

A Common Assembly: Multitude, Assemblies, and a New Politics of the Common

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Abstract

Contemporary experiments in organising the "multitude" have proliferated of late – from the encampments of Occupy to the Quebec student strike, the Arab Spring, and the European anti-austerity movements. These experiments, all appearing highly networked, have a political form in common – the assembly. This organising model, the "assembly" as form, now seems to provide a point of convergence for a variety of left tendencies – including both jaded transversal activists who want a bit more vertical organization and vanguardists who have been forced to learn the lessons of horizontality. It is a politics no longer split along traditional lineages, but rather opens us on to a politics of the common – something shared between people, not mediated by the State or capital. Using concepts drawn both from concrete activist experience and from the tradition of autonomism. This paper explores some of the genealogy of the assembly as form, and examines the autonomist notion of the common in order to see the convergences between emergent assembly projects – such as the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly – and theoretical tools that Autonomist theory has provided in order to being the project of thinking about how we can structure, coordinate, and organise movements so that they get us closer to the creation of a new world.

In the fallout of the financial crisis of 2008, there was a moment of silence. When global financial services firm Lehman Brothers folded, filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in the wee hours of September 15, 2008, it seemed that the left held its collective breath. As the financial crisis – coming on the heels of a burst housing bubble in 2006 and a global food price crisis in 2007 – spiralled, the imagined spontaneity of multitude that Hardt and Negri (2000; 2004) had ecstatically theorised at the turn of the century did not immediately appear. History, it seemed, was not on the radical left's side. Mass industrial production had ceased, in many ways, to be the prime economic driver of North American economies in the years preceding the financial crisis, and many of those living in the United States and Canada quickly became part of an increasingly disposable working class in its aftermath. Thrust into the interstices of a crumbling economy, by 2008 many were struggling to survive on part-time jobs in the retail and service sector, on low-wages only about to get lower, and on an increasingly

weaker labour movement. While the decade leading up to the crisis, and its aftermath, had seen cycles of struggles - including the 2006 immigrants' rights marches which brought half a million demonstrators to the streets in Los Angeles (and more across the US) and an anti-war movement which brought millions of people to the streets on a single weekend¹ - few of these had been centred around strong and networked anti-systemic movements, or were not driven by, or even had the mass participation of, organised labour or radical parties of the left as their institutional bedrock. It is neither unkind nor unfair to assert that in the aftermath of the economic crisis, for a period, all was quiet on one front of the class war. Labour did not engage while capital furiously raged against the working class, reshaping the world in its own favour in the twilight of neoliberalism.

As the world and capital changed, class composition changed with it. What was the working class of the early 20th century was not the working class of the 1950s and 60s; and that mid-century working class is not the working class of today. The institutions, the organisational bodies that have adhered to the composition of the working class in previous eras were to be shaken up in the 21st century; something new and experimental was emerging. The Occupy movement in many ways epitomises this experimentation. An amorphous body attempting to challenge the hegemony of financial capital whilst simultaneously attempting to create a reproductive common² centred on shared labour and struggle. It was both the result of transformative politics coming from the struggles of 1968 and earlier experiments in bottom-up organising, and a particular response to the shifting political and technical composition of the contemporary North American working class. But the Occupy movement is only one example of a proliferation of experiments in organisational structure that have been taking place quietly – and not-so-quietly – across the landscape of North America, Europe, North Africa, and Latin America, for the last several years. In this article, because it is the context in which I live and work, I will focus my attention on the experiments taking place in North America, but this is not to mistake the North American situation to be an isolated or even unique one. The model of the assembly – which was central to the organising body of Occupy, to the student strikes in Quebec, and to the new attempt at worker-community organising in Toronto as well as in the American South – is co-extensive with projects of similar infrastructure in

¹ Millions join global anti-war protests on BBC.co.uk <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2765215.stm> and Thousands march for immigrant rights on CNN.com <http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/05/01/immigrant.day/index.html>

² The “common” as a term and concept has a long history that predates modernity, initially signifying the communally held lands that were the basis of European agrarian life. In much Autonomist work – Hardt and Negri (2000; 2009), Federici (2004; 2012), and Caffentzis (2012), for example – the common has been expanded beyond the bounds of the natural world and is utilised to mean the networks of knowledge and communication that reside at the centre of many contemporary modes of production and shape the capacity to think and communicate, to reproduce the social.

the squares of Athens, Madrid, Cairo, and beyond. The radical proliferation of assembly projects across the globe points to an emergent mode of organising in a new era of class composition – one that perhaps surpasses Hardt and Negri's concept of "multitude" (2000; 2004), prefigures the possible infrastructures of the common, and asserts a new organisational form with historical precedent but unique to this particular historical conjuncture. It is in this contemporary moment that old political concepts and practices – such as the vanguard party and the mass – may not be permitted to re-emerge as hegemonic and disrupt or co-opt struggles of the working classes from below³. This moment allows us to examine that which Negri sought to illuminate in his discussion of the transition from the mass worker to the social worker in his analysis of class composition: a framework of incipient new values, existing at a mass level, able to repurpose dissent into a new model for the construction of a communist future (Negri, 1988). In this article I propose that the assembly is an emergent mode of organising in the contemporary class composition. I seek to analyse this emergent mode in detail through the model of the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly, as an example of a political organisation attempting to contend with the changed class composition of the contemporary mode of capitalist production.

Class composition is a dissident adaptation of Marx's organic composition of capital, as discussed in Volume 1 of *Capital*. The organic composition of capital is the ratio of constant capital to variable capital in production or, more clearly, the correlation of materials, tools, and machines for production and the labour-power or workers necessary in that production⁴. Class composition, on the other hand, represents at a theoretical level the central, historical importance of class struggle. It is the combination of political and material characteristics which make up, on the one hand, the historically given structure of labour-power as configured by the productive forces and relations occurring within capitalism; and on the other, the working class, as a dynamic subject and antagonistic force which is "tending towards its own independent identity in historical-political terms" (Negri, 1988: 209). It refers to "the process of socialisation of the working class, and the extension, unification, and generalisation of its *antagonistic tendency against capital*, in struggle, and *from below*" (Negri, 1991; xi). Class composition defines the power and organisation of *labour* as it is configured antagonistically in relation to capital. It also is the way in which the

³ An partial list of very recent experiments in assembly politics could include the People's Movement Assemblies growing out of the World Social Forum and US Social Forum, the Southern Movement Assembly, the Southern Workers' Assembly, the People's Assemblies Network alongside the better known Occupy assemblies, the student and neighbourhood assemblies in Quebec's "Maple Spring" and the assembly under discussion here, the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly. This list is in no way comprehensive but provides a sampling of assembly projects that have developed in the last decade alone, most within the last 12-18 months.

