

Contributions of Antonio Negri in Building the Theoretical Foundations of Autonomous Marxism



REDESCRIPTIONS

Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory

RESEARCH

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HUP HELSINKI
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ABSTRACT

This article addresses a gap in Autonomous Marxism scholarship by reconstructing the connective logic across Antonio Negri's three intellectual phases, characterizing the movement as a corrective and critically revisionist project—an immanent critique designed to free Marxist categories from deterministic and teleological orthodoxies. Through close textual analysis of Negri's primary works within Italian Theory, and while carefully distinguishing his solo writings from the later Hardt–Negri collaborations, the article shows how three interconnected conceptual pillars, grounded in Marx's *Grundrisse* and deepened during Negri's carceral and exilic phase through the Spinozist distinction between *potentia* and *potestas*, form sequentially presupposing moments of a single philosophical movement: the ontological primacy of labor over capital; the social factory thesis, theorizing the extension of capitalist command across the social fabric; and self-valorization, defined as the proletarian capacity to generate independent values and needs outside the exchange-value regime. The article contends that Autonomous Marxism transforms the specific politico-economic crises of postwar Italy—marked by the failure of the Historic Compromise and subsequent state repression—into a theoretically generalizable methodology adequate for a postnational horizon. Negri's work is thus framed not as a rejection of Marxism but as its emancipation from within, retrieving constituent power against institutional closure.

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KEYWORDS:

Antonio Negri,
Autonomous Marxism,
self-valorization, social
factory, immanent critique,
Italian theory

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Khudhyer LM.
Contributions of Antonio
Negri in Building the
Theoretical Foundations
of Autonomous
Marxism. *Redescriptions:
Political Thought,
Conceptual History and
Feminist Theory*. 2026;
29(1): 54–72. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.498>

The most philosophically generative moment in Antonio Negri's intellectual career was, paradoxically, a profound crisis. His 1979 arrest on charges of 'moral co-responsibility' for the Red Brigades' violence—charges his most rigorous defenders characterize as juridically motivated rather than empirically grounded—distanced him from the Italian political terrain and prompted a theoretical reorientation whose consequences proved far more durable than the movement it was designed to rescue. This transition from the factory-floor immediacy of *Operaismo* to the philosophical vocabulary of Spinoza's *Ethics* was not a retreat into abstraction; it was a deliberate response to a precise problem exposed by political defeat. If living labor's constitutive force is the ontological ground of antagonism, yet that ground can be negated by juridical power, then the autonomist claim requires a foundation prior to, and immune from, such negation. This structural paradox—that Negri's trajectory was defined by the movement's obliteration rather than its triumph—remains inadequately theorized in existing scholarship.

The literature on Autonomous Marxism is substantial but uneven in its philosophical ambition. [Cleaver's \(1979\)](#) foundational account established the movement as an independent working-class project, yet it foregrounds the political act of reading over ontological depth. [Wright's \(2002\)](#) exhaustive reconstruction provides the essential sociological architecture but often obscures the linear theoretical development. While Jason [Read \(2003\)](#) opened a productive intersection between Marxist class theory and Foucauldian analytics regarding the production of subjectivity, he stops short of reconstructing the specifically ontological argument linking Negri's intellectual phases. Similarly, [Christodoulidis \(2024\)](#) and [Pitts \(2026\)](#) both read Negri's Spinozism as emerging from the internal development of *operaismo/post-operaismo*: Christodoulidis foregrounds the *potentia/potestas* distinction within Negri's turn to Spinoza, while Pitts explicitly treats the passage from Marx to Spinoza as part of that theoretical trajectory rather than as an isolated achievement. Even the seminal collections by [Murphy and Mustapha \(2005, 2007\)](#), which situated Negri within 'Italian Theory,' do not fully trace the philosophical movement connecting his phases into a coherent whole. Furthermore, Kathi [Weeks \(2011\)](#) demonstrates the mobility of autonomist categories like the 'refusal of labor,' yet her feminist appropriation operates in a different register that does not engage the ontological argument for labor's primacy on its own terms. Across these interventions, a shared interpretive tendency persists: the relationship between Negri's intellectual phases is consistently approached as a process of continuous theoretical development, without reconstructing the specific philosophical problem each phase leaves unresolved for the next. It is this connective logic between phases—rather than the theoretical content of any single phase—that the present study identifies as the key to Negri's distinctive contribution.

