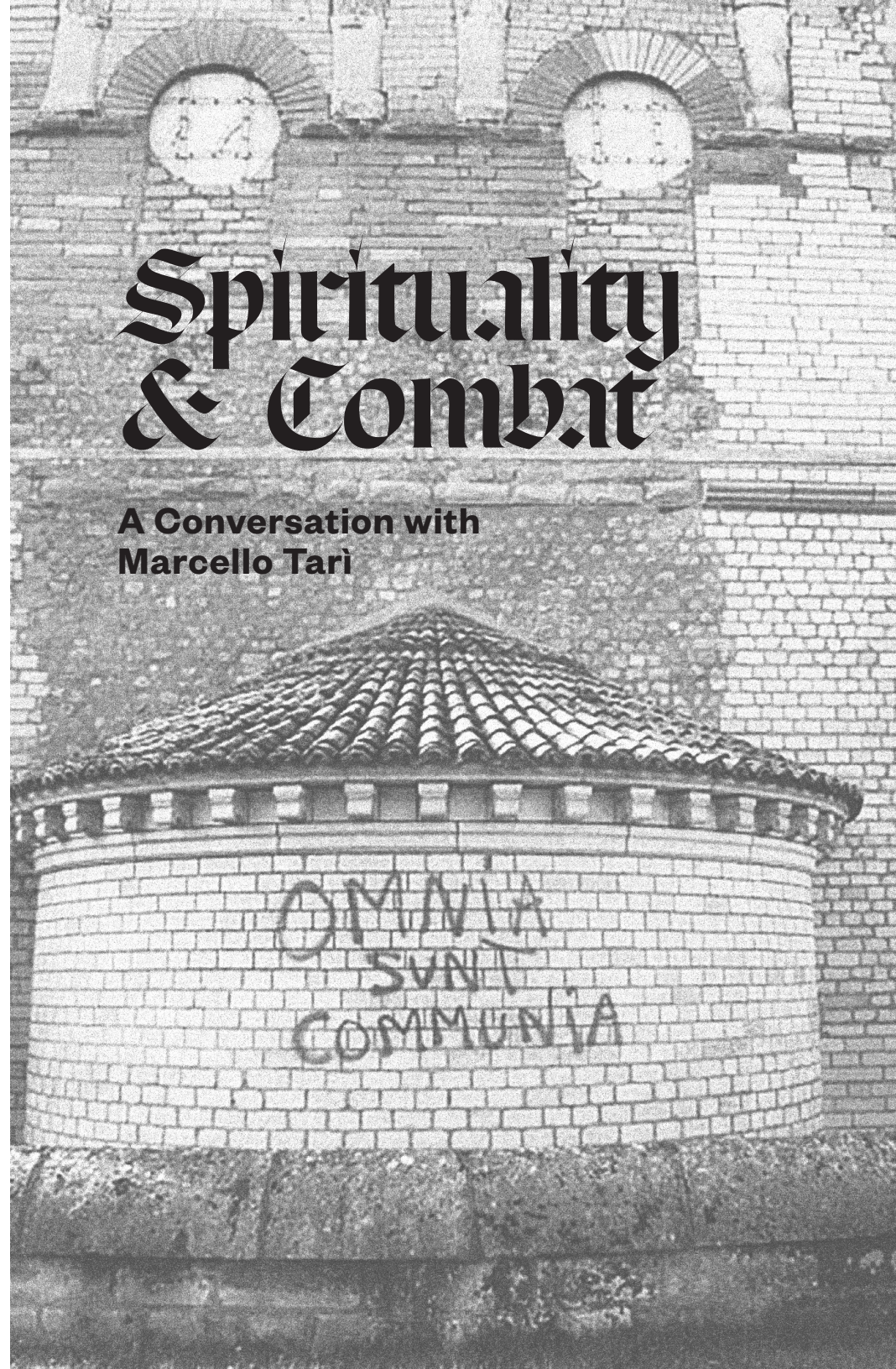


This is the main and essential question of destitution and destituent power. If we do not get out of the paradigm of Western metaphysics—the *polis*, democracy, the individual, the very concept of life—it seems very difficult to subvert the present.

Spirituality & Combat

**A Conversation with
Marcello Tari**



sense, I write that revolutionaries are militants of the end-times, His “assistants.” The communism of the end is the Good News. Pessimism for the current times, infinite hope for their ends. Come on friends, *sursum corda!* We will overcome this world!

This spring Italian philosopher Marcello Tari, a self-described “barefoot researcher,” published his first book in English, There Is No Unhappy Revolution: The Communism of Destitution. The book provides a theory of revolution, beginning with the ethics of experience and the encounter. Tari analyzes the commune as a space of both truth and redemption, and frankly discusses the contradictions involved in sovereignty, self-organization, and collectivity. Responding to Giorgio Agamben’s The Use of Bodies and The Invisible Committee’s To Our Friends, Tari uses writers such as Kafka, Brecht, Pasolini, and David Bowie to think through the meaning of ungovernability in a time of civilizational collapse. What follows is his first interview in English, where we discuss the new book, and the tools needed for revolutionary overcoming.