⁴ See Chapter 23 of *Capital Volume 1* "The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation."

technical composition of labour (the capitalist organisation of labour power) corresponds to various behaviour patterns constituting particular openings amongst workers which then permit a reading of the forms of action and organisation possible at various historical conjunctures (Negri, 1991; Nunes, 2007; Cleaver, 1998). So, forms of struggle are thus expressed in terms of a particular composition of the working class and the specific historical forms of struggle depend upon the conditions of production. For activists this means that the form or structure of organising class struggle changes alongside changes in the composition of the working class- how one can organise is itself dependent upon the primacy of certain configurations of capital within capitalism. Class composition and their attendant modes of organising are transitory. As struggle pushes capital to change, so class composition and organisational models change with it. In certain transitory periods workers have gone beyond old organisational models “but have not yet reached a new organisation in a vacuum of political organisation” (Tronti, in Roggero, 2011).

In the contemporary conjuncture, I suggest that previously prevailing modes of organising the class struggle (particularly the party model, both revolutionary and parliamentary, and the bureaucratic trades union model) should no longer be considered the exclusive representatives of working class political activity, nor the hegemonic form of working class struggle. We have also passed through the “vacuum” stage of political organising and a new political institution is emergent;⁵ that of the assembly. The assembly as it is constituted today – especially in the various Occupy movements, the Quebec student strike, square seizures, and public protests against austerity – is explicitly *not* the General Assembly of the United Nations, nor the assemblies of various states and parliamentary bodies, for they are only representative politics. The contemporary assembly rejects a politics of simple representation and rather seeks to describe and build an actually existent political organisation of the common; it moves beyond multitude, what Hardt and Negri saw as the class composition in a regime of biopolitical production⁶ but which was, I believe, a phase of transition.

Multitude as described by Hardt and Negri is lacking. I argue that a

⁵ Truthfully, we could say that the assembly is *re-emergent*: assemblies are not a new form of organising political struggle. There are, though, considerable differences between today's assemblies and their historical forebears, which I will attempt to demonstrate below.

⁶ Hardt and Negri see biopolitical production as the new nature of productive labour that moves away from mass production in a factory setting and is centred around more immaterial modes of the production of surplus value, including intellectual and communicative labour power (Hardt and Negri, 2000). This is important for conceptualising the new assembly movements because it signifies a new spatial locale for resistance – no longer situated exclusively in the factory, the sites of resistance become the workers' very bodies, the home, the social realm. All labour, in a regime of biopolitical production, is immersed in the relational elements that define the social, but simultaneously activate the “critical elements that develop the potential of insubordination and revolt through the entire set of labouring practices” (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 28). It is both production and reproduction.

description of and impetus to class struggle, and a detailed discussion of the assembly form can provide us with a framework for thinking new modes and forms of class struggle in the present, expanding multitude as a concept or moving beyond it. As we move into an era of ever-increasing austerity and intensified class warfare, the attempt to evince a coherent, non-authoritarian communism capable of producing the common must be simultaneous with the search for a new institutional and political form that is up to the task of such a long term project and programme. This new political form must be able to reassemble and organise the nodes in varying circuits of struggle, so that they are robust enough to become the channels for the circulation of the common. The assembly as a political formation can provide the means for beginning to seriously engage with the production of the common and provide the organisational terrain for the common politics to come.

In order to demonstrate the value of the assembly as an organisational formation coherent in the contemporary, I will begin by laying the theoretical terrain on which I want to situate this struggle. The political and theoretical tradition of *operaismo* or Autonomist Marxism contribute to an understanding of revolution as, by necessity, driven by the producers and reproducers of the social and economic realm; workers, broadly construed. With this theoretical toolbox in hand, the specific historical and contemporary instantiations of the assembly as a constituted political organisation of the common can be made clearer. The possibility that the assembly form holds for potential models of post-party politics comes to life. The assembly form has been used very recently in a variety of struggles, some of which I have direct experience of, and it is from this perspective of experiential knowledge that I wish to write. Thus while I will briefly examine the historical lineages of the assembly form, I will focus on a contemporary one in which I have worked – the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly (GTWA) – in order to make the historical connections and political possibilities clear. With reference to other projects which centred assemblies in their struggle, I will focus on the experiment engaged in by the members of the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly because its aim is to rethink working class organising in Toronto as a project of political experimentation, and demonstrate its contribution to the creation of spaces for networked entities to struggle for a shared, common world.

Theoretical lineages:

***Operaismo*, autonomism, and the ancestry of multitude.**

Autonomist Marxism concerns itself with the autonomy of human subjects. It is a Marxism centred on the conflict between producers and appropriators, between labour and capital, with labour being the active subject in the relation. In elaborating on Marx's account of the relationship between labour and capital, Western Marxisms have tended to focus on the dominant logic of capital itself, but Autonomists sought to affirm the power

of labour and the subsequent responses of capital to class struggle (Dyer-Witheford, 2004), inverting the dialectical relationship between labour and capital. This Copernican turn (Moulier, 1989: 19), first theorised by Tronti (1979), sees all changes in the mode of production within capital as an outcome of workers' struggles. Thus the perspective of Autonomist theory is located in the struggle of the worker and the political history of capital is the "history of successive attempts of the capitalist class to emancipate itself from the working class" (Tronti, 1979, 10 quoted in Trott, 2007:205). For this reason, Autonomism, provides us the best position from which to analyse and examine critical modes of organising in an era of austerity where the common cannot come soon enough. Additionally an Autonomist perspective is crucial to understanding new modes of worker organising which rely not on the state, nor on parties, nor on top down bureaucratic union structures, but rather are self-generative, autonomous, and developed horizontally through networks both technological and biological.

Class composition is also a concept derived from Autonomist Marxist theorising and as noted above, forms of struggle become particular to variations of class composition. In response to these forms of struggle capital attempts to impose several changes designed to restore discipline; this discipline forces a "decomposition" of the class which then gives rise to new struggles and a new class composition (Trott, 2007). In this way, class composition is connected to the circulation of struggles and how these struggles are organised. Multitude is the political composition of the working class within biopolitical capitalism as elaborated by Hardt and Negri in their trilogy *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2004), and *Commonwealth* (2009), but its inadequacies lead us to consider more expansive and directional forms of struggle, such as those we find in the assembly.