This study advances a specific interpretive thesis: that Autonomous Marxism, and Negri's contribution in particular, is best understood as a corrective and critically revisionist project—an immanent critique designed to liberate Marxist heritage from the teleological encrustations of Second International orthodoxy. Crucially, this liberation entails a rigorous methodological distinction between Marx's original categories and the deterministic economism of the Second International, allowing Negri to recover the inherent revolutionary agency that orthodoxy had occluded. By reading Marx against his institutionalized reception, Negri does not reject the Marxist heritage but retrieves its constituent power from within.

Unlike the negative critique of the Frankfurt School, this mode of critique is affirmative and ontological. While the Frankfurt School's immanent critique remains bound to a Hegelian dialectic of negation—exposing the internal contradictions of capital to reveal its crisis—Negri's immanence is strictly Spinozist and productive. It is a critique rooted in the affirmation of *potentia* as the self-organizing force of living labor, thereby locating the possibility of emancipation not in the exhaustion of capital's logic but in the irreducible vitality of the social fabric itself. It re-reads Marx's categories—above all, the *Grundrisse*'s account of living labor as subjective *potenza*—against the economic shell of determinism. The instrument of this recovery is Spinoza's distinction between *potestas* (constituted power) and *potentia* (constituent force), a distinction that Negri demonstrates is latent in Marx before institutional orthodoxy occluded it.

The central argument is that Negri's three conceptual pillars—the ontological primacy of labor, the social factory thesis, and self-valorization—are not discrete innovations but sequentially grounded moments of a single philosophical movement. The primacy of labor provides the foundation, the social factory extends the terrain of that foundation against capital's totalizing subsumption, and self-valorization articulates the political practice adequate to this extended terrain.

The analysis proceeds in two stages. During the first, the biographical and intellectual conditions of Negri's project are established, showing how the political foreclosure of the Italian conjuncture logically required the ontological turn. Meanwhile, the second stage examines the three conceptual pillars in sequence, demonstrating how they presuppose and extend one another: from the primacy of labor to the social factory and finally to the problematic of self-valorization. The methodology is analytical and textual, centered on close readings of primary works from *Marx Beyond Marx* (orig. 1979), *The Savage Anomaly* (orig. 1981), and *The Politics of Subversion* (1989) to the *Empire* trilogy (2000–2009), all situated within the intellectual field of Italian Theory.

ANTONIO NEGRI AND AUTONOMOUS MARXISM: AN INTRODUCTORY OVERVIEW

ANTONIO NEGRI: BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE AND INTELLECTUAL PHASES

Antonio Toni Negri was born in 1933 in Padua (Padova), northern Italy, into a family whose direct exposure to political violence—including the loss of close family members to fascism and war—shaped a profoundly critical stance toward the state that would find sustained expression in his autonomist theory (Negri, Dufourmantelle and DeBevoise 2004, 96–100). He studied and later taught political theory at the University of Padua, directing its Institute of Political Science—biographical details that would come to define three analytically distinct intellectual phases.

The **first phase** (1960s–1970s) is his pre-arrest Operaist period, during which Negri was active within the Autonomia Operaia and authored the pamphlets written between 1971 and 1977, later collected in *Books for Burning* (orig. 1971–1977; ed. Verso 2005), as well as *Marx Beyond Marx* (orig. delivered as lectures at the École Normale Supérieure 1978; first published in Italian as *Marx oltre Marx*, 1979; Eng. trans. 1991). The texts spanning 1967–1983 gathered retrospectively in *Revolution Retrieved* (Red Notes 1988) straddle this phase and the next. Crucially, Negri was not a member of the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI); his trajectory was defined entirely by the Operaist current.

