

NATURAL-HISTORICAL DIAGRAMS: THE ‘NEW GLOBAL’ MOVEMENT AND THE BIOLOGICAL INVARIANT

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ABSTRACT: This article puts forward the thesis that the contemporary global movement against capitalism, and the post-Fordist regime it is responding to, is best understood in terms of the emergence of ‘human nature’ as the crux of political struggle. According to Virno, the biological invariant has become the raw material of social praxis because the capitalist relation of production mobilizes to its advantage, in a historically unprecedented way, the species-specific prerogatives of *Homo sapiens*. Through the concept of ‘natural-historical diagrams’, the article explores the significance of socio-political states of affairs which directly display key aspects of anthropogenesis, and, making use of Ernesto De Martino’s concept of ‘cultural apocalypses’, considers the different relations that a biological ‘background’ and a socio-political ‘foreground’ entertain in traditional and contemporary societies. The attempt to develop a ‘natural history’ of such diagrams leads Virno to reflecting on the importance of the language faculty, neoteny, non-specialization and the absence of a predetermined natural environment for political action. This reflection on the contemporary importance of political anthropology leads Virno to a set of concluding remarks on the role of ethics and the idea of the ‘good life’ in the practice of the ‘new global’ movement.

KEYWORDS: Anthropology; Capitalism; Chomsky; De Martino; Human Nature; Language; Marx; Neoteny; New Global Movement; Peirce

1. ALWAYS ALREADY JUST NOW

The content of the global movement which ever since the Seattle revolt has occupied (and redefined) the public sphere is nothing less than human nature. The latter constitutes both the arena of struggle and its stake. The arena of struggle: the movement is rooted in the epoch in which the capitalist organization of work takes on as its raw material the differential traits of the species (verbal thought, the transindividual character of the mind, neoteny, the lack of specialized instincts, etc.). That is, it is rooted in the epoch in which human praxis is applied in the most direct and systematic way to the en-

semble of requirements that make praxis human. The stake: those who struggle against the mantraps placed on the paths of migrants or against copyright on scientific research raise the question of the different socio-political expression that could be given, here and now, to certain biological prerogatives of *Homo sapiens*.

We are therefore dealing with a historically determinate subversive movement, which has emerged in quite peculiar, or rather unrepeatable, circumstances, but which is intimately concerned with that which has remained unaltered from the Cro-Magnons onwards. Its distinguishing trait is the extremely tight entanglement between 'always already' (human nature) and 'just now' (the bio-linguistic capitalism which has followed Fordism and Taylorism). This entanglement cannot fail to fuel some Rousseauian conceptual muddles: the temptation to deduce a socio-political ideal from the biological constitution of the human animal seems irrepressible, as does the idea of a naturalist corrective to the distortions produced by an irascible history. Think of the political Chomsky, for whom the crucial point is to constantly reaffirm some innate capabilities of our species (for example, the 'creativity of language'), against the claims, unjust because *unnatural*, of this or that system of power. To my mind, there is both truth and falsehood in the 'Chomskyianism' that pervades the common sense of the movement. Truth: it is absolutely realistic to hold that the biological invariant has today become a fulcrum of social conflicts, in other words that immutable metahistory surges up at the centre of the most up-to-date labour and communicative processes. Falsehood: the biological invariant becomes the raw material of social praxis only because the capitalist relation of production mobilizes to its advantage, in a historically unprecedented way, the specie-specific prerogatives of *Homo sapiens*. The undeniable preeminence of the meta-historical plane entirely depends on a contingent state of affairs.

To clarify the link between global movement and human nature it is necessary to tackle, be it tangentially, some tricky problems. First (§2), an apodictic thesis: how and why is human nature, far from being only the condition of possibility of historical praxis, also at times its manifest content and operational field. Second (§3), a synoptic definition, itself also apodictic, of those phylogenetic constants which are simultaneously the condition of possibility and the manifest content of historical praxis. On the basis of these premises,¹ the real discussion begins. It consists (§§4-5) in confronting the rather different ways in which the background, that is human nature, comes to the foreground, in the guise of an empirical phenomenon, in traditional societies and in contemporary capitalism. This crucial difference helps us to better understand the specific weight which the political action of the global movement carries, or could carry (§6).