– Matt Peterson
May 2021

Published May 12, 2021 in *e-flux* #118.

Marcello Tari is a “barefoot” researcher of contemporary struggles and movements. He is author of numerous essays and books in French and Italian, including *Il ghiaccio era sottile: Per una storia dell'autonomia* (Derive Approdi, 2012), *Non esiste la rivoluzione infelice: Il comunismo della destituzione* (Derive Approdi, 2017), and *Autonomie!: Italie, les années 1970* (La Fabrique, 2011). Tari lives in between France and Italy. *There Is No Unhappy Revolution: The Communism of Destitution* (Common Notions, 2021) is his first book translated into English.

Matt Peterson is an organizer at Woodbine, an experimental space in New York City. He directed the documentary features *Scenes from a Revolt Sustained* (2014) and *Spaces of Exception* (2018).

Spirituality & Combat

theology—that characterizes the landscape of our completed modernity.” And later in “No Future for Us,” you continue, “Communism is not another world, but another use of this world.” So it seems the task for all of us shipwrecked in the Western metropole is to now live in and make use of the ruins we’ve inherited, which becomes an infrastructural and metaphysical question. Following both you and Sabu, to think of revolution and communism today means to face the question of our shared ruins both technically and existentially.

Tari: Exactly. First, to have another use of the world, you must change your heart, and I say heart and not intellect. In the sense of the heart in ancient Jewish theology, unlike Hellenistic ones, where it is the place of reason and love together. The heart prevents cynicism and calculation. This kind of change, I think, could give us a different vision of the ruins: to discern the things that deserve to be forgotten or destroyed, and others that call for our compassion and love. The great problem is: how to share things both technically and existentially? How to not separate the heart and reason? I don’t agree with the idea that “revolution is just a technical question,” but on the other hand, to think that it can only consist of an inner phenomenon is a dangerous illusion.

I think it’s useful to put a distinction between technique and technology. If technique is something appropriable, technology brings a huge number of problems. It is nihilistic at its core, including, among other things, its inhuman speed. In the book I make much use of Heiner Müller’s work, the German playwright. He insists on “the potential of slowing down.” I think this is what we have to learn, how to impress slowness in the midst of a hostile territory like the metropolis. I believe that our relationships would be better and more beautiful in that scenario.

Then, the end-times and communism of the end. I find that the way in which the Apocalypse is represented today is a big lie, a form of subalternity to this world based on fear. The true Revelation is something good, because it says that this world ends. And in this

freedom, to go beyond ourselves.

Finally, Heidegger said that the Pauline How is a *relation*, a communal relation to the self, to others, to the world, and then to time itself. This leads one to think that the communion of the spirits came first. The communism of goods is a *consequence* of a communism of the spirit. Spirit burns in the things that you make, in how you receive, in how you share, in how you speak, and in how you love. It burns all attachments. You can see this clearly in the *Acts of the Apostles* when, after receiving and sharing the Spirit, their community has a way of life that became a model for all coming communal forms of life and insurrections of the poor: “All the believers were together and had everything in common ... The multitude of believers was one in heart and soul. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they owned.” *Omnia sunt communia*. The question of When is almost meaningless in this perspective, “the time is coming—indeed it’s here now” (John 4:23). From what I can see, you and your friends at Woodbine are now full of this kind of a burning spirit.

But we must pay attention to the right sequence, because without a strong spirituality, as many of us have experienced, individual passions soon take over and everything ends in resentment. The best assumptions turn into their opposite. This would be an interesting couple of questions to ask many comrades and friends: are you a believer? What do you believe in? The community you live in, does it have a spirit? And if it does, how does it act?

Peterson: In the Preamble you write, “Revolutionaries are activists of end-times” and you speak of “a communism of the end,” which resonates with Sabu Kohso’s recent book *Radiation and Revolution*. Later on you say, “unfortunately, we Westerners, unlike the Zapatistas or other Indigenous peoples, do not have any Mayan tradition at our disposal, no ancestral knowledge, not even a liberation theology to serve as the living fabric of revolution. All we have is the possibility to learn how to use the field of ruins—of tradition, knowledge, and

Matt Peterson: There’s a great quote in the second chapter, “The World or Nothing at All,” where you write, “For revolutionaries the problem has always been that of creating a collision between a politics against history and a communism stronger than modernity.” Elsewhere, you write that revolution is not a question of overcoming a state, but the whole Western metaphysics of governance, of its subjectivization, de-politicization, rhythms of life, etc. How do you come to terms with just how hostile a terrain we seem to be dealing with at the present, and the reality of contemporary consciousness and spirit we’re faced with in this overcoming?