In order to understand multitude as the composition of the class in a regime of hegemonic biopolitical production⁷, it will benefit us to work through a brief history of class composition, as Negri has defined it. Saying that a regime of biopolitical production – more immaterial, reproductive, communicative forms of labour – is hegemonic is not to suggest that it is dominant in numbers or even that material production is dissipating; it is not to argue that more workers labour in call centres than in automobile factories, for example. Rather, it is to insist that the elements particular to

⁷ Hardt and Negri see biopolitical production as the new nature of productive labour that moves away from mass production in a factory setting and is centred around more immaterial modes of the production of surplus value, including intellectual and communicative labour power (Hardt and Negri, 2000). This is important for conceptualising the new assembly movements because it signifies a new spatial locale for resistance – no longer situated exclusively in the factory, the sites of resistance become the workers' very bodies, the home, the social realm. All labour, in a regime of biopolitical production, is immersed in the relational elements that define the social, but simultaneously activate the "critical elements that develop the potential of insubordination and revolt through the entire set of labouring practices" (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 28). It is both production and reproduction.

biopolitical production – knowledge, communication, and affectivity, as well as the ways in which “the results of capitalist production are social relations and forms of life” (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 131) – come to structure all of capitalist production. It is to say that the value of material production is “increasingly dependent on and subordinated to immaterial factors and goods” (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 132). Hardt and Negri argue that this regime of production shapes the class composition of the present moment, and that different historical periods struggled in different compositions of the working class.

The first composition of the class under capital, as identified by Negri, was the phase of large-scale industry, the late industrial revolution. In this phase the skills and activities of a previously artisanal workforce were beginning to be narrowed and subordinated to the functioning of machine technologies and the “professional worker” was the hegemonic working class subjectivity. The interests of this industrial proletariat were represented by the vanguardist workers' party (Bowring, 2004), organisations with a mass membership and an intellectual vanguard.

Capital responded to the class struggle of the “skilled professional worker” through a decomposition of the workforce with the introduction of Taylorist production practices and Fordist regulation. These practices subdivided labour into simplified, deskilled, and individualised tasks that only together formed a complex whole, and the worker became simply a human appendage of the assembly line., giving rise to what Negri called the “mass worker” (Negri, 1992; Bowring, 2004). The mass workers' labour was truly that of Marx's “abstract labour,” i.e., “labour which is independent of the particular concrete form it takes at any given time” (Bowring, 2004: 106) as it was so divided and separated from the end product created, “reduced to mere abstraction and activity” (Marx, 1973: 693). The machine rose to new heights of importance in production. As Marx notes, it is not “as with the instrument, which the worker animates and makes into his organ with his skill and strength, and whose handling therefore depends on his virtuosity” but rather “it is the machine which possesses skill and strength in the place of the worker, is itself the virtuoso, with a soul of its own in the mechanical laws acting through it” (Marx, 1973: 693). Workers, moved increasingly into mass factories in large concentrations, became newly empowered with a class subjectivity and from that novel forms of class organisation developed and new, radical workers' movements came to the fore – anti-reformist trades unions groups and militant workers associations arose alongside older formations such as the Communist party.

The general strikes and mass movements of the mass worker are managed, by capital, through crisis, and through the attempt to “revalorise work through *social command*, i.e., to enforce the wage-work nexus and unpaid surplus work over society by means of the State” (Negri, 1992: xii). Responding to the growing power of the mass worker capital aimed to destroy its political composition in two ways. One, by the introduction of

more machine technologies and automated production, leading to further deskilling and proletarianisation, also thereby minimising necessary labour time; and two, by capital extending itself outside of the factory walls, beyond the boundaries of the workplace or the site of commodity production and into the sphere of the social reproduction of capital, into *reproduction itself*, wherein social relations as a whole become increasingly subordinated to a capitalist mode of production. The social itself emerges as a plane of capitalised activity in the development of what Tronti referred to as the "social factory" and the "social worker." Tronti, in 1962, writes:

The more capitalist development advances, that is to say the more the production of relative surplus value penetrates everywhere, the more the circuit production-distribution-exchange-consumption inevitably develops; that is to say that the relationship between capitalist production and bourgeois society, between the factory and society, between society and the state, become [sic] more and more organic. At the highest level of capitalist development social relations become moments of the relations of production, and the whole society becomes an articulation of production. In short, all of society lives as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive domination over all of society" (Tronti, in *Quaderni Rossi*, no. 2, cited in Cleaver, 1992: 137).

As Marx has it, labour becomes merely a "conscious organ" that is "subsumed under the total process of the machinery itself" becoming "only a link in the system" (Marx 1973: 393) which now, according to Tronti, expands well beyond the factory and into the very realm of social life.

With increasing technological advances and decreasing geographical space for capital to colonise, social and even the biological realms of life become sites of valorisation for post-Fordist capital. Labour becomes even more abstracted, in the Marxist sense, in post-Fordism, with its focus on high-tech communication, transportation, and information. Ordered by immateriality, affectivity, and cognition, the mass worker of the Fordist era soon becomes the "social worker" of post-Fordism. The social worker was defined, by Hardt and Negri, as "characterised by a hybrid of material and immaterial labour activities linked together in social and productive networks by highly developed labouring cooperation" (Hardt and Negri, 1994: 274). As Lazzarato notes, today capital draws upon a "basin of immaterial labour" which "dissolves back into the networks and flows that make possible the reproduction and enrichment of its productive capacities" (Lazzarato, 1996:136-7). This is not to say that value is no longer created at the point of production, but rather that the point of production is spread out through the circulatory networks of capital, expanded into varied areas of life, including the production of life itself. As the point of production is expanded beyond the factory so too is the mass of people then considered workers expanded far beyond the traditional scope of "worker". Negri

argues instead that as the process of capitalist exploitation now takes place society-wide, socially and economically marginalised groups such as students, the unemployed, and casual labourers are also part of the proletariat. Autonomist feminists such as Dalla Costa, Federici, and Fortunata also contend that the unpaid domestic labour of women is part of the capitalist production process and thus also a site of struggle, initiating such ventures as the "Wages for Housework" campaign. For workers in the class composition of the social worker, battles circulated around "anything which bears the work relation without the wage" (Negri, 1992: xii).