The political conjuncture that culminated in the 1979 crackdown—already framed as the generative crisis of Negri’s project—bore directly on the theoretical trajectory that followed. Workers’ movements had already demonstrated the explosive depth of class antagonism: the Hot Autumn of 1969 had seen hundreds of thousands of workers occupy factories and engage in militant industrial action, triggering capital flight, inflationary surges, and credit contraction (Katsiaficas 2001, 18). In the early 1970s, PCI Secretary Enrico Berlinguer proposed a ‘historic compromise’—a strategy designed primarily to circumvent the *conventio ad excludendum* by demonstrating the PCI’s governmental reliability to centrist forces—which the autonomist left, including Negri, interpreted as capitulation to capital’s demand for austerity and working-class discipline (Italian Communists 1976). By 1977, as protest against capitalist restructuring reached its peak, the state adopted a strategy of tension—provoking escalation while empowering far-right groups to discredit Italian Marxism through orchestrated violence (Campani 2016, 32).¹ The Historic Compromise collapsed definitively with the assassination of Aldo Moro in 1978 (Bull 2001); the subsequent crackdown, culminating in Negri’s 1979 arrest, marked not merely a biographical episode but the political closure that made the continuation of the autonomist project within the Italian institutional terrain impossible—and that made the turn toward ontological resources beyond the immediate political conjuncture a theoretical necessity.

The **second phase** (1979–1997) spans two institutionally distinct but philosophically continuous moments: the period of Negri’s incarceration in Italy (1979–1983) and his subsequent French exile (1983–1997). The philosophical productivity during these times was inseparable from their shared political origin, yet the internal sequence within this phase is decisive for understanding Negri’s theoretical development. The experience of juridical criminalization at its most direct and material form—imprisonment itself—posed a precise theoretical problem: autonomist theory required a metaphysical vocabulary capable of grounding labor’s constitutive force at a level prior to, and immune from, juridical negation. It was from within Rebibbia prison that Negri found this vocabulary in Spinoza, whose distinction between *potestas* (transcendent, constituted power, and the power of the state) and *potentia* (immanent, constituent power, and the irreducible creative force of living labor) provided the ontological foundation of *The Savage Anomaly*. This Spinozist turn was not an arbitrary philosophical detour but a rigorous ontological necessity: Negri found in Spinoza’s concept of *potentia* the precise philosophical armature to articulate Marx’s *living labor* as an irreducible, self-organizing constituent force, inherently prior to and resistant to any constituted power (*potestas*).

The exile period proper (1983–1997) then extended this Spinozist foundation through sustained engagement with Foucault’s biopolitics and Deleuze’s ontology of difference, furnishing further conceptual tools adequate to a theory of power operating through the total subsumption of social life—tools that would prove foundational to the social factory thesis examined in Section 2.2. This philosophical arc situates Negri’s work within the field of *Italian Theory* (Murphy and Mustapha 2005; Murphy and Mustapha 2007) and marks the moment at which a locally rooted political experience was equipped with ontological resources sufficient for theoretical generalization beyond the Italian conjuncture. The **third phase** encompasses the Hardt–Negri trilogy *Empire* (2001), *Multitude* (2004), and *Commonwealth* (2009), extending earlier concepts into a global framework. Negri returned to Italy in 1997 and regained his freedom in 2003 (Buchanan 2018, 905), continuing to write and engage publicly until his death in December 2023.

Intellectually, Negri resolved the tension between appropriating and transcending Marx by asserting that the only way to understand Marx is by passing through Marx himself. In *Labor of Dionysus*, Hardt and Negri cast their discussions ‘not from obstinacy or any obscure orthodoxy, but simply because [...] these are the most useful categories for political and social analysis’—framing their engagement as methodological necessity rather than fidelity; their language, they insist, differs from the Marxist scholastic tradition precisely because it stands in contradiction to it ([Hardt and Negri 1994, 3](#)). This is not a dismissal of Marxism but a distinctly Marxist move: the application of immanent critique to Marxism itself.