Marcello Tari: I think this is the main and essential question of destitution and destituent power. If we do not get out of the paradigm of Western metaphysics, which comes from ancient Greek philosophy and politics—the *polis*, democracy, the individual, the very concept of life—it seems very difficult to subvert the present. This also means not only coming to terms with old revolutionary traditions, Marxism, anarchism, whatever, but also with the thought that is more contemporary to us, on which we have relied for a long time: Foucault, Deleuze, and all that has followed until today, because they remain within those traditions. It is not by chance that many have set out to find alternatives—Tiqqun takes up the Jewish Kabbalah, others take up knowledge from from the Far East or the Andean mountains. After all, Christianity, which I think has something very meaningful for the gesture of destitution, also comes from the East. This research of recent years is a striking symptom of dissatisfaction with available tools. The very idea of destitution stems from an obvious difficulty, that this way of thinking about revolution was insufficient, lacking, destined not to be realized except in its nemesis. The problem seems to me that every time we cover every idea, every practice, with its Western meaning and concept, and “destituent power” itself runs this risk, so we should maybe deconceptualize it. Less philosophy, more spirituality; less chatter, more experiences; less willpower, more listening. So, “love, and do what you will.”

Now, it is certain that we cannot suddenly get rid of millennia of history and culture, but being aware of it is the first step. The second step that I propose, and this is not very well understood, is that if we do not pass through a destitution of our Ego, of how our subjectivity is constructed, with its passions, selfishness, greediness, it is not credible to think of subverting any other external power. Reality, which you reference, is not *the* reality. To quote an author I do not like, it is just “capitalist realism.” In order to have access to a different reality, which means looking at and living things differently, with a new heart, we have to dismiss the way we have been living. This is what I refer to as the destitution of the worldly form of life. And I think that we can do it individually and collectively, in solitude and in common.

Peterson: In many ways, the book is an account and response to the last twenty years of radical politics and theory, and an elaboration on the ideas of Mario Tronti, Giorgio Agamben, and the Invisible Committee. In thinking through the polemics these authors and groups have proposed, I wonder whether the question of revolution is one of winning these debates, or do they instead demonstrate the need for a broader spiritual shift, transformation, or “awakening,” as we’ve often had it in our American religious context. You speak in the last chapter, “The Destituent Insurrection,” of the recurrent leftist complaint, “Now is not the moment, we need to wait for the ‘objective conditions’ to mature. The people won’t understand,” but I’m wondering what can be said of *subjective conditions*? Marxism has its secular, rational, materialist theory of consciousness, but seems unable to access the spiritual depths of belief, devotion, and faith that feel necessary for revolution.

Tari: *Spirituality and combat* is the theme around which Mario Tronti and I have begun to work this past year, so this is a good question for me. I will begin by paraphrasing Marx who says “the existential and spiritual condition determines consciousness.” The original Marxian sentence was about the “social condition”—I think this is not enough,

because it leads to the thinking that if I change the external conditions, i.e., economic and political structures, then everything will be better. Reason and the heart are separated. This is why classical Marxist revolutions, in Russia and elsewhere, were all defeated. Today, capitalism colonizes our souls, and subjectivity is a commodity like any other. “To live” is a battlefield.

Do you remember the Tiqqun text, “How Is It to Be Done?,” which is to ask ultimately: “how to live?” This is the central question, the How and not the What—the When depends on the How. Heidegger discussed this in his early course on the phenomenology of religious life. Referring to St. Paul’s proclamation, Heidegger said that the Christian How concerns the self-conduct in factual life, because, “The opposition of faith and law is decisive: the *how* of faith and of the fulfillment of the law, *how* I comport myself to the faith and also to the law.”

The How is a praxis, an existential praxis founded on a belief. This How is also and fundamentally connected to the *parousia*, to the messianic promise of a total liberation: it’s How you behave now that achieves eschatological fulfillment. Not “wait and see”! *Now* you must know *how* to live in the kingdom and let it grow in this world. This primitive Christian way of life is a total disavowal of the typical forms of leftism that you recall. We can also think of Benjamin’s image of the messianic *now-time*: “For every second of time was the strait gate through which Messiah might enter.” As Tronti said, you must always be ready, to be organized for this moment, that is: you must have a way of life able to do this. And this way is the How which proceeds by faith.

Faith wants a *metánoia*, a conversion, which means a radical change in the way of thinking and living that takes you *beyond* (*metá*). Conversion today means also a critique of civilization, not just a social critique. A critique that includes my Ego as a producer and not only a product of this civilization. Simone Weil wrote in *Gravity and Grace*, “The reality of the world is the result of our attachment.” So that’s why poverty, as I write in the first pages of the book, is the form of our