Of course, the three distinct phases of class composition as outlined here are never so smooth or distinct. Distinguishing characteristics of one phase flow into the next, as do many of the practices of earlier forms of production find themselves in later instantiations, while new characteristics, compositions, and practices of both the class and capital also emerge. Sergio Bologna, for example, has criticised Negri's "tendency to ignore counter-trends and exaggerate class unity" (cited in Bowring, 2004: 113). The shifts and waves and changes within the working class and leftist political organising are important to note, though, and key to an argument wherein these organisational forms have traded places back and forth, often in line with changes and shifts in the modes of production. Just as elements of industrial production techniques co-exist with biopolitical production regimes, so too – this article argues – are some elements of earlier, more vertical organisational tactics necessary to consider in contemporary, horizontal organising. In the present conjuncture we can see lines of organisational flight converging, in a less dialectical and rather multilateral movement towards some sort of organised yet diffuse, structured yet flexible affinity.

As Hardt and Negri's work progressed the term social worker has been rapidly replaced by the term "multitude". The use of the term multitude is important, because it is in this configuration that the composition of the class ceases to be about traditionally defined notions of class, or about one class in particular, and comes to represent an expanded body of the exploited, thoroughly contemporary and thoroughly embedded into networks of biopolitical production. In multitude the factory worker is intimately connected to the graphic designer, the nurse to the student, the construction worker to the part-time retail worker. All are connected under the hegemony – but not, as discussed earlier, the exclusivity – of the immaterial: through affect and care, through reproduction, communication and symbol manipulation. But, aside from describing an expanded class, what does the term 'multitude' do for us politically?

The coming class: multitude's nascent political form

As noted, multitude is related to the post-modern, post-Fordist, biopolitical workforce, and is made up of workers for whom work time now extends and snakes throughout their entire lives; it is the emergent subjectivity that issues from the class composition of immaterial production. Hardt and Negri offer multitude as a carefully nebulous beast, a largely structureless understanding of social movements and the connections between them as well as the subjectivities that populate them. Coming out of both the aftermath of the much touted “end of history” in the late 1980s and the birth of a militant, transnational, anti-globalisation⁸ movement in the 1990s, this new theory of multitude offered both a revitalisation of activist theory and new ways to think about movement configurations and future organising principles. Multitude also, as a concept, was intended to resist the flattening tendencies of “unified” bodies or “unity” in politics and movements (the Hobbesian “people”, the Leninist “vanguard”) while simultaneously avoiding incoherence and chaos. The aim of multitude is to understand a heterogenous class – what Hardt and Negri called a “general mixture and miscegenation of individuals and populations” (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 61) – that is “composed through the encounters of singularities within the common” (Hardt and Negri, 2004:xiii). Moreover, multitude is seen as an “open and expansive network in which all differences can be expressed freely and equally, a network that provides the means of encounter so that we can live and work in common” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: xiii). The theory claims that the mere existence, or coming to being, of multitude in a regime of biopolitical production will give rise to the common, through the heterogenous subjectivities that make up the new class, and the cooperative tendencies that are claimed to be part and parcel of immaterial production. Multitude itself will give way to spontaneous and elementary forms of communism as it is itself a “form of political organisation that, on the one hand, emphasises the multiplicity of the social singularities in struggle and, on the other, seeks to coordinate their common actions and maintain with equality in horizontal organisational structures” (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 110). But what this organisation and coordination is meant to look like remains unclear.

Contrary to the spontaneity that Hardt and Negri espouse, an examination of past and present political movements makes clear that any political formation – any movement with political directionality – does not arise from nothing but rather it must be consciously moved in this activated, revolutionary direction⁹. New figures of struggle, new subjectivities, *are*

⁸ I use, here, the term “anti-globalisation” rather than the more European “alter-globalisation” or “counter-globalisation” because these terms never really caught on much in North America.

⁹ The liberatory possibilities of multitude have already been discussed through critiques of immaterial production (Nunes, 2007; Trott, 2007) and so it remains clear that multitude is not *necessarily* emancipatory, but must be *made* thus (Virno, 2004; Hardt and Negri, 2009). The question then becomes, how?

produced in the latest phase of struggle and capitalist response, but these subjectivities do not in and of themselves necessarily possess any greater impetus to becoming communism. Although effective communication, coordination, and collaboration – hallmarks of the labouring and organising conditions of multitude – may be the source for radically new forms of democracy (Virno, 2004; Hardt and Negri, 2004; 2009), that these conditions are totalising and already immanent to the practices of labour today “appears as nothing more than a tragically flawed proposition” (Trott, 2007: 226). Labour today is much more heterogenous than the immaterial kind so favoured here, and the particular make up of immaterial labour has not yet lead, spontaneously, to this communistic coming together that Hardt and Negri initially predicted it would. It is important to remember that manual labour still exists¹⁰ and the politics implied in the era of the mass worker can therefore still be useful. That this labour remains points us to the absence of a sharp contrast between phases of class composition and regimes of production, and highlights the necessity of invoking internally heterogenous practices of politics and organising, which I will below demonstrate that the assembly model exemplifies.

As well as signifying a new subjectivity for workers in an era of biopolitical production, multitude is also intended to signify a new organisational model for movements of the common. But the specifics of form here is left undefined and ill-described. Here I break from Hardt and Negri's thoughts on multitude, and challenge the notion that multitude, as a radical political force with the possibility of bringing the common into being, can arise through spontaneity alone. This common will arise through struggle, and through the production of alternatives, as Hardt and Negri themselves suggest, but the subjectivities and organisations needed for their creation can only come about through more directional, defined structures such as the assembly; a radical left institution that does not become the “Modern Prince”, the erstwhile Party nor the tired vanguard. Riding a line between Leninist discipline and late-Autonomist spontaneity, the assembly suggests itself as the form through which the flaws of multitude can be repaired, and the possibility it holds can be realised. To deny this possibility, to practice the same politics and to avoid necessary experimentation when the vast majority experience life as a mix of powerlessness, confusion, and fear, to concede power to the usual agents at their usual sites – this simply promotes the continuation of that mix of anarchy and oligarchy that marks the rule of capital. I do not seek to re-invent the wheel but rather to understand the contemporary class composition as maintaining within it elements of the old, and seeing our tactics, strategies, and structures as also being both innovative and connected to an historical lineage of struggle.

