movement, and passage, and what contains the potentiality (casual as it may be) of subverting the existing power structure. Such movement thus becomes the *space-in-between*, the locus of encounter between the individual and the multitude: neither separated entities, nor definable as an unshapely mass.

In *Q*, the proper name undergoes a continuous paradigmatic change: it is not always related to a precise individual (author or character) but addresses instead a collectivity. It is commonly assumed that a proper name is a determiner of individuality, hence as a marker of boundaries or, to use Deleuze and Guattari's definition, of 'appropriative territories'.¹⁸ Repeatedly transforming proper names therefore causes not only a confusion of identity, but also an unstable territorial condition. The lack of 'singularity' and 'identity' that results from the indeterminacy of names, then, manifests itself as a 'missing space'.¹⁹ The novel illustrates this

indeterminacy every time a character changes his name: 'Metzger, Niemanson, Jost, Boekbinder, Lot. The many and the one. The ones I've been. The many and the one. Someone. The man in the crowd. Hidden within the community. One of ours.'²⁰ In all the works of the Luther Blissett/Wu Ming collective, though, and especially in *Q*, the lack of territory is always balanced by the wider potentiality of 'occupying multiple spaces' that is offered to those who bear multiple names. In other words, a multiple name allows its bearer(s) to live multiple lives, and necessarily speaks of perpetual motion. Or, as one of the characters comments: 'Anyone without a name must have had at least a hundred of them ... And a story worth listening to.'²¹ None of the figures that lead the action of the story has a fixed, proper name. Those whose names are clear and recognisable are usually well-known historical figures—Martin Luther, Pope Leo X, the Emperor, the Fugger family—but instead of having an active part in the development of the plot, they have the function, to paraphrase the affirmation that opens the book, of 'background figures'; they deliver for the reader the spatio-temporal context of the story. As we can see, the passage and the movement are always a characteristic of the nameless and of the multiple, never of the individual.

Virno's interpretation of the concept of general intellect relies upon the idea of anthropogenesis. Such a notion, Virno insists, is the real origin of Marxist discourse and rests on the idea that the human being is, unlike all other species, an undefined animal. In an interview with the editors of *Futuro anteriore*, (a collection of interviews, articles, essays of the *movimento operaista*), he states:

Being a linguistic animal, man possesses a certain ratio of cognitive, intellectual life and sensitive life, and he does not belong to a clearly determined environment ... but instead to an indeterminate world in which he can never find a specific direction. Hence, when we speak of relationality, of linguistic basis, and of man's readiness to continually change and renew, we give our emphasis to the indefiniteness of the animal-man.²²

Within the state of indeterminacy that seems to be the primal constitutive element of humanity, then, the general intellect assumes a dual characteristic. Virno continues:

[The general Intellect] is a productive resource of capitalism, it is knowledge, science, and the use that the human being makes of these faculties; it is also, obviously, the only concrete and defined source of transformation. In this sense it has a double face.²³

In the same collection, Bifo also answers a few questions about general intellect, addressing precisely its duality. He affirms that Marx's reasoning on the constitutive elements of general intellect does not only rest on a political basis, but is instead a profound reflection on the composition of the social apparatus *and* its productive power. The general intellect, Bifo claims, 'is the objective force of transformation of the capitalistic productive process'.²⁴ Although there is no indication, in Marx, of the subversive power of the general intellect per se, its potentiality is indeed implicit, rooted in its duality and indefiniteness, and inclusive of all subversive gestures tended to the transformation of the social and political reality. And if it is indeed true that the general intellect is a term that naturally applies to the multitude, we must not forget that Marx does not exclude subjectivity as the element that informs it. In the same fragment of the *Grundrisse*, alongside the praise for the potential of the 'general forces of the human mind', is the need for 'the development of the social individual which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth'.²⁵ In other words, Marx specifically mentions the individual as the constitutive unit of the general intellect.

Q seems to be constructed on the duality inscribed in the notion of general intellect, not only because of its continuous shifts in focus between individual and collective history, but also for its reflection on the functioning (rather than the simple meaning) of individuals and multitudes in the constitution of social relations. Although the novel is constructed as a choral 'painting', a fresco of the history of the Reformation that includes a multitude of indistinct figures, its focus is always on two main individualities who are themselves multiple and strictly interconnected: the rebel and the spy; the power and its opposition.

