Revolutions of Capitalism

The Politics of the Event

Maurizio Lazzarato

TRANSLATED BY
BRIAN WHITENER
AND GEO MAHER

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Introduction

Brian Whitener

I first read Maurizio Lazzarato's *Revolutions of Capitalism* sometime in 2006 in a rooftop apartment in Mexico City. The book was a Spanish translation from the Argentine press Tinta Limón, and, at the time, I read it as in conversation with the great Argentinian uprising of December 19 and 20, 2001—as a call to return to politics after the fallow years of neoliberalism. It is a book that I have returned to many times over the years since, drawn in by its combination of political and theoretical innovation. The conviction that it is a work that continues to repay study—even now almost twenty years after its publication—drove our decision to translate it, as there is no more careful study of a text than translation. Now, perhaps more than ever, *Revolutions of Capitalism* cunningly and cannily opens new horizons for thought—particularly in how, twenty years after its original publication, it reconnects us to past histories of struggle and opens the present onto them.

At the heart of *Revolutions of Capitalism* is the insight that politics is an event—and Lazzarato begins the book with the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, the first salvo in the United States against neoliberalism, which would, with uprisings in Argentina, Bolivia, and elsewhere, soon become a hemispheric battle. Such events, according to Lazzarato, bring with them a "field of possibles" and allow "new possibilities of life to emerge." Lazzarato critiques forms of politics, be they Marxist, liberal democratic, or procapitalist, that bring preconceived ideas to the field of the possibles—rather, these possibles, as new, must be grasped and understood on their own terms. *Revolutions of Capitalism* understands politics as requiring the translation of these new possibles into actuality. We must refuse to give in to a "distribution of possibles" given in advance as "binary alternatives (man/woman, capitalists/workers, nature/society, labor/leisure, adult/child, intellectual/manual, etc.)" in order to hold onto the "new possibilities of life [that] hurl themselves . . . against established powers."

In this way, Lazzarato models a way of relating thought and politics that is rigorously open—one that refuses formatting, one that follows wherever an event leads. One of the ongoing attractions of *Revolutions of Capitalism* is that it presents Lazzarato as a movement thinker. While the book opens with the "Battle in Seattle," the struggle that is at the center of it and that motivates much of the thinking is that of the 2003–4 sequence in France of the intermittent performing arts workers (*intermittents du spectacle*). Essentially, these were struggles around precaritization, but what Lazzarato is thinking through—alongside, as it were, his immersion in these struggles—is the question of what is new in them and how they might be organized. This is where Lazzarato's critique of existing union or party organizing ends up—as he writes, "The greatest obstacle to contemporary struggles is the push to contain them within the framework of the capital-labor relation and enclose them within the forms of organization, readdress, mobilization, and militancy codified according to the principles of factory cooperation and its concept of labor, wealth, and divisions between economy and society and base and superstructure." Following an opening in a field of possibles, tracing how a possible could be made actual, and specifying the organizational forms that could carry such work forward—this is exactly what the best of contemporary movement and militant thinking within organizing contexts tries to do. It tries to discern how not to fight the prior battle; to assess what is new in a situation; and to grasp both change and continuity. In this book, Lazzarato makes an important contribution to our understanding of how to do this work.

The social theory Lazzarato derives from his version of the politics of the event develops through an argument with orthodox Marxism. Lazzarato begins from nineteenth-century French sociologist Gabriel Tarde's rereading of Leibniz: In

our present, all worlds are possible—not just in the mind of God, but rather in actuality. *Neomonadology* is Lazzarato's term for thinking a world "populated by a multiplicity of singularities, but also by a multiplicity of possible worlds." A multiplicity of possible (and incompossible) worlds is the core of Lazzarato's theory of the social: "We find ourselves in a situation where what had been excluded by Leibniz's philosophy is becoming reality, as all the incompossible worlds can enter into existence at the same time." Difference and becoming (of worlds) are the basis of the social—and political actors differ depending on their relation to this becoming. They can try to control the becoming, what Lazzarato terms neutralization, or they can participate in actualization, by fleeing the worlds of discipline and control through invention (or "by inventing incompossible worlds").

For Lazzarato, this understanding of the social and the political marks a break with Marxism, since "classes no longer manage to contain multiplicity, in the same way that heterosexuality no longer normalizes the thousands of sexes." We might argue that this bends the stick a bit too far—or that we would need to specify which and what kinds of Marxism would understand classes and "sexes" in this way. However, Lazzarato's text enters here into a productive conversation with our own moment once again. Lazzarato is a representative of a post–1968 tradition that has been roundly critical of the orthodox political formations of left parties and unions. Much of this post–1968 tradition critiques how these parties and unions have continually limited and undermined militant struggles, and Lazzarato's version of this critique is certainly not unpersuasive. In a US context, which has seen the rise of the Democratic Socialists of America and a return to more militant union organizing—movements that can also carry with them an occasionally frustratingly limited politics—these kinds of critiques could help us break out of or move past the limitations of such political forms.

Revolutions of Capitalism also presents a media theory that is fortuitously both in and out of step with our social media and AI-dominated present. Across several chapters, Lazzarato builds a critical theory of the internet or what he calls "noo-politics." Noo-politics describes the action of brains at a distance on other brains or the attempt to control memory and attention, which for Lazzarato, forms a third tier of power in contemporary control societies, alongside disciplinary techniques (aimed at the body) and biopolitical techniques (aimed at populations). Again, Tarde is the key point of reference for Lazzarato. Tarde is the theorist of the nineteenth century who saw the "age of publics, that is, an era in which the fundamental problem is holding together whatever subjectivities that act on one another at a distance and in open space." Lazzarato builds a useful media genealogy back to early advertising and radio through television and video that doesn't treat the form of social control represented by the internet as wholly new, and his

expanded genealogy allows us to displace the presentism and futurism of current AI discussions. This theorization of "action at a distance" gives us an opening to trace historically the modulation of these new institutions of "public opinion, collective perception, and collective intelligence" and the power relations "expressed through action at a distance by one mind on another mind, through the capacity of brains to affect and be affected, mediatized and enriched by technology."

Finally, in this book Lazzarato provides a window into French organizing scenes centered on the form of the "coordination," which is a self-organized political form that exists either outside or alongside traditional union structures and that helps to guide a particular struggle. For Lazzarato, the coordination is the apparatus "through which postsocialist movements hold together the two planes of action (that of resistance against power and the unfolding of multiplicity)." Coordinations represent a politics that is open to the event—one not ruled by the logic of parties and unions. In Lazzarato's reading, the coordination seeks to actualize "possible worlds and subtracts itself from the consensus and division of a single shared world." As well, the coordination as a political form reappropriates the action at a distance of brains: "In the coordination, all the forces of brains' cooperation (the power of assemblage, disjunction, and coordination of flows and networks, mobility, capacity to compose the new, and creation and actualization of publics), instead of being appropriated and exploited by the communication and culture industries, drive the struggle." For the past two decades, the most important thread of militant French politics in the United States has been insurrectionary, under the influence of *Tiqqun* and the Invisible Committee. However, this other current of "coordinations"—particularly if we see it as forming a continuum with more recent ecological struggles (such as the Soulèvements de la Terre aka "Earth Uprising")—is now becoming better known and more influential in political discussions. Lazzarato's theorizations of this form hold possibilities for reconstituting and reformulating our own political strategies and tactics, ones that can surely shed some much needed light and perhaps can provide a glimmer of hope in difficult times.