2. MAPS OF HUMAN NATURE

The decisive question is broadly the following: can human beings *experience* human nature? Note that experiencing something, for instance an object or an event, does not

1. Which are fully argued in Paolo Virno, *Quando il verbo si fa carne. Linguaggio e natura umana*, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 2003.

at all mean representing it with some degree of scientific precision. Rather, it means perceiving it in its phenomenal manifestness, being emotionally involved, reacting to it with praxis and discourse. If that is so, our case immediately confronts us with a difficulty: the expression 'human nature' effectively denotes the ensemble of innate dispositions that guarantee the very possibility of perceiving phenomena, to be emotionally involved, to act and discourse. Accordingly, the decisive question takes on a paradoxical air: is it possible to experience, in the full sense of the term, that which constitutes the presupposition of experience in general?

The answer depends on the way in which we conceive of eternity in time. Make no mistake: by 'eternal' I simply mean that which displays a high degree of invariance, not being subject to social and cultural transformations. In this mild acceptance, 'eternal', for instance, can be said of the language faculty. There are basically two ways, opposed to one another, of conceiving the eternal in time. The first, which I reject, can be loosely defined as 'transcendental'. Its point of honour lies in arguing that the invariant presuppositions of human nature, on which really experienced facts and states of affairs depend, never present themselves in turn as facts or states of affairs. The presuppositions remain confined in their recondite 'pre-'. That which grounds or permits all appearances does not itself appear. This approach rules out that human beings may experience human nature. The second way of considering the eternal in time can be defined, once again loosely, as 'natural-historical'. It consists in demonstrating that the conditions of possibility of human praxis possess a peculiar empirical counterpart. In other words, there are contingent phenomena which reproduce point-by-point the inner structure of the transcendental presupposition. Besides being their foundation, the 'eternal' exposes itself, as such, in such and such a given socio-political state of affairs. Not only does it *give* rise to the most varied events, but it also *takes* place in the flow of time, taking on an evental physiognomy. In other words, there are historical facts which show in filigree the conditions that make history itself possible. This second approach, which I share, implies that human beings can experience human nature.

I call *natural-historical diagrams* the socio-political states of affairs which display, in changing and rival forms, some salient features of anthropogenesis. The diagram is a sign that imitates the object to which it refers, meticulously reproducing its structure and the relation between its parts. Think of a map, a mathematical equation, a graph. However, the contingent historical fact, which offers the abridged image of a biological condition, is not a necessary condition of the latter, since its roots lie instead in a particular social and cultural conjuncture. The diagram faithfully reproduces the object that it stands for but, unlike an index, it is *not* caused by it. A geographical map is something other than the knock on the door which attests to the presence of a visitor.

Recall the question we formulated above: is it possible to experience, in the full sense of the term, that which constitutes the presupposition of experience in general? I can now reply: yes, if and when there are adequate phenomenal diagrams of this presupposition; yes, if and when a historical event offers the map or the equation of certain fundamental meta-historical constants. The diagrams of human nature institute an

endless circularity between the transcendental and the empirical, the condition and the conditioned, the background and the foreground. To get an approximate idea of the diagram, consider this observation by Peirce on self-reflexive diagrams (I thank Tommaso Russo for having brought it to my attention): ‘On a map of an island laid down upon the soil of that island there must, under all ordinary circumstances, be some position, some point, marked or not, that represents *qua* place on the map the very same point *qua* place on the island.’² The map is the diagram of a territory, part of which is constituted by the diagram of that territory, part of which... to infinity. The same happens, in effect, when you formulate a mental image of your own mind; accordingly, the image of the mind includes an image of the mind that includes an image... to infinity. Unlike the map discussed by Peirce, the diagrams of human nature are not scientific constructions or conventional signs; they are concrete phenomena, socio-political states of affairs, historical events. What’s more, the paradoxical oscillation implied by these diagrams is not spatial but temporal. That is, it consists in the infinite circularity between ‘just now’ and ‘always already’ (experienced facts and conditions of possibility of experience); not in the circularity between part and whole, as in the case examined by Peirce.

