

Miriam Tola

Species, Nature, and the Politics of the Common:
From Virno to Simondon

Two stratigraphers writing in the magazine of the Geological Society of America recently asked, “Is the Anthropocene an issue of stratigraphy or pop culture?” Puzzled by the popularity of the term, they argued that currently the Anthropocene allows conceptual mapping rather than conceptualization based on empirical evidence (Autin and Holbrook 2012). To be sure, the Anthropocene has become a matter that exceeds the geoscience community. It is an issue of popular culture and politics as much as stratigraphy. Within feminist studies and allied fields, a central problem is that the generic *anthropos* of the Anthropocene closely resembles the hegemonic model of the human, the white Man of European modernity entitled to appropriate a feminized and racialized material world in the quest for capitalist progress. But this does not entail a wholesale dismissal of the Anthropocene concept. Rather, the question becomes what politics might be pursued within and against prevalent narratives of the Anthropocene that foreground an undifferentiated human species capable of simultaneously causing and remediating the ecological crisis.

With these concerns in mind, I turn to the work of Paolo Virno, a radical political thinker

who stands out for his persistent investment in human nature—a notion somehow out of sync with feminist and antiracist contestations of who and what counts as human. Although Virno has not directly engaged the Anthropocene, the anthropos is at the core of his analysis of post-Fordism, a flexible form of accumulation that connects disparate modes and places of production. The current economic regime, he argues, mobilizes the biolinguistic faculties that set *Homo sapiens* apart from the rest of the living. These faculties, understood as inexhaustible potentiality rather than as timeless given, constitute the common of humanity, what might be actualized in the form of “engaged withdrawal” from capitalism and the state (Hardt and Virno 1996: 196).

In works such as *A Grammar of the Multitude*, *When the Word Becomes Flesh*, and *E così via, all’infinito*, Virno (2004, 2015, 2010) attempts to reconnect the history of labor with natural history, the transformation of social relations with the powers of the human as natural being.¹ At the intersection between the human form of life and the post-Fordist transformation, he contends, new modes of being together may emerge. As the key thinker of the “naturalist” tendency within Italian autonomism, Virno offers a compelling point of entry for exploring limits and possibilities of autonomist Marxism for thinking politics in the Anthropocene.

The first part of this article charts Virno’s investment in “human nature.” What is the anthropos for Virno? How does it intersect the hegemonic model of Man? These questions are useful not only for engaging Virno’s work but also for examining the tendency within autonomist Marxism to privilege man-the-producer as primary agent transforming himself and the world. It is certainly puzzling that Virno participates in the species discourse without sufficiently addressing its ties to global circuits of exploitation that, throughout Western modernity, have shaped the categories of human and nonhuman in exclusionary ways. In what follows, I explore some of the implications of this elision at a time when much of the Anthropocene discourse describes the human species as the key geomorphic force behind the “sixth extinction” (Kolbert 2014) while also placing confidence in managerial planning and technological fixes (Hamilton 2013).

The second part of the essay tackles the centrality of the anthropos in Virno’s work from a different angle. In order to complicate Virno’s anchoring of the common in properly human capacities, it discusses his use of Gilbert Simondon’s philosophy of individuation and provides an alternative reading of Simondon’s concept of preindividual nature. Through the discussion of a particular instance of commoning occurring in Italy, I build on

Simondon to rework the common as a form of collective individuation capable of cultivating attachments to the pre-vital and living elements that constitute its condition of possibility. At stake is not just the introduction of difference within human nature but a reflection on the common as a project that requires the interplay of disparate beings, not all of which are human.

Post-Fordist Anthropogenesis

Virno was a member of the workerist group Potere Operaio (Workers' Power) until 1973, when the organization dissolved into the broader movement of Autonomia. He was active in the cycle of struggles that began in 1967 and culminated in 1977 with the irruption of new subjectivities in the Italian political scene that expressed simultaneously the refusal of work and the invention of new modes of living. As one of the defendants in the "April 7th trial," Virno spent three years in prison before finally being acquitted of charges of subversive association and armed insurrection. Throughout the 1980s and until the present, he has been a crucial voice in autonomist debates on the shifting nature of labor and political organization in the age of post-Fordism.²

Trajectories of exile and activist exchanges led autonomist thinkers such as Antonio Negri and Franco "Bifo" Berardi to encounter the French philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Michel Foucault, and Jean Baudrillard. Virno has taken a different path, one defined by the interest in philosophy of language and the German philosophical anthropology of the early twentieth century. Combining Marx's concepts of "general intellect" and "species being" with philosophical anthropology's reflection on human nature and Simondon's theory of individuation, Virno has developed a distinctive account of how the potentialities of *Homo sapiens* have become the "raw material" of post-Fordist production.