This immanent critique is the unifying thread across all three phases, though its register shifts with each. In the **first**, it operates at the level of political economy: the *Grundrisse* is read against its economistic reception, asserting labor’s constitutive force against the determinist shell that Second International orthodoxy had built around it. In the **second**, it deepens into ontology: the political claim of the first phase, exposed to juridical negation, required grounding prior to constituted power—which Spinoza’s *potentia* provided precisely in *The Savage Anomaly*. In the **third**, it extends to scale: the ontological resources developed during incarceration and exile are deployed against capitalism’s imperial reach. Each phase presupposes rather than supersedes the previous one, adding the philosophical foundation its predecessor had left exposed. The discontinuities are real; what is continuous is the direction of the critique.

THE OPERAIST TRADITION: INTERNAL DEBATES AND MARIO TRONTI

To understand Negri’s theoretical contributions, it is necessary to situate him within Operaismo (Workerism)—an intellectually rich, internally contested, and far more heterogeneous tradition than any linear account would suggest. Operaismo emerged from critical reassessments by Italian Marxist theorists such as Raniero Panzieri, Romano Alquati, and—crucially—Mario Tronti, who challenged the reformist methodology of the PCI and the economism of traditional socialist parties. Their common project was driven by a conjuncture that rendered theoretical re-examination a practical necessity rather than an intellectual preference. Post-war Italy’s politico-economic conjuncture was distinctive: the *conventio ad excludendum* kept Western Europe’s largest communist party permanently in opposition despite substantial electoral support ([Salvati 2003, 556–577](#)), while the ‘economic miracle’ of the 1950s–1960s industrialized the economy at the cost of intensified exploitation sustained by a southern migrant reserve army ([Berardi 2007, 150](#)). This combination—rapid industrialization without political representation, economic expansion without class emancipation—compelled Operaist thinkers to place the autonomous initiative of the working class at the center of analysis rather than the developmental logic of capital ([Carvalho 2020, 8](#)).

Mario Tronti deserves particular attention as the figure whose theoretical innovations most directly shaped Negri’s subsequent work. His concept of the ‘strategy of the refusal’—the idea that workers’ refusal of labor is itself a productive political act that forces capital to restructure—and his formulation of the *operaio massa* (mass worker) as the central subject of political antagonism, laid the groundwork for Negri’s later theorizing. Tronti’s *Workers and Capital* (originally published in 1966, now available in English translation as [Tronti 2019](#)) is indispensable for understanding the intellectual

genealogy of Autonomous Marxism. The internal divergences within Operaismo also matter: Tronti himself eventually moved toward a more pessimistic assessment of working-class political capacity and a controversial rapprochement with the PCI, while Negri maintained an uncompromisingly antagonistic stance—a divergence that explains much about why Negri's trajectory led toward the social factory and the *Multitude* rather than institutional accommodation.

[Wright \(2002, 70–78\)](#) reads the divergence between Negri and Tronti as symptomatic of an unresolved tension within Operaismo—between working-class primacy and the gravitational pull toward institutional mediation. The present study accepts Wright's diagnosis but contests his conclusion that the divergence constitutes a theoretical weakness: it was precisely Negri's refusal of Tronti's trajectory that enabled the development of the ontological resources—through Spinoza and the *Grundrisse*—that transformed a locally rooted Italian political experience into a theoretically generalizable framework.

THE CONCEPT OF AUTONOMOUS MARXISM

Autonomous Marxism is a leftist political and social current that opposes capitalism while remaining distinct from both anarchism and orthodox Marxism—a distinction often missed by critics who misidentify this current as one or the other ([Alcoff and Alcoff 2015](#), 221).² It is generally characterized by its orientation toward localism and horizontal decision-making, rejection of hierarchical institutional authority, and advocacy for the independence of social movements from political parties—thereby proposing a practical alternative distinct from both communist authoritarianism and representative democracy ([Katsiaficas 2006](#), 6–7).

The term was coined by American Marxist historian Harry Cleaver in *Reading Capital Politically* (1979) to characterize Marxist traditions that emphasize the self-activity and independent power of the proletariat to define and struggle for its own interests ([Cleaver 1979](#), 14). It derives etymologically from the Greek *Autonomos*, signifying 'one who lives by their own law.' The autonomy in question signifies the right of any class to self-determination and the capacity for anti-capitalist liberatory struggle as a mode of refusal and withdrawal from capitalist command ([Cunninghame 2010](#), 454).