Natural history, in the particular sense I am giving to it here, meticulously collects the multiple socio-political *diagrams* of the biological invariant. Accordingly, it concerns itself with all the circumstances, rather different over the course of time, in which *anthropos*, working and speaking, retraces the salient stages of anthropogenesis. Natural history inventories the ways in which human beings *experience* human nature. Having the latter as its content, the global movement should be considered as an episode of natural history. It can rightfully be compared to the map of an island which is laid down on a precise point on the island itself.

3. THE POTENTIAL ANIMAL

Our theme is and remains the existence of natural-historical facts that have the value of diagrams (graphs, maps, etc.) of human nature. However, in order to discuss these diagrams with greater precision, it is necessary to establish some aspect of the object that they designate. What are we speaking about when we speak of species-specific prerogatives, of phylogenetic metahistory, of biological invariant? The following annotations are merely offered by way of orientation: nothing more than a road sign. Whoever doesn’t share them, or thinks they fall short, can replace or complement them at will. The crucial point, I repeat, is not an exhaustive definition of that which in *Homo sapiens* remains unaltered from the Cro-Magnons onwards, but the ways in which the mutable course of history sometimes thematizes the ‘eternal’, even exhibiting it in concrete states of affairs.

The biological invariant that characterizes the existence of the human animal can be referred back to the philosophical concept of *dynamis*, power. From a temporal angle, power means *not-now*, untimeliness, a deficit of presence. And we should add that if

2. Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers*, Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (eds.), vol. 2, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1933, p. 230.

there were no experience of the not-now, it would also be impossible to speak of a ‘temporal angle’; it is precisely *dynamis* which, by dissolving the ‘eternal present’ of God and the non-human animal, gives rise to historical time. The potentiality of *Homo sapiens*: (a) is attested by the language faculty; (b) is inseparable from instinctual non-specialization; (c) originates in neoteny; (d) implies the absence of a univocal environment.

- a. The language faculty is something other than the ensemble of historically determinate languages. It consists in a body’s inborn capacity to emit articulate sounds, that is in the ensemble of biological and physiological requirements which make it possible to produce a statement. It is mistaken to treat the indeterminate power-to-speak as a proto-language spoken by the entire species (something like a universal Sanskrit). The faculty is a generic disposition, exempt from grammatical schemas, irreducible to a more or less extended congeries of possible statements. Language faculty means language *in potentia* or the power of language. And power is something non-actual and still undefined. Only the living being which is born aphasic has the language faculty. Or better: only the living being which lacks a repertoire of signals biunivocally correlated to the various configurations—harmful or beneficial—of the surrounding environment.
- b. The language faculty confirms the instinctual poverty of the human animal, its incomplete character, the constant disorientation that sets it apart. Many philosophers argue that the language faculty is a highly specialized instinct. But they go on to add that it is a specialization for polyvalence and generalization, or even—which amounts to the same—an instinct to adopt behaviours that have not been preset. Now, to argue that the linguistic animal is supremely able in... doing without any particular ability is really to participate in the international festival of the sophism. Of course, the language faculty is an innate biological endowment. But not everything that is innate has the prerogatives of a univocal and detailed instinct. Despite being congenital, the capacity to speak is only *dynamis*, power. And power properly speaking, that is as distinguished from a well-defined catalogue of hypothetical performances, coincides with a state of indeterminacy and uncertainty. The animal that has language is a potential animal. But a potential animal is a *non-specialized* animal.
- c. The phylogenetic basis of non-specialization is *neoteny*, that is the ‘retention of formerly juvenile characteristics produced by retardation of somatic development’.³ The generic and incomplete character of the human animal, the indecision that befalls it, in other words the *dynamis* which is consubstantial with it, are rooted in some of its organic and anatomical primitivisms, or, if you prefer, in its congenital incompleteness. *Homo sapiens* has ‘a constitutively premature birth’,⁴ and precisely because of this it remains an ‘indefinite animal’. Neoteny explains the instability of our species, as well as the related need