The common as a political concept redefines the terrain of contemporary struggle, breaking through the duopoly of public versus private, State versus

¹⁰ Al Jazeera English hosts a regular programme called “Working Man's Death” which seeks to highlight the manual labour that takes place, but is obscured, in today's “technological age”.

Market. Hardt and Negri define the common as, first, “the common wealth of the material world – the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, and all of nature's bounty – which in classic European political texts is often claimed to be the inheritance of humanity as a whole, to be shared together” (Hardt and Negri, 2009: viii). But, beyond nature, the common can also be considered even more significantly the sociality necessary for production in post-Fordism; things such as knowledge, culture, language, and historical remembrances (Mattei, 2011). This understanding of the common does not see humanity as a separate entity outside of nature, humanity as the exploiter or caretaker of the common, natural or social; it does not posit a subject (a human, a corporation or a government) which rules over an object (a good, an organisation, or a territory). Rather it sees human beings as impossibly networked into the world around them, as entities which together inhabit in a common world. No longer about a particular life sphere (as is the notion of the commons as natural commons) that can be set aside and preserved; the common is rather about how politically the whole species being can be subsumed to capital and simultaneously how this is open to various practices of resistance; and thus a fitting political project for the multitude whose entire life capital has made productive.

Instituting the common is a fundamental task, particularly in the current era of neoliberal globalisation, and the common (both ecological and social) becomes increasingly obscured through the dominant capitalist ideology and neoliberal state policies. In today's politics of austerity, the turn to privatising the common rapidly increases, and both the natural and cultural elements of the common are increasingly valorised and made into private property. Liberal notions of the commons does not break with this State/Market, subject/object duopoly, and rather risks reproducing “the traditional mechanistic view, the separation between object and subject and resulting commodification” (Mattei, 2011). Elinor Ostrom, for example, has amply demonstrated through overwhelming empirical evidence that cooperative property arrangements do not bring about the tragedy and destruction that Hardin predicted in *The Tragedy of the Commons*, where individual self-interest exploits and destroys common pool resources. Rather, cooperative property arrangements have been quite successful (Ostrom, 1990). What liberal conceptions of the commons do not contend with, though, is that corporations and States, if not individuals, *do* behave in ways that produce the tragedy of over-extraction and exploitation of which Hardin warned. It is markets and States that produce the tragedy of the commons, markets and States that “tend to operate as relentless and merciless maximisers of short term interest” (Mattei, 2011). Property laws, whether public or private, are merely justifications for the power of “dominant sovereigns over weaker subjects in a process of brutal exploitation” (Mattei, 2011). The end result is that liberal notions of the commons such as those forwarded by Ostrom do not overcome commodification but instead contribute to the lineage of modernist thought that denies the possibility of the radical break from commodification from

ever occurring.

Theories of the common propose a different possibility from the public/private or State/market duopoly. It is my contention that a politics of the assembly can help us find an organisational form for these new epistemic and political projects of emancipation. The idea and practice of the common can lie beyond the "reductionist approach of subject-object, which produces the commodification of both" (Mattei, 2011), and lies in the terrain where we see ourselves as the common, as part of an environment whether rural or urban, natural or cultural. In this conception of the common, we can see multitude as inseparably linked to communities, to ecosystems, to knowledge, and to political institutions. The assembly as a political form allows us to do just this – to cut across competing political ideologies, to understand the common as something that develops together through collaborative efforts that are both a part of our labouring conditions under capitalism, but also develops from our resistances to that dominant ideology and our creative expressions in these anti-capitalist political projects. More than that even, though, it is my contention that the assembly as a form both contributes to bringing about the common, but also *is* the common itself, becomes the common in its very constitution.

The assembly past and present

Assemblies as means of forging political directionality for groups of workers are not new. The contemporary incarnations of assemblies such as in the Occupy movement, or in the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly, carry with them a long history of other experiments in workers' democratic control and working-class self liberation. From the early soviets of the first and even the second Russian revolution, to the factory councils in Turin in 1918, to the assembly movement in Spain in the 1970s, organisational forms have existed which, in their very construction, resisted the top-down politicking of parties, vanguards and parliamentarianism.

Assemblies, as a form of decision-making, were often a component part of anarchist and Marxist traditions like the Council Communist movement. Like the "council," then, assembly can be considered something of a catchall term for a "form of organisation renewed at different times and across different countries by groups of workers often unaware of this kind of structure or of previous historical precedents" (Cohen, 2011: 48). Workers' councils and assemblies tend to operate with directly democratic decision-making structures, focussing on the self-activity of workers, building unofficial and cross-union forms of worker organisation. These assemblages of workers also helped to forge class unity in that they often incorporated unionised workers with their non-unionised counterparts. Broadly speaking, assemblies are a form or mode of organisation that prioritises, and is a direct vehicle for, class struggle. Forms of direct democracy are fundamental to these movements, and can be seen in the mass meetings,

delegate structures and, occasionally, the creation of accountable, revocable “local leaders”. Features of direct democracy have been seen in even the earliest workers uprisings under capitalism, for example in the Chartist movement (1830s and 40s Britain) and even in the earlier tradition of “cross trade conferences” held as early as 1810 (Cohen, 2011). Directly democratic structures were often threatening to traditional, bureaucratic trades unions as they allowed decision-making to take place at the site of labour, by workers themselves, and did not require waiting for directives from labour leadership. This is evident, for example, in the Great Upheaval of the 1870s in the United States (Brecher, 1999), wherein railroad workers walked out in a mass strike action against wage cuts and developed delegate committees “ignoring the leadership of their national unions” (Cohen, 2011: 49).

The assembly form is simple in that it develops out of the material conditions of workers – it is not “plucked from thin air” (Cohen, 2011: 48) – while in practice it remains work. There are claims to the naturalness of this form, as councils and assemblies have been repeated throughout various cycles of class struggle, often in movements with little knowledge of past precedent. The combustion of radical energy from workers in the form of councils, soviets, and assemblies should not necessarily be considered a spark which ignites a fire, but rather a fire that grows out of embers already lit – this is to say that “workers independently and repeatedly learn and put into practice class-based lessons,” (Cohen, 2011: 54) and the practices that arise develop out of the concrete needs of workers over long periods of both struggle and stagnation. While there is spontaneity, then, there is also coordination – the long smouldering embers of workers' discontent eventually combust into flames, usually after the assembly form has already been constituted in a specific location.