Autonomous Marxism resists unified categorization due to its ideological heterogeneity and lack of centralized unity—a fragmentation some scholars address through the alternative label 'Open Marxism' ([Spence 2010](#), 99; [Wright 2002](#), 152). Yet, this same fragmentation proved a structural strength: unlike the Communist International, which produced a weakened and submissive proletariat, the self-managed insurgent movements proved capable of transforming into a 'many-headed hydra' that capitalism found difficult to confront directly ([Linebaugh and Rediker 2000](#), 328–329).

One tension must be addressed: Autonomous Marxism's distinctly local character—rooted in the specific politico-economic experience of the Italian industrial proletariat—sits in apparent tension with Negri's later postnational horizon. This is not a contradiction but a dialectical development: the specificity of the Italian experience generated theoretical tools that, once abstracted, proved applicable to global capitalism, with the local providing the empirical ground from which the universal was constructed.

What this dialectical development does not yet explain, however, is the *mechanism* by which Italy's political foreclosure—the *conventio ad excludendum*, the failure of the

Historic Compromise, and the juridical criminalization of 1979—was transmuted into theoretical resources of genuinely universal applicability. That mechanism is precisely what Negri's three principal contributions provide, each answering a determinate question the historical record poses but cannot alone resolve: if labor is ontologically prior to capital, what is the philosophical ground of that claim beyond political assertion? If capitalist command has extended beyond the factory walls, what is the theoretical architecture of that extension? And if the working class can generate its own values outside the exchange-value regime, what does that practice look like at the level of the class relation itself? It is to these questions that the analysis now proceeds.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF AUTONOMOUS MARXISM IN NEGRI'S THOUGHT

The following three subsections engage directly with Negri's primary texts to analyze the interconnected theoretical contributions that together constitute the core of his intellectual legacy: the primacy of labor over capital provides the ontological foundation, the social factory thesis extends the terrain of analysis from the industrial workplace to the entire social fabric, and self-valorization articulates the political practice adequate to this extended terrain.

THE PRIMACY OF LABOR OVER CAPITAL

Autonomous Marxism redefined the theoretical relationship between labor and capital by inverting the conventional priority: if capital cannot exist without labor, then labor exists prior to capital and can, in principle, act independently to build a society distinct from capitalism. Whereas Marx's economic determinism emphasized capital's accumulative logic as the singular force shaping history (Roggero 2023, 10), autonomist theorists rejected this framework—describing it as a form of 'ideological indoctrination' practiced by the Second International—and insisted that capital is structurally dependent on productive labor. Autonomists accordingly reoriented analysis away from the laws governing capitalist development and toward the actual struggles of the working class (Wright 2002, 78). For Negri, any Marxist analysis that places capitalist development first and workers second is fundamentally inverted; the correct approach is to begin from class struggle and the constitutive role of labor within it (Fuchs 2025, 1712).

Autonomists further argue that Marxist determinism erred when it subordinated the positive proletarian project to a critique of capital. The task is to conceptualize the working class as a subject of power rather than merely a subject of exploitation (Hardt 2005, 7–37): the proletariat is not a passive object of domination but an active force whose skills, innovation, and cooperation constitute the material precondition of capitalist reproduction (Dyer-Witheford 1999, 65).

This critique also redefines the proletarian worker not solely through productive capacity but through the inherent right to refuse labor (Tronti 1980, 28). In *Revolution Retrieved*, Negri (1988, 210) describes the proletariat as 'a dynamic subject, an antagonistic force, tending towards its own independent identity,' and argues that working-class struggles possess 'a continuity of independent power' (Negri 1988, 81), while later condemning the 'mechanistic interpretation' of Marxism that has persisted for over a century (Negri 2005, 53).