3. Stephen Jay Gould, *Ontogeny and Phylogeny*, Cambridge, Belknap Harvard, 1977, p. 483.

4. See Marco Mazzeo, *Tatto e linguaggio*, Rome, Editori Riuniti, 2004; Adolf Portmann, *Aufbruch der Lebensforschung*, Zurich, Rhein Verlag, 1965.

for uninterrupted learning. A chronic infancy is matched by a chronic non-adaptation, to be mitigated in each case by social and cultural devices.

- d. Biologically rooted in neoteny, the potentiality of the human animal has its objective correlate in the lack of a circumscribed and well-ordered environment in which to insert oneself with innate expertise once and for all. If an environment [*ambiente*] is the ‘ensemble of conditions [...] which make it possible for a certain organism to survive thanks to its particular organization’,⁵ it goes without saying that a non-specialized organism is also an *out-of-place* [*disambientato*] organism. In such an organism perceptions are not harmoniously converted into univocal behaviours, but give rise to an overabundance of undifferentiated stimuli, which are not designed for a precise operational purpose. Lacking access to an ecological niche that would prolong its body like a prosthesis, the human animal exists in a state of insecurity even where there is no trace of specific dangers. We can certainly second the following assertion by Chomsky: ‘the way we grow does not reflect properties of the physical environment but rather our essential nature’.⁶ Provided we add, however, that ‘our essential nature’ is characterized in the first place by the absence of a determinate environment, and therefore by an enduring disorientation.

We said that the primary task of natural history consists in collecting the social and political events in which the human animal is put into direct relation with metahistory, that is with the unmodifiable constitution of its species. We call natural-historical those maximally contingent phenomena which offer plausible *diagrams* of an invariant human nature. The terse definitions we proposed above allow us to specify the overall argument. The questions that natural history must face up to are accordingly the following: In what socio-political situations does the non-biological specialization of *Homo sapiens* come to the fore? When and how does the generic language faculty, as distinct from historical languages, take on a leading role within a particular mode of production? What are the *diagrams* of neoteny? Which are the maps or graphs that will adequately portray the absence of a univocal environment?

The answer to these questions will shed light on an essential difference between traditional societies and contemporary capitalism. In other words, it will shed light on the unprecedented features of the historical situation in which the global movement of Genoa and Seattle finds itself operating.

4. CULTURAL APOCALYPSES

In traditional societies, including to some extent in classic industrial society, the potentiality (non-specialization, neoteny, etc.) of the human animal takes on the typical visibility of an

5. Arnold Gehlen, *Philosophische Anthropologie und Handlungslehre*, Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann, 1983, p. 112.

6. Noam Chomsky, *Language and the Problems of Knowledge: The Managua Lectures*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1988, p. 151.

empirical state of affairs only in an emergency situation, that is in the midst of a *crisis*. In ordinary circumstances, the species-specific biological background is instead concealed, or even contradicted, by the organization of work and solid communicative habits. What predominates thus is a robust discontinuity, or rather an antinomy, between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. Anyone who would object that this discontinuity is merely a mediocre cultural invention, to be chalked up to the bilious anthropocentrism of spiritualist philosophers, would be making his own life too easy, neglecting what is by far the most interesting task: to individuate the *biological* reasons for the enduring bifurcation between biology and society. A program to naturalize mind and language that would forsake a *naturalist* explanation of the divergence between ‘culture’ and ‘nature’, preferring to reduce the whole affair to a... clash of ideas, would be shamelessly incoherent.