In the "ten theses" that conclude *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Virno (2004: 106) observes that "in Post-Fordism, the *general intellect* does not coincide with fixed capital, but manifests itself principally as a linguistic reiteration of living labor." This statement encapsulates a central motif of the autonomist interpretation of Marx's "Fragment on Machines." Part of the *Grundrisse*, the "Fragment" is the key text autonomist Marxists draw on to make sense of the shifting relationship between labor and capitalism. Here Marx reflects on the relationship between *dead labor*—that is, labor objectified in machinery and technology—and *living labor*, creative human activity identified with the collective potentiality of working bodies. He suggests that

the *general intellect*, the collective knowledge of living labor, has become a direct force of production objectified by capital in technical machines (Marx 1973: 706).

Autonomist Marxists propose an alternative reading of the general intellect, one that privileges living labor as that which is only ever partially captured by capitalism. This analysis is largely rooted in the post-1977 Italian landscape of repressed insurrection and capitalist restructuring. Capitalism has converted the refusal of factory discipline expressed by new antagonistic subjects into productive activities that blur the boundaries between labor and life. Post-Fordist workers are no longer required to perform repetitive tasks. What is now put to work is the capacity of acting in concert. If Marx identified the general intellect with the abstract knowledge subsumed by the machines, autonomist Marxists argue that “general social knowledge” cannot ever be fully integrated within fixed capital because it is “actually inseparable from the interaction of a plurality of living subjects” (Hardt and Virno 1996: 194). This new *mass intellectuality* drives the development of post-Fordist capitalism.

This is precisely where the nature of the *anthropos* comes into play. Virno’s wager is that contemporary capitalism produces value by harnessing the “biological invariant” common to human individuals: the potentiality of speech and relationality. While other animals dwell in a fixed environment that triggers specialized behaviors, *Homo sapiens* is characterized by innate disorientation (*disambientamento*). The lack of specialization, “the habit of not having solid habits” (Virno 2005: 29), translates into a fundamental oscillation between blockage and innovation, negation and affirmation.

Here Virno draws on philosophical anthropology’s attempt to compare man and animal as a way to grasp the distinctive traits of man. Influential in Germany between the 1920s and 1950s, the philosophical anthropology of Helmut Plessner and Arnold Gehlen was indebted to Jakob von Uexküll’s (2010) ethological study of the relations between organisms and their *Umwelten*, lifeworlds defined by correspondences between sensory capacities and environmental forces. Uexküll, however, seemed inclined to think that humans, too, act within a particular milieu, one more complex than that of many other living beings and yet functioning on the basis of the same operating principles.³ In contrast, philosophical anthropologists argued that the human species is fundamentally deprived of *Umwelt* and therefore compensates this deficiency through the creation of cultural environments and the capacity for self-reflexivity.

Virno and philosophical anthropologists agree that all organisms are enmeshed in lifeworlds. But humans, they contend, are eccentric beings,

deprived of a milieu and therefore at a distance from themselves. This “openness to the world” sets *Homo sapiens* apart from other organisms. As beings that do not fully coincide with their milieu, humans have the capacity to transform their form of life. Insofar as post-Fordism relies on human non-specialization, it engenders, according to Virno (2009), a historical and social repetition of anthropogenesis. In other words, the post-Fordist organization of labor corresponds to an ontological condition that oscillates between repetition and the capacity to invent the new.

It is important to note that when Virno draws attention to the “since always” of human nature he is evoking not a transhistorical essence but a potentiality that is immanent in human beings. He is interested in how the “right now” of post-Fordism, with its insistence on flexibility and precarity, forces a reconsideration of the human as species. In this respect, his intervention partially overlaps with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2009: 212) point that the Anthropocene “requires us to put global histories of capital in conversation with the species history of humans.” For both thinkers, it is not that the human has a species destiny to fulfill but that the current global situation imposes a return to species thinking. What is perplexing, however, is the conflation between human generality and global dynamics. Chakrabarty links the global fact of anthropogenic climate change to the return to the generality of the species. In Virno’s analysis of the transformation of global capitalism, natural history is conflated with the history of *Homo sapiens*. In both cases what remain unexplored are the other-than-human forces that enable, and disable, human existence and that capitalism variously enrolls in productive processes (see Johnson, this issue).

The Political Economy of Species, Race, and Sex

According to Virno, in the context of post-Fordist transformations, Marx’s category of *Gattungswesen* (species being), the generic existence of humanity, acquires new relevance. He writes, “Roles and tasks, in the post-Ford era, correspond by and large to the *Gattungswesen* or ‘generic existence,’ which Marx discussed in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*” (Virno 2008: 78). We have come full circle: human nature is the point of integration between historical materialism, the critical trajectory that began with Marx and connects productive forces and social relations, and “naturalistic materialism,” by which Virno means the investigation of the distinctive capacities of the human species. A closer look at Marx’s species being, however, reveals an ambiguous relationship between humans and their lifeworlds, one that intersects philosophical anthropology.