The frequent digressions on the causes and consequences of collective activities, for instance, together with the focus on the subjectivity of individual characters, suggest the strict relations between the general intellect and what we could call the 'particular intellect' of the individual. Rather than solving such impasses imposing a choice (epistemological and ethical) between the two possibilities, Luther Blissett exemplifies the existence of a position that, close to Virno's definition of the man-animal, is strictly indeterminate; it comprehends the dualism and accentuates rather than reduces its contradictions. The general intellect in *Q* is the invisible passage between the collectivity and the individual, between proper and improper names, between storytelling and history. In conclusion, *Q* suggests that it is indeed an intrinsic property of the general intellect to be both social and subjective, both determinate and indeterminate. *Q* is a collective novel, and its author is not a singular subject but a multiple name, a general intellect of its own. The link between the historical and the allegorical reading of the novel must therefore

find its point of departure in the conception of names as non-defining and indeterminate entities *in* and *outside* the novel.

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Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

¹ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, Vintage Books, New York, 1973, p. 706. The notion of general intellect has been the center of attention of most contemporary Marxist philosophers, especially in Italy, where the *movimento operaista* has taken the concept as the point of departure for the development of new conceptions of work, technologic development and the potentiality of subversion of the capitalist system. Marx, however, does not offer an explicit definition of the term, which appears, rather enigmatically, at the end of the ‘fragment on machinery’ in the second volume of the *Grundrisse*.

² See Gottlob Frege, *Logical Investigations*, trans. PT Geach and RH Stoothof, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1977, p. 32 (footnote); and Paolo Virno, *Quando il verbo si fa carne: linguaggio e natura umana*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2003, pp. 111–39. Virno talks about ‘transindividuality’ and about ‘transindividual objects, words, and thought’ as the elements that best explain Marx’s reference to the ‘social individual’ and, by consequence, the general intellect. He explains:

The process of individuation, which renders the human animal an unrepeatable, discrete unit [*unità discreta*], is always partial and circumscribed; it is by definition inconclusive. The ‘subject’ overcomes the limits of the individual, since it includes, as its identifiable component, a ratio of pre-individual reality, which is still indeterminate, unstable and full of potentials. Such reality durably coexists with the singular I, although it does not assimilate with it. It has, then, its autonomous expressions. Collective experience springs from pre-individual reality. (p. 121)

³ Paolo Virno, ‘The Ambivalence of Disenchantment’, in Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (eds), *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis/London, 1996, p. 22.

⁴ Virno, p. 22.

⁵ See Michel Foucault, ‘La Nature Humaine’, in *Dits et écrits*, Gallimard, Paris, 1994.

⁶ Luther Blissett, *Q*, Einaudi, Torino, 1999.

⁷ ‘Q’ stands for Qoélet, the book of the *Ecclesiastes* in the Old Testament. For an exhaustive interpretation of the name in relation to its biblical referent, see Philippe Cantichi’s review of the French translation of the novel, titled ‘Le Premier rêve de Big Brother’, *Le monde des livres*, April 2001. Although we do not know whether any of their names are ‘real’, the spy Q only has two names in the novel. Q’s counterpart, on the other hand, changes his name many times. He is Gustav Metzger, shepherd’s helper in Eltersdorf in 1527. When he hits Strasbourg in 1528, he is a merchant named Lienhard Jost. He is Gert ‘From-the-Well’ during his participation in the events of Münster in 1534, then Lot during his period of stay at the congregation of the Free Spirit led by Lodewijck Pruystinck in 1538. He will bear the name of Lodewijck Pruystinck himself, when the latter is condemned and burned for heresy. In Venice, he is ‘messer Ludovico’. He is Tiziano the Baptist in 1548. The epilogue of the book, then, sees the character ‘outside Europe’ (as prophetically announced in the title of the first chapter), at the court of Soleyman the Great in Turkey, surrounded by other multiple-named fugitives. His ‘Arab’ name is Ishmael-who-traveled-the-world.

⁸ Virno, p. 22.