Let’s stick with well-known, even stereotypical formulations. We call potential the corporeal organism which, lacking its own environment, must wrestle with a vital context that is always partially undetermined, that is with a *world* in which a stream of perceptual stimuli is difficult to translate into an effective operational code. The world is not a particularly vast and varied environment, nor is it the class of all possible environments: rather, there is a world *only* where an environment is wanting. Social and political praxis provisionally compensates for this lack, building *pseudo-environments* within which omnilateral and indiscriminate stimuli are selected in view of advantageous actions. This praxis is thus opposed to its invariant and meta-historical invariant. Or rather, it attests it to the very extent that it tries to rectify it. If we wanted to turn once again to a concept drawn from Charles S. Peirce’s semiotics, we could say that culture is a ‘Sign by Contrast’ of a species-specific instinctual deficit: a sign, that is, which denotes an object only by virtue of a polemical reaction to the object’s qualities. Exposure to the world appears, above all and for the most part, as a necessary immunization from the world, that is as the assumption of repetitive and predictable behaviours. Non-specialization finds expression as a meticulous division of labour, as the hypertrophy of permanent roles and unilateral duties. Neoteny manifests itself as the ethico-political defense of neotenic indecision. As a device which is itself biological (that is, functional to the preservation of the species), culture aims at stabilizing the ‘indefinite animal’, to blunt or veil its disorientation [*disambientamento*], to reduce the *dynamis* that characterizes it to a circumscribed set of possible actions. Human *nature* is such as to often involve a contrast between its expressions and its premises.

On this background, which we’ve evoked with all the brevity of a musical refrain, there stands out a crucial point, which is instead redolent with nuances and subtleties. We’ve already alluded to it: in traditional societies, the biological invariant (language as distinct from languages, raw potentiality, non-specialization, neoteny, etc.) acquires a marked historical visibility when, and only when, a certain pseudo-environmental setup is subjected to violent transformative traction. This is the reason why natural history, if it is referred to traditional societies, coincides for the most part with the *story of a state of exception*. It scrupulously describes the situation in which a form of life loses any obviousness, becoming brittle and problematic. In other words, the situation in which cultural

defenses misfire and one is forced to return for a moment to the 'primal scene' of the anthropogenetic process. It is in such conjunctures, and only in such conjunctures, that it is possible to garner vivid *diagrams* of human nature.

The collapse of a form of life, with the ensuing irruption of metahistory into the sphere of historical facts, is what Ernesto de Martino, one of the few original philosophers in twentieth-century Italy, called a 'cultural apocalypse'. With this term he designated the historically determinate occasion (economic disruption, sudden technological innovation, etc.) in which the very difference between language faculty and languages, inarticulate potentiality and well-structured grammars, world and environment, becomes visible to the naked eye, and is dramatically thematized. Among the multiple symptoms which for De Martino presage an 'apocalypse', there is one which possesses strategic importance. The undoing of a cultural constellation triggers, among other things, 'a semantic excess which is not reducible to determinate signifieds'.⁷ We witness a progressive indetermination of speech: in other words, it becomes difficult to 'bend the signifier as possibility towards the signified as reality'⁸; untied from univocal referents, discourse takes on an 'obscure allusiveness', abiding within the chaotic domain of the power-to-say (a power-to-say that goes beyond any spoken word). Now, this 'semantic excess not reducible to determinate signifieds' is entirely equivalent to the language *faculty*. In the apocalyptic crisis of a form of life, the biologically innate faculty fully exhibits the gap which forever separates it from any given language. The primacy attained by an undulating power-to-say is matched by the abnormal fluidity of states of affairs and the growing uncertainty of behaviours. As de Martino writes: 'things refuse to remain within their domestic boundaries, shedding their quotidian operability, seemingly stripped of any memory of possible behaviours'.⁹ No longer selectively filtered by a complex of cultural habits, the world shows itself to be an amorphous and enigmatic context. The conflagration of the ethico-social order thus reveals two correlated aspects of invariant 'human nature': a language faculty distinct from languages and a world opposed to any (pseudo-)environment whatsoever.