In a famous passage, the young Marx describes man as a natural, conscious living being who manifests a peculiar mode of existence through sensuous activity. He writes: “The productive life is the life of the species. It is life-engendering life. The whole character of a species, its species-character, is contained in the character of its life activity; and free, conscious activity is man’s species-character” (Marx 1988: 76). Species being returns in *Capital*, volume 1, where Marx (1976: 283) offers a famous definition of *labor* as the process by which man “regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature.” He goes on to say that through this relation man “develops the potentialities slumbering within nature, and subjects the play of its forces to his own sovereign power” (283). Clearly, Marx was inspired by scientific ideas of life as the constant transformation of matter. Metabolism, a concept that he borrowed from agricultural chemistry, refers to the material exchanges activated by labor for the production and reproduction of human life.

Now, it seems to me that the formulation of species being reflects a process in which human beings act upon lifeworlds rather than in conjunction with them. Through labor, a form of energy capable of adding energy, man activates potentialities that would have otherwise remained latent. Human relation to nature, therefore, can hardly be explained in terms of coevolution, as some theorists of metabolism suggest (Foster 2000). Rather, it describes the emergence of the human out of nature, as a living being capable of tirelessly mobilizing natural forces, animate and inanimate, for its own transformation. Ultimately, what underpins species being is the narrative of the self-reflexive *anthropos* capable of transforming himself and the world. As Donna Haraway (2008: 47) puts it: “Of all philosophers, Marx understood relational sensuousness, and he thought deeply about the metabolism between human beings and the rest of the world enacted in living labor. As I read him, however, he was finally unable to escape from the humanist teleology of labor—the making of man himself.” For Marx, as for Virno’s philosophical anthropology, the human species has a relation to nature by virtue of its detachment from it.

Jason Read (2003: 180) suggests that the English translation of the German term *Gattungswesen* as “species being” might be misleading in that it underscores biological meanings. He argues that the French translation of *Gattungswesen* as *la vie générique* (generic life) might more accurately convey Marx’s use of the term. This attempt to detach species being from biology, however, overlooks how in Marx “generic life” indexes man’s universality as *opposed* to animal particularity. Marx contrasts human species being to the “species life” of animals. Animal activity is identical to itself: it is purely

instinctual and subordinated to physical needs. Humans, in contrast, can act and, simultaneously, confront the objects that they have created (Marx 1988). Labor, or *praxis*, is the primary way through which human beings collectively transform nature and, by doing so, transform themselves. In the attempt to define what is proper to man as laboring living being, Marx's species being creates a distinction between the human and the nonhuman by which only the former acts upon the world, while the latter just exists.

Still more, in this concept we find echoes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' species discourse, one not only bound up with racialized and sexualized formations but also paradoxically connected to classic political economy's effort to naturalize capitalist relations of production. The idea of the human as species emerged in eighteenth-century Europe, where it was often conflated with race and used to naturalize the hierarchical ordering of biological differences. The development of species taxonomies was steeped in the colonial obsession for classification, connected to racial subjectification and infused with sexual difference. Carl Linnaeus's taxonomy is paradigmatic in this sense. The Swedish naturalist introduced the term *Mammalia* in the mid-eighteenth century to indicate the class of animals, including humans, characterized by the presence of mammary glands. Then he used the term *Homo sapiens* to distinguish between humans and other primates and defined four racialized subspecies ranging from the white, blond, and inventive *Homo sapiens europaeus* to the *Homo sapiens afer*, described as black, lazy, and ruled by caprice. As feminist historian Londa Schiebinger (1993: 53–55) has shown, the genealogy of *Homo sapiens* is not only highly racialized but also profoundly gendered. While Linnaeus used a female characteristic (the lactating breast) to emphasize the ties between humans and animals, he employed a traditionally male feature (reason) to indicate human uniqueness, or, more precisely, the uniqueness of the European white man.

Marx was not immune from the racialized legacy of species thinking. In the *Grundrisse* he uses the distinction between species life and species being to contrast the Asiatic Mode of Production to the Germanic mode of production. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak avers that Marx conflates the Asian individual with species life, natural life without human specificity. It is only with European feudalism and the movement toward urbanization in the Germanic mode of production that the self-reflexive relationship with nature typical of species being emerges. Spivak notes (1999: 80) that in Marx's description of the Asiatic individual "it is almost as if Species-Life has not yet differentiated itself into Species-Being." The species distinction is now recast in historical as well as geographical terms.

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault (1970) argues that modern Man emerged at the intersection of three discursive domains—life, labor, and language—articulated by biology, political economy, and linguistics, respectively. These are interdependent domains, characterized by an intense flow of ideas. Political economy, for example, borrowed heavily from the species taxonomy developed by natural history. Adam Smith, who was familiar with the work of Linnaeus, proposed the market as a natural, self-regulating force independent from individual agency and able to guarantee the perpetuation of the species against extinction (Schabas 2003; Cohen 2013). Political economy had an anthropological foundation insofar as it constitutes itself in relation to “the biological properties of the human species” (Foucault 1970: 257). Marx’s project countered classic political economy’s attempts to naturalize an economic order grounded on private property and the slavery of wage labor. Yet by thinking labor as species capacity, he imported from classic political economy the idea that labor is what makes us human.