Councils and assemblies as the political form for the emancipation of labour strive to overcome the division between the economic and political spheres – they make struggles over the wage not simply an economic struggle but a political one¹¹. This makes them inherently revolutionary, as this division underpins the capitalist state, and overcoming the division thus means “in fact, overcoming the capitalist state itself” (Bonnet, 2011: 66). Because unions had historically struggled in the economic and parties in the political spheres, councils resisted this ossified structure and worked to overcome the division. This desire for innovation in form helps explain why councils and assemblies have been so stalwartly resisted by labour unions and traditional left parties. At almost every turn, historically – as we will see in just one example with the Spanish assembly movement – workers' councils and assemblies as movements that condensed power into the bodies of workers themselves were strongly resisted by forces on both the left and right. That being said, there has always existed a minority current into which assemblies and council movements have fit, whether it be from Marx's writings on the Paris Commune, through council communism,

¹¹ For a greater elaboration on this, see Negri, 1989.

elements of Trotskyism, anarcho-syndicalism, *operaismo*/Autonomism and other "heretical" left currents which have seen "workers control and councils as the basis of a self-determined socialist society" (Ness and Azzellini, 2011: 2).

Spain in the 1970s provides an example of the use of assemblies as an experimental, directly democratic organisational form resisting more authoritarian organising measures. The workers' assembly movement that arose in Spain during the waning of Franco's dictatorship described itself as the "independent manifestation of the proletariat" (Amoros, 2011) and served as a physical confirmation of the class struggle in that country. Not simply a movement against the Franco dictatorship, nor merely a movement in support of his replacements, the assembly movement in Spain was an "upraising against all forms of exploitation that escaped the narrow framework of bourgeois politics intended for the containment of workers" (Amoros, 2011) and catalysed resistance to anti-Franco opposition groups. Rejecting vanguardism, electoral politics, and trade union reformism, these assembly movements sought rather to invoke practices of solidarity, self-defense, direct dialogue, and the general strike as their specific methods of struggle. Though they began less as a clarified movement, the assemblies soon forged ahead as institutions for the defense of diverse workers' everyday interests, and served as spaces for workers to discuss labour problems and strategise around employment issues. They formed in different domains of public life, taking the shape of meetings and colloquiums, street occupations and public engagements and actions. Through the process of self-education and expansion, the assembly movement eventually shed its purely spontaneous character and was able to sharpen itself into a coordinated self-defense body, with aligned activities and actions – a move that was a necessary evolution from previously fragmentary politics. Through commitment to horizontal, democratic engagement, and diverse memberships, locations, and tactics, the Spanish assemblies of the 1970s never developed into the strict, inflexible party structure of the earlier political mobilisations of, say, the soviets under the Bolshevik party. For a moment, workers' assemblies in Spain became a true counter-power, independent and with enormous force, and full of apparent possibilities.

In the same way that Hardt and Negri discuss multitude as the new, creative social subjectivity of the post-Fordist era of biopolitical production, so too are assemblies and councils about the unleashing of human creativity in the search for and discovery of new ways of being – and producing – together, in common. Councils and assemblies as organisational forms and structures of working class power came from the shared experience of the early capitalist labour process, from the unity and solidarity forged through work, often factory work taking place in the same geographical space. That spatial unity, that locational solidarity, is not as totalising today – which is not to say that it does not exist at all. But older forms of organisation must mesh with and blend with newer forms, so as to develop a politics capable of

resistance, and creation. The reinvigorated assembly contains within it the lineage of those earlier assemblies of the era of the mass worker. The contemporary assembly as an organisational form also speaks to those engaged in the locationally specific, industrial factory work that still exists today. Contemporary assemblies are heterogenous; they do not seek to eradicate difference, as the philosophy of unity that drove much of the Leninist style organising of earlier eras did, but rather use the sectarian, gender, racial, and class differences contained within the assembly as a creative force for the advancement of a dialectical political vector.

The assembly model in general, but as specifically detailed in the work of the GTWA, can be seen as an institution of simultaneous dissent and action that can be, and can bring about, the common. The assembly, with its inclusiveness, non-sectarian identity, and horizontal, participatory structure, registers the dissent of growing numbers of people dissatisfied with hierarchical modes of organisation and politics, and also slowly and often clumsily builds a new politics and social that can be considered an emergent common.

Formed in the autumn of 2009, the GTWA was developed out of a series of consultas with a variety of differently situated activists and organisers on the anti-capitalist, labour, and social movement left. These consultations sought to illuminate the differences between various activist projects and the labour movement (in particular, these consultas sought to bring together auto factory-based labour organisers and activists in the social movement-oriented Ontario Coalition Against Poverty). They sought to build strong relationships of solidarity between these two often opposed forces in order to bring into relief and examine the relationship between class and other forms of oppression and social determination. The tensions between labour bureaucracies and activists which existed throughout the history of radical movements¹² was also at play in left organising in Toronto. The GTWA is imagined as a place where these tensions can be sorted through and alleviated. The Assembly is narrow enough to limit its membership to those identifying with the anti-capitalist left, but broad enough to encompass anarchists and socialists, labour activists and social movement organisers, autonomists and communists, Trotskyists and dissident members of Canada's social democratic party, the New Democratic Party. As a space of reflection and action for disparate and often disconnected actors, the Assembly hopes to defragment struggles and build larger collectivities for work that might address the limits of earlier modes of organising and opens the Assembly up to the possibility of being, or becoming, a living body engaged in the creation of the common, even if it does not directly recognise itself as participating in this. Much of what connects the Assembly to the concept of multitude is largely unrecognised by the organisation (as Autonomist thought is not the prevailing political tendency within the project), but it is these connections that, if deepened,

¹² Much of which is outlined in Ness and Azzelini (2011).

can continue the GTWA as a radical and revolutionary institution of the common.

The Occupy movement, too, uses the model of the assembly in unique and important ways – the General Assembly was the centrepiece of most Occupy encampments, with GAs often taking place twice a day during the active occupations. The complexity of Occupy's engagement with the assembly process points us to some of the difficulties that embed themselves within the notions of both "the common" and "multitude." General Assemblies in various Occupy sites were points of contention, and varied sites took different approaches to the use and structure of the GA. The New York City General Assembly, struck before the Occupy encampments began, agreed upon the following definition of the General Assembly on 3 September 2011:

NYC General Assemblies are an open, participatory, and horizontally organised process through which we are building the capacity to constitute ourselves in public as autonomous collective forces within and against representative politics, cultural death, and the constant crisis of our times (quoted in Holmes, 2012: 152).