This twofold revelation is nevertheless transitory and parenthetical. The ultimate outcome of the apocalypse or state of exception is the institution of new cultural niches, capable of concealing and blunting once again the biological 'always already', that is the inarticulate and chaotic *dynamis*. Rare and fleeting are the apocalyptic diagrams of human nature.

5. METAHISTORY AND SOCIAL PRAXIS

What was said in the preceding section only counts for traditional societies. Contemporary capitalism has radically modified the relation between unalterable phylogenetic prerogatives and historical praxis. Today, the prevailing forms of life do not veil but

7. Ernesto De Martino, *La fine del mondo. Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali*, Torino, Einaudi, 2002 [1977], p. 89.

8. De Martino, *La fine del mondo. Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali*, p. 632.

9. De Martino, *La fine del mondo. Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali*, p. 91.

rather flaunt without any hesitation the differential traits of our species. In other words: the prevailing forms of life are a veritable inventory of *natural-historical diagrams*. The current organization of work does not allay the disorientation and instability of the human animal, but on the contrary takes them to their extreme and systematically valorizes them. Amorphous potentiality, that is the chronic persistence of infantile characteristics, does not menacingly flare in the midst of a crisis. Rather it permeates every aspect of the tritest routine. Far from dreading it, the society of generalized communication tries to profit from the 'semantic excess not reducible to determinate signifieds', thereby conferring the greatest relevance to the indeterminate language faculty. According to Hegel, philosophy's first task is to grasp its time with thought. This proverbial precept, akin to the chalk that grates against the blackboard for those who delight in studying the ahistorical mind of the isolated individual, needs to be updated in the following way: the paramount task of philosophy is to come to grips with the unprecedented superimposition of the eternal and the contingent, the biologically invariant and the socio-politically variable, which exclusively connotes the current epoch.

Let it be noted in passing that this superimposition accounts for the renewed prestige which for some decades now has been accorded to the notion of 'human nature'. It does not depend on the impressive tectonic shifts within the scientific community (Chomsky's pitiless critique against Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* or suchlike) but on an ensemble of social, economic and political conditions. To believe the opposite is yet another demonstration of culturalist idealism (of a very academic sort, to boot) on the part of those who nonetheless never fail to toot the horn of the program to naturalize mind and language. Human nature returns to the centre of attention not because we are finally dealing with biology rather than history, but because the biological prerogatives of the human animal have acquired undeniable historical relevance in the current productive process. That is, because we are confronted with a peculiar empirical manifestation of certain phylogenetic, which is to say metahistorical, constants that mark out the existence of *Homo sapiens*. If a *naturalist* explanation of the autonomy enjoyed by 'culture' in traditional societies is certainly welcome, so is a *historical* explanation of the centrality attained by (human) 'nature' in the midst of post-Fordist capitalism.

In our epoch, the object of natural history is not a state of emergency, but everyday administration. Instead of dwelling on the erosion of a cultural constellation, we now need to concern ourselves with the way it is fully in force. Natural history does not limit itself to scavenging through 'cultural apocalypses'. Instead it tightens its grip on the totality of contemporary events. Because biological metahistory no longer surges up at the edges of forms of life, where they get stuck and idle, but installs itself durably at their geometric centre, testifying to their regular functioning, all social phenomena can be rightfully considered as *natural-historical phenomena*.