I argue that Virno, with his insistence on the coincidence between human language and labor, runs into a similar problem. Moreover, the account of post-Fordism as historical reiteration of anthropogenesis risks producing an insidious foreclosure: it elides the effects of racialization and feminization that the species discourse has historically both enabled and entailed. The foregrounding of labor as potentiality immanent in the whole of humanity obliterates the potentialities of the ecological and geological milieu that provides the conditions for what “we” have come to understand as human. Because he operates within a framework that conceives the constitution of the world in terms of production, Virno falls short of providing a counterpoint to the narratives of the Anthropocene that posits “generic” man as primary locus of geopolitical agency. However, in Virno’s work we find an expansive, and nuanced, notion of the collective that displaces the political ontology of modernity, particularly the idea that the political community is made up of individuals who have left behind the state of nature. His work invites the question of how to inherit autonomist Marxism’s rich account of the collective without embracing the human as central agent of world making.

States of Nature

Virno’s insistence on the political valence of human nature in the present context of capitalist accumulation poses an important challenge to Western modern political thought. The liberal tradition envisions isolated individuals lacking communal relation. Each individual owns something but shares

nothing with others except a set of recurring elements. For example, in the work of Thomas Hobbes, one of Virno's favorite targets, the relationship between the many and the sovereign is unidirectional. It begins with a multitude of hostile individuals scattered in the state of nature and culminates with their submission to the law in exchange for protection from violence and death. Through the transition from the prepolitical state of nature to the civil state, the multitude becomes the people, an aggregate of individuals whose interests are mediated by the universal figure of the state.

To the Universal of modern thought Virno (2010: 204–7) opposes the Common. While the former results from the abstraction of recurrent elements that return in a number of already individuated entities, the latter provides the conditions for the emergence of singularities. The common, the shared linguistic faculty of the human species, expresses a multitude of singularities that persist as such. There is no dividing line between the common and the multitude, only trajectories of dislocation. This means that there is no overcoming of the state of nature, only countless realizations of its potentiality.

Simondon's theory of individuation is key in Virno's articulation of the common as shared biolinguistic faculties that are performed differently by a multitude of singularities. Virno's interest in the process of individuation dates back to the 1980s. Already in *Convenzione e materialismo*, a book first published in 1986, he draws a connection between Marx's notion of general intellect and the philosophical concept of *principium individuationis*, which he traces back to medieval philosopher Duns Scotus. Instead of taking the individual as the given unity from which everything else can be derived, Virno (2011: 56) speaks of individuation as a process "whose rhythm is not in tune with the cogito or with consciousness (not even class consciousness) but unfolds through exterior intersections and dislocations of productive forces" (my translation) In other words, individuals are modulations of the "collective intelligence" of living labor. The reflection on the expansive dislocation of the general intellect remains a fundamental theme in Virno's thought. The encounter with Simondon has allowed him to fully explore this intuition and formulate the notion of the common as *preindividual reality*.

A rare case of a thinker working at the intersection of physics, biology, and philosophy, Simondon has been largely interpreted as a philosopher of technics and technogenesis (Mackenzie 2002; Stiegler 1998). Explicit references to politics in his work are sparse.⁴ Yet the relevance of the model of ontogenesis for elaborating alternatives to the modern fixation with individuals as the basic unity of social and political life has become the subject of an

increasingly lively debate. Etienne Balibar (1997) sees a convergence between Spinoza and Simondon as political thinkers. Muriel Combes (2013) argues that Simondon breaks away from the division between nature and politics that has been crucial in the juridical tradition of the social contract. Virno, who has translated Simondon into Italian and introduced his writings to autonomist circles, employs Simondon to advance a politics of collective subtraction from capitalism. More recently, feminist theorists such as Hasana Sharp (2011) and Elizabeth Grosz (2012) have turned to Simondon in the effort to elaborate a feminist politics that moves beyond the image of Man as the sovereign subject of history.

Instead of focusing on elementary units or essences, Simondon shifts attention to *ontogenesis*, that is, the process through which specific forms of life come into being and change over time. Ontogenesis originates in a metastable “preindividual reality,” which Simondon, inspired by pre-Socratic philosophers, also calls *nature*. In physics and chemistry, metastability indicates a system in a state of tension that even the smallest disturbance can alter. The preindividual is characterized by a level of potential energy, internal “disparations” that trigger a change in the system, leading to the emergence of more or less completed individuals.⁵ Simondon (2009: 5) writes: “In order to think individuation, being must be considered neither as a substance, nor matter, nor form, but as a system that is charged and supersaturated, above the level of unity, not consisting only of itself.” Individuation takes place when a communication is established between different orders of magnitude that coexist within the metastable system. This produces a new phase of being, a medium order that provisionally resolves an internal problematic. The growth of a plant is an example of ontogenesis: “A vegetable institutes a mediation between a cosmic order and an infra-molecular order, sorting and distributing the chemical species contained in the ground and in the atmosphere by means of the luminous energy received from the photosynthesis” (Simondon 2009: 16).