But, by October when the Occupy Wall Street encampment was just a month old, some argued that the "General Assembly was becoming a form of entertainment" and it "could not withstand the pressures of a constant public and permeable space" (Holmes, 2012: 155). The GA was, itself, becoming a "machine of the mob" (Holmes, 2012: 155), counter to its original intentions. There is a distinct difference between the *use* of assemblies by Occupy, and the assembly *as* the predominant form of a political body on the left centred around a baseline of generally shared politics – something Occupy could not claim but the GTWA can. Occupy sites also used General Assemblies as decision-making bodies and information-sharing sites over the course of a spatial occupation – they are open to anyone at any time without any specific membership criteria, thus often involving actors with competing politics and priorities. The Coalition of student associations, *CLASSE*¹³, which drove much of the Quebec student strike imagined the assembly as the political spaces in which organisers and participants would come together, discuss politics, debate, and decide upon strategy in a movement of diverse political actors grounded by a shared political demand. The Assemblies were open for observers, but votes could only come from those affiliated with member organisations. For example, only members of the Geography department at Concordia University could vote in the assembly held by that departmental association. For the GTWA, the assembly is the form through which a non-sectarian, open and heterogenous politics are conducted by political actors of varying tendencies

¹³ CLASSE stands for the Coalition Large de l' ASSE or, in English, the Broad Coalition of Associations for Student Union Solidarity.

for which strategies and tactics form the largest deviation. The difference between these three examples is subtle but important – it is the difference between the assembly a tool and as mode of being. The GTWA, even if it fails – and it may, indeed have already failed in its heterogenous aims by the time of this printing – the project itself, in attempting to think through *new* forms of left working class organising in Toronto, has begun the process of creating a new organisational common; it has taken initial steps forward in expanding and deepening processes of struggle in the city through attempted convergences of competing and differing visions of radical left organising. It has raised the level of discourse and debate alongside the level of collaboration, even if its long-term survival remains to be seen.

The assembly as common

Protracted internal debate is an essential component of an assembly. This commitment to debate and dialogue can make conclusions slow to arrive at but does not have to derail the process of decision-making entirely. GTWA meetings are forums for debates that are otherwise not had on the left in general. With just over 300 members, the Assembly does not operate on the basis of consensus, and instead uses voting as its decision making tool. The General Assembly is the highest authority of the GTWA, and no decisions can be made or passed unless they go through discussion, debate, and voting by the assembly as a whole. In this way, assembly politics can begin to actively rethink the dichotomy between vertical and lateral organising, in favour of more hybrid models, recognising the necessity of working with diverse subjects and groups, while maintaining a commitment to continued struggle through practice, debate, and action. An assembly, then, attempts to strengthen political communication for the multitude. If we are to see networking and dialogue as a series of situational negotiations based around the possibility of changing both one's own standpoint and that of another person's, an assembly gives a foundation for this spatial and temporal togetherness without the necessity of drawing clean lines of for or against, distinctions of good versus evil. That being said, disagreements arise, and the GTWA has not yet discovered ways to move forward in the face of serious political polarities. As time goes on, certain positions within the assembly harden, certain tendencies calcify and certain segments of the GTWA population – mostly more horizontal activists, anarchists and autonomists – feel less “at home” within the greater body, due to concerns over the direction of the assembly. This said, many of these activists still feel a commitment to the work they carry out in the committees or campaigns where the majority of their activity is centred. This opens up a serious issue with regard to the level of democratic engagement on the part of the membership and troubles easy understandings of the assembly as a model to simply put in place to improve democratic organising. That being said, providing the space to begin to work through these disagreements – to talk across tendencies – is an important first step in building mass movement

organisations that are not to re-inscribe oft-committed errors more vanguardist-type organising models.

As noted, most of the GTWA's action-oriented work takes place in its various committees and campaigns which include the Public Sector Defense Committee, the Feminist Action Committee, the Internal Education and Political Development Committee, the Culture Committee, and the Free and Accessible Transit Campaign. These committees and campaigns have autonomy to carry out political activity in the way that they deem most valuable, and their actions then lay the foundation for broader political debate and commentary. For example, in the winter of 2012 the Public Sector Defense Committee intervened in a dispute between a labour organisation and a social movement organisation. As Toronto's city council prepared to vote on a highly contentious austerity budget that would see cuts to social programming and the outsourcing of many unionised jobs, social movement activists sought to take action, organising a demonstration outside of City Hall on the evening of the vote. The labour organisation initially did not respond to calls for collaboration and when they finally did, they attempted to control the planned demonstration actions. The social movement activists sought to enter City Hall and engage in a process of non-violent disruption of the council meeting. The labour organisation disagreed with these tactics, but went further, attempting to thwart the social movement activists and community members from proceeding with their action by threatening to take over the rally and cut social movement activists out. The GTWA Public Sector Defense Committee felt it inappropriate for organised labour to dictate the terms of protest to social movement and community groups, but remained cognizant of the fractious history in activism that the immediate conflict was replaying – a history of disagreement around tactics between labour unions and social movements that is in no way limited to organising in Toronto.

As a clarification of its own politics, and through long discussions, the Committee drafted a letter to the labour organisation highlighting three issues at the heart of the current manifestation of the conflict between social movements (less hierarchical) and unions (more hierarchical), including a) the legitimacy of certain social movements as a significant community voice, b) the role of certain social movements in rallies, protests, and demonstrations, and, most importantly, c) labour organisations' claims to unilateral authority in determining the tactics of others. The Committee felt that the conflict between the labour organisation and the social movement was a key sticking point in a history of struggles as they have manifested in varying geographic locales, and it needed resolution. Whenever there is collaboration between more horizontal and more vertical organisations, there is a question of surrendering some autonomy in the name of common strategy, and this needs to be respectfully negotiated. One group cannot assert dominion over the tactics of others, and the committee felt that limiting class struggle to "polite" tactics are neither effective nor in tune with the ways labour has acted in the past, nor with the prevailing political

conditions, such as the recent actions of Occupy, which helped to inaugurate bold and audacious actions onto a mainstream political stage. This intervention led to conflict within the broader organisation as a whole – some members agreeing with the Committee's intervention, others virulently disagreeing. The end result was a fruitful, powerful, and important political debate and discussion that helped the Assembly further delineate its own politics and positions, bringing not unity to a multitude, but rather the negotiation of difference.