⁹ Luther Blissett is a fictitious, multiple identity (taking its name from a Jamaican soccer star) that may be adopted in any form, by anyone who wants to tell a story in a way that destabilises the 'normative' constriction of the institutional publishing channels. It is difficult to trace a precise history of the Luther Blissett Project. One of the first 'public appearances' of the multiple name is on 2 March 1997 (the activity of the collective, though, has started earlier). In order to undermine journalists' exploitation of stories on pedophilia and Satanism, Luther Blissett sent to the newspaper *Il resto del Carlino* (Bologna daily) a series of fake confessions of Satanists. The joke was, at first, taken seriously. When the daily television news publicly declared the unreliability of the material, the whole inquiry on pedophilia (that had already sent two innocent people in jail) fell and revealed itself as without any foundation. What distinguishes the Luther Blissett Project from other communicative multi-media experiments is the socio-political character of the material they propose. Their expressions tend to political radicalism and they do not line up with any ideology, be it left wing or right wing. The press usually associates the collective with new cultural tendencies such as the anti-globalisation movement, and to the (principally Italian and European) phenomenon of the *centri sociali*.

¹⁰ Franco Berardi (Bifo), 'Gli ultimi romanzi del xx secolo', *DeriveApprodi*, no. 19, Spring 2000, p. 65.

¹¹ Bifo, 'Gli Ultimi Romanzi', p. 65.

¹² See Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended, Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76*, trans. David Macey, Picador, New York, 2003, pp. 1-21. Foucault defines the term 'genealogy' as the coupling together of scholarly knowledges and disqualified (or subjugated) knowledges. This method allows scholars to construct the historical knowledge of struggles and make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics.

¹³ Luther Blissett, *Q*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, Harcourt, Orlando, 2004, p. 52.

¹⁴ See Virno, *Quando il verbo si fa carne*, p. 119. Transitional objects are objects that allow reification, that is, the passage that connects two (or more) states, minds, human beings etc. It is the *res intermedia* that does not connect two already constituted individualities, but enables their constitution as distinct polarities at a later time.

¹⁵ Luther Blissett, p. 524.

¹⁶ See Wu Ming, *Giap!*, Einaudi, Torino, 2003, pp. 161-6. A letter from a reader states that *Q* reads more like an autobiography of the authors. The author of the letter offers a detailed parallel between the novel and contemporary Italian history, from 1970s *lotta armata* to 1980s individualism. Also, a great number of (Italian and foreign) reviews of *Q* on the official Wu Ming website <www.wumingfoundation.com> insist on the allegorical element, which imposes a reading of *Q*'s story as a metaphor of contemporary political struggles. See, for instance, Fiorella Iannucci, 'Il cinquecento Sembra il 2000', *Il messaggero*, 6 March 1999.

¹⁷ Luther Blissett, p. 743.

¹⁸ See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis/London, 1987, p. 315. Following Deleuze and Guattari's argument, the name, in its expressive form, constitutes a 'temporal constancy and a spatial range that make it a territorial, or rather territorializing, mark: a signature'. The signature is then a written, hence spatial, mark of human presence. This mark, understood as the written expression of the name, is to be thought of as determining a territory, because the 'trait' (its expressive mode) is constituted precisely as a movement in space. Interestingly, Deleuze and Guattari remark that the expressive quality of the signature is always in strict relation to the 'possessive'. This idea of a territory marked by the signature that possesses it shares many points with the notions of name and name-giver brought forward by European humanistic culture, which has, according its platonic origins, ascribed to the proper name an attribute of power.

¹⁹ For an exhaustive analysis of the concept of identity in relation to singularity and multiplicity, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2001, pp. 9-23.

²⁰ Luther Blissett, p. 430.

²¹ Luther Blissett, p. 166.

²² Paolo Virno, interview by 'Conricerca', 21 April 2001, in *Futuro anteriore. Dai Quaderni rossi ai movimenti globali: ricchezze e limiti dell'operaismo Italiano*, DeriveApprodi, Rome, 2002, enclosed CD ROM, pp. 12-13.

²³ Virno interview, p. 13

²⁴ Franco Berardi (Bifo), interview by 'Conricerca', 19 November 2000, in *Futuro anteriore. Dai Quaderni rossi ai movimenti globali: ricchezze e limiti dell'operaismo Italiano*, DeriveApprodi, Rome, 2002, enclosed CD ROM, p. 10.

²⁵ Marx, p. 705.