Simondon (2009) describes the dynamic of differentiation within the preindividual as transduction, an operation—physical, biological, psychic, or social—through which an activity propagates and structures heterogeneous domains that remain in relation. Transduction designates the modulation of a field, its coagulation into specific points that, in turn, trigger new rounds of structuring activity. Importantly, by describing transduction as an operation that cuts across the physical, the social, and the technological, Simondon shifts emphasis from the divisions between these realms to the nonlinear movements and thresholds that link them together. The same operation

of transduction produces living and nonliving individuals, thus destabilizing the hierarchy between life and nonlife, organic and inorganic.

Simondon distinguishes between “physical individuation” that produces inanimate individuals and “vital individuation” that produces living beings. There exists a difference of complexity and degree of metastability between the two. The emergence of physical individuals occurs in a definitive manner, marked by a stabilization of energy that indicates a completed individuation. In contrast, living individuals always carry within themselves a dimension of preindividual potentiality that makes further individuation possible. Although this argument seems to privilege life over nonlife, it carries an important corollary: “There is no real division between the physical and the vital, as if they were separated by an equally real boundary; the physical and the vital are distinguished by functions and structure, not on the basis of their substantial reality” (Simondon 2005: 323; my translation). Transductive operations affect both individuals and milieus. The preindividual milieu is never equal to itself; it is transformed by individuation in a way that does not impoverish its potential to engender endless variation. Form, matter, and energy coexist in it; none of them appears as an external element that superimposes on the others from the outside.

Virno glosses over Simondon’s insistence on the preindividual as a prevital field of disparation that propels innumerable modes of becoming. Instead, he uses the preindividual to describe the common potentialities of the human that are put to work in the circuits of post-Fordist accumulation. From this perspective, the common refers simultaneously to the linguistic capacities of the species being and the “transindividual” public sphere that might be produced by the multitude. He offers three definitions of the preindividual common, and all of them are species-specific. First, “the pre-individual is the biological basis of the species, that is, the sensory organs, motor skills apparatus, perception abilities” (Virno 2004: 76). Sensory perceptions constitute the generic capacity of the human rather than of any particular individual. For example, when I touch something, it is not just I who touch but the generic “one” of the species. Sensory perceptions exceed the sphere of the subjective to open up to the larger domain of the impersonal and the common. According to Virno, this is also true of language. A historical-natural language is shared by the speakers of a certain community; it belongs to everybody and to nobody. Thus the linguistic faculty encapsulates the second definition of the preindividual common. Finally, his third definition argues that in the regime of advanced capitalism the realm of productive forces is preindividual because “the labor process mobilizes the most universal

requisites of the species: perception, language memory and feelings” (Virno 2004: 77). How does Virno resolve the question of the relationship between the preindividual common and the realizations of its potential? Once again, he turns to Simondon and specifically to the notion of collective individuation, which he sees as a prerogative of the human associated with political life.

In contrast to the conventional image of the collective as a sort of synthesizing machine that diminishes difference, Simondon claims that the collective furthers individuation. Virno (2004: 78–79) remarks: “According to Simondon, within the collective we endeavor to refine our singularity, to bring it to its climax. Only within the collective, certainly not within the isolated subject, can perception, language, and productive forces take on the shape of an individuated experience.” The multitude, an unstable network of cognitive workers, is a form of collective individuation in which the many persevere as many and always carry within themselves shares of preindividuality. It is in the network of the multitude that the second face of the common may emerge: “Besides being preindividual, it is *transindividual*; it is not only the undifferentiated backdrop, but also the public sphere of the multitude” (Virno 2009: 64).

Virno is careful to not characterize the multitude simply as a network of rebellious singularities capable of creating alternative modes of living. It is a much more ambiguous formation, one that reflects the ambivalence of *Homo sapiens*. Such nuanced assessment of the multitude underscores the indeterminacy of any radical political project. But in Virno’s peculiar political reading of Simondon, it is as if the process of individuation that might actualize the common would begin and end with the anthropos.

Other readings of the preindividual, however, radically dislocate the centrality of the human. Deleuze (2001: 49), for example, suggests that the ontology elaborated by Simondon is “one in which Being is never One.” Combes (2013: 3) defines the preindividual as a “power of mutation,” always in excess over itself. Unlike much of modern Western thought that understands the social as processual and dynamic, capable of mobilizing a malleable nature, the ontogenetic approach frames preindividual nature as what creates the conditions for the production of variations that reverberate through the social. For Grosz (2012: 45), the preindividual “is the real, the world, the universe in its unordered givenness. What is given are singularities, specificities, tendencies, forces but not yet modes of ordering and organizing them into systems, levels, dimensions, or orders. Chaos.” Simondon’s preindividual does not coincide with human nature but is closer to what pre-Socratic philosophers called *physis*. The philosophy of ontogenesis revitalizes

physis. Even more, it rejects the division between *physis* and *techne*, what emerges out of nature and what is produced by human activity.