The dearth of specialized instincts and the lack of a definite environment, which have been the same from the Cro-Magnons onwards, today appear as noteworthy economic resources. It is not difficult to register the patent correspondence between certain salient features of 'human nature' and the sociological categories which are best suited to

the current situation. The biological non-specialization of *Homo sapiens* does not remain in the background, but gains maximal historical visibility as the universal *flexibility* of labour services. The only professional talent that really counts in post-Fordist production is the habit not to acquire lasting habits, that is the capacity to react promptly to the unusual. A univocal competence, modulated in its last detail, now constitutes an authentic handicap for those obliged to sell their labour-power. Again, neoteny, that is chronic infancy and the related need for continual training, translates, without any mediation, into the social rule of *permanent formation*. The shortcomings of the ‘constitutively premature birth’ are converted into productive virtues. What matters is not what is progressively learned (roles, techniques, etc.) but the display of the pure power to learn, which always exceeds its particular enactments. What’s more, it is entirely evident that the *permanent precarity* of jobs, and even more the instability experienced by contemporary migrants, mirror in historically determinate ways the congenital lack of a uniform and predictable habitat. Precarity and nomadism lay bare at the social level the ceaseless and omnilateral pressure of a *world* that is never an environment. They induce a paradoxical familiarity with the stream of perceptual stimuli that do not allow themselves to be translated into univocal actions. This overabundance of undifferentiated solicitations is no longer true only in the final analysis, but it is true in the first analysis. It is not a disturbance to be dispelled, but the positive soil on which the current labour-process develops. Lastly, what is perhaps the most relevant and comprehensive point: inarticulate power, which is not reducible to a series of preset potential acts, acquires an extrinsic, or better pragmatic aspect in the commodity *labour-power*. This term effectively designates the ensemble of generically human psycho-physical faculties, which are precisely considered as mere *dynameis* that have yet to be applied. Today labour-power largely coincides with the language faculty. And the language faculty, qua labour-power, unmistakably shows its difference with regard to grammatically structured languages. Language faculty and labour-power lie on the border between biology and history—with the added proviso that in our epoch this very border has taken on precise historical lineaments.

To affirm that contemporary forms of life have as their emblem the language faculty, non-specialization, neoteny, loss of environment, does not at all entail arguing that they are unruly. Far from it. Being conversant with omnilateral potentiality demands, as its inevitable counterpoint, the existence of far more detailed norms than the ones which are in force in a cultural pseudo-environment. Norms so detailed that they tend to hold for a single case, for a contingent and non-reproducible occasion. The flexibility of labour services implies the unlimited variability of rules, but also, for the brief period in which they remain in force, their tremendous rigidity. These are ad hoc rules, of the kind that prescribe in minute detail the way of carrying out a certain action and only that action. Precisely where it attains the greatest socio-political relevance, the innate language *faculty* mockingly manifests itself as a collection of elementary *signals*, suited to tackling a particular eventuality. The ‘semantic excess which is not reducible to determinate signifieds’ often flips over into a compulsive reliance on stereotyped formulae. In other words, it takes on the seemingly paradoxical guise of a semantic *deficit*. In both of

its polarities, this oscillation depends on the sudden absence of stable and well-articulated *pseudo-environments*. No longer screened by a protective cultural niche, the world is experienced in all its indeterminacy and potentiality (semantic excess); but this patent indeterminacy, which each time is to be contained and diluted in different ways, provokes by way of reaction halting behaviours, obsessive tics, the drastic impoverishment of the *ars combinatoria*, the inflation in transient but harsh norms (semantic defect). Though on the one hand permanent formation and the precarity of employments guarantee the full exposure to the world, on the other they instigate the latter's recurrent reduction to a spectral or mawkish dollhouse. This accounts for the surprising marriage between generic language faculty and monotonous signals.

6. THE DEMAND FOR THE GOOD LIFE

Let's sum up. In traditional societies, the biological invariant was thrust to the fore when a form of life imploded and came undone; in contemporary capitalism, when everything functions regularly. Natural history, usually busy registering with seismographic precision crises and states of exception, is instead concerned today with the ordinary administration of the productive process. In our epoch, the biological requirements of *Homo sapiens* (language faculty, non-specialization, neoteny, etc.) match up point-by-point with the most significant sociological categories (labour-power, flexibility, permanent formation, etc.).