Negri's reading of Marx, developed systematically in *Marx Beyond Marx*, rejects mechanistic Marxist sociology and deterministic interpretations of historical materialism—including the base-superstructure model and modes of production—insisting instead that Marxism is, above all, a theory of social conflict (Connell 2005, 36). Marx's decisive category is labor, understood as creative human energy—a generative, living, and dynamic activity shaping society's distinctive form (Dyer-Witheford 1999, 65; Negri 1991a, 72). Labor is not only the essence of capital but also the essence of humanity, defined as much by productive capacity as by creative potential (Negri 1988, 226). Capital's extraction of surplus labor does not abolish proletarian identity but confines exploitation to activity alone, leaving intact the constitutive power that exceeds capitalist command (Negri 1991a, 145). Hence, Negri (2005, 46) insists that any theory—including Marxism—must remain alive and free from stagnation through continuous redefinition in response to proletarian needs.

The full theoretical weight of this inversion becomes apparent only through a close reading of the passage in *Marx Beyond Marx* where Negri confronts what he calls the 'paradox' of labor as abstract subjectivity. Working through Marx's *Grundrisse*, Negri identifies a pivotal moment: when labor is analyzed as separated from all its objective conditions—from raw materials, instruments, and products—it appears simultaneously as 'absolute poverty' and as 'the living source of value' (Marx 1973, 295–296, as cited in Negri 1991a, 70). Negri treats this not as a rhetorical flourish but as a foundational ontological claim:

The paradox is completed; and it is no longer a paradox, it is a dialectical development of an exceptional intensity: the opposition determines subjectivity and this subjectivity of labor is defined as a general abstraction. The abstraction, the abstract collectivity of labor is subjective power [potenza] (Negri 1991a, 70).

Negri's reading reveals that, in Marx's own analysis, labor is the ontologically primary force whose creative potential capital can appropriate and command but never exhaust or fully subsume. Labor as subjectivity constitutes 'the general possibility of wealth' against which capital's valorization is necessarily parasitic (Negri 1991a, 69–70). The political corollary is that Marxist analysis must be reversed: rather than beginning from the laws governing capitalist development, one must begin from labor's constitutive power and understand capital as a historically specific, politically enforced mechanism for capturing what labor already produces. As Negri (1991a, 62) states, the theory of surplus value demonstrates that we move from 'the unveiled antagonism of surplus value to the destruction of the horizon of command, of mediation, of politics'—the theoretical grounding for the autonomist insistence on the primacy of class struggle over the logic of capital, not as a political preference, but as a consequence of Marx's own ontology read against its economic misinterpretations.

This ontological claim is not confined to the abstract register of the *Grundrisse* reading. In *Revolution Retrieved*, Negri translates it into a concrete analysis of class composition. The working class is defined as 'a determinate level of solidification of needs and desires, as a dynamic subject, an antagonistic force, tending towards its own independent identity in historical-political terms' (Negri 1988, 106). The phrase 'solidification of needs' is theoretically significant: working-class subjectivity is not a superstructural phenomenon but a material accumulation—a historically produced and irreversible quality of the class that capital must reckon with as an objective constraint on its own valorization. The

motor of historical development is not capital's drive to accumulate but the working class's drive to constitute itself as an independent power.

This ontological inversion has not gone uncontested within the Marxist tradition itself. [Callinicos \(1989, 25–32\)](#) argues that the autonomist reading conflates Marx's analytical distinction between the logic of capital and the agency of class struggle with an ontological hierarchy, thereby risking a voluntarism that Marx himself carefully avoided. [Wood \(1995, 49–57\)](#), approaching from a different critical standpoint, contends that foregrounding working-class agency at the expense of structural analysis dissolves the explanatory power that distinguishes Marxism as a theory of historical determination from a mere politics of desire. The present study takes these objections seriously but argues that they misread the precise character of Negri's inversion: he does not deny structural determination but relocates its source—from the logic of accumulation to the constitutive force of living labor. The ontological primacy he asserts is not a claim about historical contingency but about the conditions of possibility of capitalist valorization itself, a move internal to Marx's own *Grundrisse* analysis rather than a departure from it. It is this same ontological claim that *The Savage Anomaly* would later ground in Spinoza's metaphysics: the *potentia* of living labor as an immanent, inexhaustible constituent force that no *potestas*—no constituted juridical or political power—can fully capture ([Negri 1991b, 155–156](#)).