Ontogenesis does not accord particular privileges to any species of individuals, including humans. The preindividual, a field of prevital incompatibilities, provides the conditions for the emergence of living and nonliving beings. In other words, it makes individuation possible, but it is not reducible to any particular trajectory of becoming. By foregrounding this aspect of the differential, chaotic nature of the preindividual, I want to complicate Virno's notion of the common as reservoir of human potentialities and public sphere of the multitude.

A profound skepticism, if not an outright rejection, of "anthropological" problems appears everywhere in Simondon's writings on individuation. "The notion of anthropology itself," he contends, "implies the implicit affirmation of the specificity of Man, separated from the vital" (Simondon 2005: 297; my translation). The reference to anthropology can be taken as a critical reference to the dominant humanist orientation of Western philosophy from which Simondon seeks a way out. In the French context of the 1950s, the tendency was to look at the human through either the Freudian lenses of the psychic or the Marxist lenses of social relations of production. The model of ontogenesis breaks with both traditions in that it places emphasis on what enables individuation, on transductive transformations across physical, psychic, social, and technical domains. For Simondon, there is no human nature, only thresholds and transitions that define the human as a particularly unstable field of individuation. But rather than explaining instability through the abstract model of the species (Simondon 2011), he focuses on degrees of individuation. This is not to deny human singularity but to refuse bounded notions of the human as a form of becoming autonomous from animal and mineral existence. Individuation is not human to begin with; it emerges out of an inhuman milieu and unfolds in innumerable directions.

Virno does away with the notion of politics as an overcoming of the state of nature deeply ingrained in the liberal tradition. In thinking the common, he connects natural potentialities with a politics that is also entangled with the development of the forces of production. This is a powerful move, but one that presents the limit of analyzing the human species as a rather undifferentiated aggregate of living beings and in utter isolation from ecological and geological formations. Simondon, on his part, does not provide an analysis of power, an understanding of how particular individuations of preindividual tensions come to acquire quasi stability as abstract models with violent effects on particular categories of bodies. For example, how did

gender, race, and species become hierarchical categories producing distinctions within the human and between human and nonhuman beings? What Simondon offers, however, is the forsaking of anthropology as the ground of politics. This, I contend, does not mean to do away with politics altogether. On the contrary, it poses the challenge of cultivating different forms of politics.

This is the direction toward which Simondon (2005: 314) points us with the striking assertion that the collective “exists *physikos* and not *logikos*.” The Greek adverbs φυσικῶς (*physikos*) and λογικῶς (*logikos*), which appear in the French text, can be roughly translated as “pertaining to nature” and “pertaining to reason,” respectively. I take this as an indication that, in thinking the formation of the collective, Simondon prioritizes “physical” nature, that is, the relation to preindividual reality rather than cognitive capacities. Instead of thinking preindividual nature as the mute substratum that is left behind in the human process of collective becoming, Simondon calls attention to the indeterminacy of *physis* that makes politics possible. What is at stake here is the opening up of an approach to politics that does not lose sight of the preital and living elements that are elaborated by psychic and collective individuation. Collective individuation is realized via transductive movements that actualize a field of potentialities. As that which creates the conditions for trajectories of becoming, preindividual nature “renders social transformation thinkable” (Combes 2013: 54).

Making the Common in the Ruins of the Anthropocene

Combes (2013: 50) writes that Simondon replaces the Kantian query “What is man?” with the question “What can a human do insofar as she is not alone?” Simondon, she argues, proposes “a humanism without the human to be built on the ruins of anthropology” (50). This assertion resonates with the trope of “living in ruins” that Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015), Haraway (2016), and Isabelle Stengers (this issue) have been deploying in recent writings. These feminist thinkers direct attention to collectives that strive to persist in the devastated landscapes of the capitalist Anthropocene. Not unlike Simondon, they contend that the invention of the new requires the dislodging of Man as prime mover of history. Joining these efforts to dethrone the anthropos from its commanding positions, I want to rethink the common through the Simondonian question of what humans can do insofar as they are not alone. Let me turn to a particular instance of the common to clarify what I mean.

In the early 1990s, builders working at the foundations of a shopping center in a densely populated area in Rome, Italy, struck a source of Rome’s famous *acqua bullicante*, mineral water that flows through a geological layer

storing the ruins of the Roman Empire and now mixed with plastic debris, a marker of the Anthropocene. After a few months, the water submerged the construction site and formed an urban lake. The watery formation bordered the Ex SNIA Viscosa, a former textile factory turned into a self-managed social center and laboratory for activists. Quietly, the lake began to exert its force of attraction on those who learned to care for its existence.