Two phrases by Marx, taken from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, are perfectly suited to the current situation. The first says: 'It can be seen how the history of *industry* and the *objective* existence of industry as it has developed is the *open* book of the essential powers of man, man's psychology present in tangible form. [...] A *psychology* for which this book [...] is closed can never become a *real* science.'¹⁰ To paraphrase: today's industry—based on neoteny, the language faculty, potentiality—is the externalized, empirical, pragmatic image of the human psyche, of its invariant and metahistorical characteristics. Today's industry therefore constitutes the only dependable textbook for the philosophy of mind. Here is Marx's second phrase: 'The whole of history is a preparation, a development, for "*man*" to become the object of *sensuous* consciousness.'¹¹ Once we expunge the eschatological emphasis (history doesn't prepare anything, let it be clear) we can paraphrase as follows: in the epoch of flexibility and permanent formation, human nature now constitutes an almost perceptual evidence, as well as the immediate content of social praxis. In other words: every step they take, human beings directly experience that which constitutes the presupposition of experience in general.

The raw material of contemporary politics is to be found in natural-historical phenomena, that is in the contingent events in which the distinctive traits of our species come to light. I say *raw material*, not a canon or a guiding principle. All political orientations are effectively faced with a situation in which human praxis is systematically ap-

10. Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844', *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, London, Penguin, 1975, p. 354.

11. Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844', p. 355.

plied to the ensemble of the requirements that make praxis human. But they do so in the name of contrasting interests. The shared attention to the differential traits of the species gives rise to diametrically opposed aims, whose realization depends on the balance of forces they enjoy, not on their greater or lesser conformity to 'human nature'. It is in vain that Chomsky appeals to the unalterable biological endowment of *Homo sapiens* to rectify the inherent injustice of contemporary capitalism. Rather than constituting the platform and parameter for a possible emancipation, the congenital 'creativity of language' appears today as an ingredient in the despotic organization of work; or better, it appears as a profitable economic resource. To the extent that it attains an immediate empirical consistency, the biological invariant is part of the problem, and certainly not the solution.

The global movement is inscribed in this context. Not unlike its enemies, that is not unlike the politics that prolongs oppression, it too has considerable familiarity with the metahistory that incarnates itself in contingent states of affairs. But it strives to discern the various forms that could take on the manifestation of the 'always already' in the 'just now'. That the congenital *potentiality* of the human animal fully manifests itself at the socio-economic level is an irreversible matter of fact; but that in manifesting itself, this potentiality is obliged to take on the features of the commodity *labour-power* is by no means an inescapable fate. On the contrary, it is a momentary outcome, which one should intransigently struggle against. Likewise, it is not set in stone anywhere that the phenomenological correlate of the biological *non-specialization* of our species will continue to be, always and regardless, the servile *flexibility* flaunted by the contemporary labour-process. The socio-historical prominence of human nature does not attenuate but rather immeasurably enhances the specific impact (and the irreparable contingency) of political action.

The global movement is the conflictual interface of biolinguistic capitalism. It is precisely because (and not in spite) of this that it presents itself on the public stage as an *ethical* movement. The reason for this is easy to intuit. We have said that contemporary production implicates all the attitudes the distinguish our species: language, reflexivity, instinctual deficiency, etc. With a simplifying but not empty formula, we could even say that post-Fordism puts to work *life* as such. Now, if it is true that biolinguistic capitalism appropriates 'life', that is the set of specifically human faculties, it is pretty obvious that insubordination against it must focus on this same fact. The life that is included in flexible production is countered by the demand (which is pertinent because it is itself 'non-specialized') of a *good life*. And the search for the *good life* is the only concrete theme of the 'science of mores'. As numerous as its misfortunes may be, it is beyond doubt that the global movement has indicated the point of intersection between natural history and ethics.

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