THE SOCIAL FACTORY AND ITS CONTRADICTIONS

The ontological primacy of labor does not leave capital passive: confronted with a constitutive force it can appropriate but never fully exhaust, capital is compelled to extend its command beyond the factory walls—reorganizing the whole of social life as a productive apparatus, and thereby generating, within that very extension, the contradictions that the social factory thesis is designed to theorize. Thus, capitalism's struggle against the proletariat does not merely rely on exploitation but also seeks to frustrate, defeat, and contain labor, ultimately attempting to escape its grasp ([Dyer-Witheford 1999, 134](#)). According to [Negri \(2005, 48\)](#), the law of value no longer functions autonomously but has been replaced by the rule of exploitation dictated by capital's will.

Capitalism, under pressure from working-class struggles in the post–World War II era, was forced to develop new forms of control over rebellious workers by reorganizing the production process so that society itself became a factory. In this form of domination, production relations—as power relations—extend throughout the entire social body, blurring the distinction between economy and politics ([Tronti 2019](#)). Consequently, capitalism pushes control to its furthest and deepest limits, seeking not only to absorb the workplace but to transform society as a whole into a moment of production. The total integration envisioned by capitalism through the model of the 'social factory' goes far beyond direct productive labor, encompassing the colonization of post-industrial spaces—such as entertainment, education, and health care—and subjecting them to strict surveillance and organization, all aimed at preserving the comprehensive social conditions necessary for capitalist profitability ([Dyer-Witheford 1994, 95](#)).

The most radical dimension of this new capitalist mode of socialization lies in the blurring of the boundary between paid and unpaid labor. As [Negri \(1989, 89\)](#) argues in *The Politics of Subversion*, 'the diffuse or "borderless factory" is, in fact, society itself, which has become an immense social factory where the working class toils and class struggle unfolds.'

However, this pessimistic reality simultaneously harbors revolutionary potential. Capitalist production, in its effort to penetrate all aspects of life, transforms into a biopolitical mode of production—encompassing the production of life itself in its totality (Hardt and Negri 2009, 299). Much of everyday labor has become immaterial, involving ideas, symbols, images, and affective relations that transcend direct physical production—from digital intellectual property to health maintenance, education, and cooperative research (Hardt and Negri 2009, 382). This biopolitical dimension of capitalist subsumption is precisely what Negri’s engagement with Foucault and Deleuze during his exilic phase equipped him to theorize—an engagement whose philosophical ground had already been laid in *The Savage Anomaly*, where Spinoza’s distinction between *potestas* and *potentia* established that constituted power can command and suppress living labor but can never exhaust the immanent creative force from which it derives (Negri 1991b, 187). Power that operates not through legal prohibition but through the colonization of life itself creates, as its unintended consequence, forms of cooperation and collective intelligence that exceed capital’s capacity to command them.

The theoretical mechanism that drives this expansion from the factory to the social totality is carefully articulated in *Marx Beyond Marx*, where Negri analyzes Marx’s ‘Fragment on Machines’ in the *Grundrisse*. There, Marx (1973, 699, as cited in Negri 1991a, 142) demonstrates that, as capital subsumes scientific knowledge and the collective intellectual capacities of society into its productive apparatus, ‘the entire production process appears as not subsumed under the direct skilfulness of the worker, but rather as the technological application of science.’ For Negri, this is not merely a description of technological change but a revelation of capital’s structural tendency: the more it extends control, the more it must incorporate—and thereby depend upon—the collective, social, and immaterial dimensions of human creativity. As Negri (1991a, 142) writes: ‘Real subsumption of labor can’t but be (in the same moment) real subsumption of society.’

This is the theoretical kernel of the social factory thesis: it is not a metaphor for the extension of management techniques into everyday life but the logical consequence of what Negri, following Marx, calls the ‘logic of separation’—the tendency of capitalist development to simultaneously absorb and produce its own antagonist. As Negri (1991a, 128) argues, the totalizing process of valorization ‘must allow proletarian self-valorization to appear. It must allow its own antagonism to develop in all its potential.’ The social factory is thus simultaneously capital’s maximum extension of control and the condition that generates the *Multitude* as a political subject: dispersed through the social fabric, engaged in immaterial and affective labor that produces the commons—language, knowledge, cooperation, and social relations—that capital requires but cannot fully command. The revolutionary implication, drawn explicitly by Negri from the *Grundrisse*, is that when ‘the creation of real wealth comes to depend less on labor time and on the amount of labor employed than on the power of the agencies set in motion during labor time’ (Marx 1973, 704–705, as cited in Negri 1991a, 143), then the measure of value in exchange-value terms becomes increasingly fictitious, and the material conditions for a post-capitalist organization of production are already being constructed within capitalist society itself. *Empire*, in this reading, carries the seeds of its own dissolution.³