When new development plans for the area were announced, an alliance of local residents and activists from the Ex SNIA Viscosa, including hip-hop artists and rebel scientists, organized a protest. They studied the geology of the area, tested the water for assessing toxicity levels, learned about the birds and plants populating the lake, and negotiated with the local administration.⁶ They referred to the “lake that resists” as a common. But, I suggest, this is a common where it is hard to tell when nature ends and the social begins.

That is how the hip-hop song “The Lake That Struggles,” composed as part of the mobilization, describes what happened: “The lake invaded the reinforced concrete and asked for help, / we learned to imagine, love, and experience it.”⁷ For some this may conjure up the romantic image of an innocent nature that turns against plunderers to form a common that activists are called to defend. I do not wish to subscribe to this narrative of holistic nature. More than pristine wilderness that needs to be protected, the lake resembles what some would define as “second nature” produced by human action (Smith 1984). But this second nature does something: it is capable of altering the beings that press upon it. Through the reference to a “nature that resists,” the lyric makes present an attachment that forced political thought. Stengers (2005: 191) suggests that “attachments are what cause people . . . to feel and think, to be able or become able.” Attachments generate problems and pose questions that may be resolved through new trajectories of collective form taking. They propel collective transformation that could not be enacted by humans alone. Attachments, however, are not a matter of partnership or even alliance. They involve asymmetry, the possibility of relation without reciprocity.

The episode of the lake is seemingly insignificant when placed next to big-pictures stories of antagonism, riots, and uprisings that characterize the uneven geographies of the Anthropocene. Yet this struggle, one among many specific instances of commoning, constitutes fertile ground for experimenting with alternative textures of politics in the ruins of the Anthropocene. To me its significance is this: the watery formation slowed down urban development and enabled the making of the common. What might be flourishing around the urban lake is an instance of collective individuation that

foregrounds attachments to its ecological and geological conditions of possibility. This is a mode of commoning without the anthropos as its center.

As Alberto Toscano aptly notes, Virno's thinking of the preindividual common as human nature implies that a new social configuration lies in a state of latency, as if waiting for the propitious convergence of anthropogenesis and capitalist development to emerge. From this perspective, politics would consist in the insurrection of human biolinguistic capacities against capitalist control (Toscano 2007: 2). Simondon instead gestures toward a politics that begins with "the invention of a communication between initially impossible series; as invention of a common that is not given in advance" (3). Moving along these lines, this essay argues for a reconsideration of the preindividual as a more-than-human field of potentiality, the ground for the difficult task of making the common. Neither the reservoir of human linguistic faculties nor its actualization beyond capitalism, the common could be thought of as a project enacted by humans as beings "with and of the earth" (Haraway 2016: 60).

Virno offers a profound rethinking of the relationship between natural human potentials, their historical realizations and political relevance for the present time. By doing so, he unsettles one of the key tenets of Western political thought, namely, the idea that politics begins where the realm of nature ends. Yet as this essay demonstrates, he also conflates natural history with the history of the laboring human. For Virno, as for Marx and much of autonomist thought, man produces man, a figure whose only attachment is to himself. This essay focuses on different genealogies of the human. It attends to the racialized and gendered logic that has historically informed the dominant model of man that acts upon and transforms the world. At the same time, building on Simondon, it explores instances of the common capable of making present the other-than-human forces operating "within everything we think is ours, or our own doing" (Sharp 2011: 9). The capitalist Anthropocene is replete with assumptions about *Homo sapiens* as agent of catastrophe and source of salvation. Radical thought ought to operate within and against them, for it is not a reinvigorated humanism that can create modes of living otherwise but rather situated collectives that politicize the attachments to that which makes them possible.

Notes

- 1 *A Grammar of the Multitude* and *When the Word Becomes Flesh* were published in Italian in 2001 and 2003, respectively. Portions of *E così via all'infinito*, published in 2010, have appeared in the journal *Parrhesia*. See Virno 2004, 2015, 2010.

- 2 Virno offers rich accounts of his political and intellectual trajectory in an interview with Branden W. Joseph (see Virno 2005) and in *Gli operaiisti*, a book collecting biographical statements and interviews with many workerist thinkers (see Borio, Pozzi, and Roggero 2005).
- 3 Of course, the problem with Uexküll is the tendency to think in terms of enclosed sensory bubbles, vital spaces at times conflated with the nation-state. Roberto Esposito (2008: 17–19) has drawn attention to this aspect of Uexküll’s ethology.
- 4 Simondon’s first publication, *Du mode d’existence des objets techniques* appeared in France in 1958. It is only in 1989, with the posthumous release of *L’individuation psychique and collective*, that his work began to be widely read. His writings on individuation have been published as a whole in *L’individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d’information* (Simondon 2005).
- 5 Simondon uses *disparation* (*disparition*) to name an incompatibility, a difference, that arises within a metastable system. Disparation is therefore a condition of individuation.
- 6 In 2014 the city’s administration expropriated a large part of the land and pledged to work with the activists to keep the area accessible to all. The funds promised for this project, however, have been diverted elsewhere. The struggle continues.
- 7 “The Lake That Struggles” is a song by Assalti Frontali and Il Muro del Canto. My translation.