For Hardt and Negri's multitude, there is no unity, no centrality, no homogeneity. Multitude is heterogenous, the opposite of previous forms of communism which relied on an homogenous subjectivity around which the politics could cohere. A contemporary politics of the common rely on different social subjectivity, an internally differentiated subjectivity that is heterogenous but not separate. In a way that the concept of multitude is unable to, the notion of an assembly as a coming together of bodies and subjects into politicised space creates a *form* of unity without necessitating an absolute agreement. In the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly debate rages regarding structure and practice; regarding the future directions of the project. Should the assembly intervene in electoral politics or develop a political platform? Should it become a more active force in organising or focus on strengthening political debate and changing political conversations? None of these debates are resolved, but the important work is already underway – creating the common space for these conversations to take place.

The GTWA also represents a common politics by bringing together different segments of the working class, segments that have been divided by “the pressures of neoliberal policies and labour markets” (Rosenfeld, 2011) and isolated both in their workplaces and homes. Isolation is a large part of post-Fordist capitalism, as workers are no longer convening together in large factories but are, often, separated in precarious work conditions, labouring on contracts, working from home or in others' homes,¹⁴ often located in alienating suburbs. But the isolation of workers in post-Fordist capitalism is not only spatial. The divisions that are part and parcel of the new, post-Fordist workforce have created rancour within the working class itself. Workers are pitted against workers for jobs and, in times of austerity, those perceived members of the labour aristocracy with union protection who labour for higher wages and greater benefits are taken by many members of the non-unionised working class to be an obstacle to greater wealth distribution and thus a different kind of class enemy¹⁵. In Toronto, for example, the working class is very mixed with a dramatically declining

¹⁴ This is most especially the case of women, often racialised women, engaged in care work, such as domestic workers, personal support workers, and those engaged in elder care. Much of this has been discussed by autonomist feminists such as Dalla Costa, Fortunati, Federici and the Spanish feminist collective, Precarias a la Deriva.

¹⁵ This can be seen in the comments sections of newspapers on a regular basis.

industrial base and the financial sector, real estate, and public services as the economic drivers of the city. The working class itself is divided into “highly segmented clumps of concentrated numbers: construction; upper-end manufacturing; lower-end manufacturing; servicing the financial services cluster, as well as the retail centres and the entertainment complexes” (Rosenfeld, 2011). Deeper internal divisions within the working class continue with the trajectory of neoliberalism. Such divisions reveal themselves to be highly gendered and racialised in Toronto. Real wages across the city have declined over the last decade¹⁶ as much work has been consistently outsourced, privatised and restructured. Immigrants – of which there is a high density in Toronto – can make up key elements of the commercial capitalist class, but these communities also make up “an increasingly cheapened and precarious segment of the working class” (Rosenfeld, 2011), this being particularly true in the case of migrant women. What we are seeing, then, is less the Autonomist circulation of struggles than the segmentation of struggles amongst disparate groups. The concerns of the employed are counterposed to those of the welfare recipient; a white middle-class positioned against new immigrants; the taxpaying private sector maligns and competes with a parasitic public service. This momentum does not recompose struggles in circulation, as earlier Autonomist theories suggested took place in the era of the mass worker, for example. Rather, a de-compositionary antagonism of struggles (Dyer-Witford, 2011) is underway and it is into this trajectory that the assembly – assemblies of the multitude in general, the GTWA in particular, can intervene and serve as a new political force for the creation of the common. The assembly is and can be the organisational mode and conceptual framework for a politicised multitude, one with a strong commitment to class analysis that simultaneously recognises the differing experiences of those interpellated into the body of the working class/multitude. The GTWA, especially through the work of its committees, is making the first steps towards the creation of an organisation of the common that is centred in both a class analysis of capital, but able to see the tendrils of capitalist exploitation that radiate outwards, throughout the social factory.

This base building through action is integral to the longevity of the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly in particular and to assemblies as political movements in general. These bases make the Assembly an institution of the common which can develop and maintain a circulation of struggles long past the invocation of a revolutionary moment but throughout the very core of a new common social future. Earlier movements of multitude, in particular the anti-globalisation movement of the late 1990s, were mostly unsuccessful in the Western context of creating long-lasting institutions (and fair enough, that was never its aim). As some have suggested

¹⁶ See Hulchanski, David J. et al “Toronto Divided? Polarizing Trends That Could Split the City Apart”, a report for the Cities Centre at the University of Toronto, 2010, available at <http://www.urbancentre.utoronto.ca/pdfs/gtuo/TorontoDivided-PolarizingTrends-CUI-January2010.pdf>

(Katsiaficas, 2002; 2006, Nunes, 2007), the movements of the 1990s were often meant to be momentary, spectacular, tangential, and then dissipate. The main “institutions” which arose were largely in the ephemeral, virtual world of the internet. With its multipolar means of production and circulation, the internet was a way to massify information and open movements up to horizontality and transparency. As Nunes notes “it is only within the horizon of a social life that has become networked that a politics of networking as such can appear” (Nunes, 2007). Moving beyond the thrill of late-90s organising around the internet and the recent ecstatic claims of Facebook and Twitter revolutions that so ignored the low-tech actuality of the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions, the GTWA marks a turning point in the relationship between communication technology and radical political organising. In its monthly coffeehouses, which offer space for members and the general public to discuss a specific theme or issue in its campaigns and general membership meetings, the GTWA attempts to create new spaces for people to meet together in person, to create the persistence and physical connection, which seemed to be missing from over-reliance on virtual communication. At the same time, the Assembly pursues very sophisticated digital communication strategies, using the internet for flexible and quick decision-making, communication, and promotion without forgetting the importance of face-to-face contact and debate. It is this strategy of melding the concrete and the virtual that operates to overcome the ephemerality and temporality of anti-globalisation movements, and yet still permits the flexibility and spontaneity that were doused in inflexible party structures of older forms of organisation.

In the era of crisis and austerity in which we are embedded, devising new political strategies and experimenting with new political forms is not only beneficial but is a necessity. Developing tactics and movements from below will be the only form of bringing about the common, and opening up the revolutionary potentiality of multitude. The assembly as a political form can be seen as that structure through which radical politics, politics of the common, can be formulated and developed. Certainly there is much to be learned from past movements, and as political subjects we must be aware of these histories, but the assembly form allows us to remain flexible enough to adapt to contemporary conditions, respond to contemporary crisis, and make space for a diverse range of subjects and actors so as to make radical social change – the coming of the common – a true possibility.

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