References

- Autin, Whitney, and John Holbrook. 2012. “Is the Anthropocene an Issue of Stratigraphy or Pop Culture?” *GSA Today* 22, no. 7: 60–61.
- Balibar, Etienne. 1997. *Spinoza: From Individuality to Transindividuality*. Delft: Eburon.
- Borio, Guido, Francesca Pozzi, and Gigi Roggero, eds. 2005. *Gli operaiisti: Autobiografie dei cattivi maestri (The Workerists: Autobiographies of Wicked Teachers)*. Rome: DeriveApprodi.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2009. “The Climate of History: Four Theses.” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2: 197–222.
- Cohen, Ed. 2013. “Human Tendencies.” *e-misférica* 10, no. 1. <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/e-misferica-101/cohen>.
- Combes, Muriel. 2013. *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual*. Translated by Thomas LaMarre. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 2001. “Review of Gilbert Simondon’s *L’individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* (1966).” Translated by Alberto Toscano. *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 12: 43–49.
- Esposito, Roberto. 2008. *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*. Translated by Timothy Campbell. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Foster, John Bellamy. 2000. *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature*. New York: Monthly Review.
- Foucault, Michel. 1970. *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. 2012. “Identity and Individuation: Some Feminist Reflections.” In *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology*, edited by Arne De Boever et al., 37–56. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

- Hamilton, Clive. 2013. *Earthmasters: The Dawn of the Age of Climate Engineering*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Haraway, Donna. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Haraway, Donna. 2016. "Staying with the Trouble: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene." In *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, edited by Jason W. Moore, 34–76. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- Hardt, Michael, and Paolo Virno. 1996. *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kolbert, Elizabeth. 2014. *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. New York: Holt.
- Mackenzie, Adrian. 2002. *Transductions: Bodies and Machines at Speed*. London: Continuum.
- Marx, Karl. 1973. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Martin Nicolaus. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.
- Marx, Karl. 1976. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Vol. 1. Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin.
- Marx, Karl. 1988. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Translated by Martin Milligan. Amherst, MA: Prometheus Books.
- Read, Jason. 2003. *The Micro-Politics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of the Present*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Schabas, Margaret. 2003. *The Natural Origins of Economics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schiebinger, Londa. 1993. *Nature's Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science*. Boston: Beacon.
- Sharp, Hasana. 2011. *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Simondon, Gilbert. 2005. *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information (Individuation in the Light of the Concepts of Form and Information)*. Paris: Jerome Millon.
- Simondon, Gilbert. 2009. "The Position of the Problem of Ontogenesis." Translated by Gregory Flanders. *Parrhesia*, no. 7: 4–16.
- Simondon, Gilbert. 2011. *Two Lessons on Animal and Man*. Translated by Drew S. Burk. Minneapolis: Univocal.
- Smith, Neil. 1984. *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*. New York: Blackwell.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravarty. 1999. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Stengers, Isabelle. 2005. "Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices." *Cultural Studies Review* 11, no. 1: 183–96.
- Stiegler, Bernard. 1998. *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*. Translated by Richard Beardsworth and George Collins. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Toscano, Alberto. 2007. "The Disparate: Ontology and Politics in Simondon." Paper presented at the Society for European Philosophy / Forum for European Philosophy annual conference, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK, September 9. www.after1968.org/app/webroot/uploads/Toscano_Ontology_Politics_Simondon.pdf.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Uexküll, Jakob von. 2010. *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans: With a Theory of Meaning*. Translated by Joseph D. O'Neil. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Virno, Paolo. 2004. *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. Translated by Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Virno, Paolo. 2005. "Interview with Paolo Virno." Conducted by Brandon W. Joseph. Translated by Alessia Ricciardi. *Grey Room*, no. 21: 26–37.
- Virno, Paolo. 2008. *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*. Translated by Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Virno, Paolo. 2009. "Angels and the General Intellect: Individuation in Duns Scotus and Gilbert Simondon." Translated by Nick Heron. *Parrhesia*, no. 7: 58–67.
- Virno, Paolo. 2010. *E così via, all'infinito: Logica e antropologia (And So Away with Infinity: Logic and Anthropology)*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Virno, Paolo. 2011. *Convenzione e materialismo: L'unicità senza aura (Convention and Materialism: Uniqueness without Aura)*. Rome: DeriveApprodi.
- Virno, Paolo. 2015. *When the Word Becomes Flesh: Language and Human Nature*. Translated by Giuseppina Mecchia. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).