The political subject adequate to the social factory is what Negri, in *Revolution Retrieved*, calls the ‘social worker’ (*operaio sociale*)—a concept marking a decisive

advance beyond the earlier Operaist figure of the ‘mass worker.’ The transition is theorized with precision:

But it would be more correct to say: from the working class, ie that working class massified in direct production in the factory, to social labour-power, representing the potentiality of a new working class, now extended throughout the entire span of production and reproduction [...] (Negri 1988, 105).

The social worker represents a qualitative transformation in class composition, defined as:

That combination of political and material characteristics—both historical and physical—which makes up: (a) the historically given structure of labor-power, in all its manifestations, as produced by a given level of productive forces and relations; and (b) the working class as a determinate level of solidification of needs and desires, as a dynamic subject [...] (Negri 1988, 106).

This double definition—structural and subjective—distinguishes Negri’s concept of class from both economistic and voluntarist alternatives: class composition is the historically produced material form of the antagonism itself.

In *Domination and Sabotage*, Negri draws the political consequences with characteristic directness:

The whole of capitalist development, ever since the working class established itself at a high level of composition, has been nothing other than the obverse of, a reaction to, a pursuit of proletarian self-valorization—an operation of self-protection, of recuperation, of adjustment in relation to the effects of self-valorization, which are effects of sabotage of the capitalist machine (Negri 2005, 241).

The social factory, in this reading, is not primarily an instrument of capitalist domination but the spatial form that capital is compelled to assume in response to the expansive force of proletarian autonomy.

These daily, immaterial, and widely diffused forms of labor possess the capacity to escape the centralized control and surveillance of capital, coalescing instead into what Negri calls the natural and cultural common (such as language, social practices, and collective relational patterns). These commons can serve as the nucleus of an independent revolutionary subjectivity, provided they succeed in breaking free from corrupting capitalist influence and harnessing the individual differences of the masses. Ultimately, they can give rise to autonomous institutions of governance that enjoy political and economic independence (Hardt and Negri 2004, 341).

As noted earlier, this logic is later recast in the Hardt–Negri trilogy, where it takes the form of *Empire* and the *Multitude*.⁴ These concepts designate the actual form of widespread, networked dissent across the globe, manifesting in fragmented forms of postmodern identity politics (Hall 2015, 112). The *Multitude*—defined by biopolitical production as ‘an open, inclusive concept’ extending beyond the working class—is ‘composed of innumerable internal differences that can never be reduced to a unity’ and is ‘capable of forming society autonomously’ (Hardt and Negri 2004, 13–15).⁵

Autonomist Marxism expressed its resistance to the logic of the social factory through various forms of non-unionized or non-party-based activism, such as the collective refusal to pay public utility bills and opposition to price increases in essential services like water, electricity, and telephone (Katsiaficas 2006, 22). Student protests in universities and schools also became prominent, as did the growing role of feminist movements that challenged the patriarchal traditions of the Italian left, politicizing issues previously considered personal freedoms, such as divorce and abortion (Gautney 2009, 477).⁶

SELF-VALORIZATION AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF STRUGGLE WITHIN THE FACTORY

For autonomist Marxists, self-valorization means that the working class engages with its own experience and initiates an independent process of generating its own demands, needs, and values to replace those that are alien to or imposed by capitalism. This leads to a transformation in the nature of labor itself; as Negri (2005, 259) argues, ‘nothing reveals the immense historical positivity of workers’ self-valorization more completely than sabotage’—a claim that goes far beyond merely demanding reduced working hours or higher wages.

According to Negri in *Marx Beyond Marx*, the primary cause of the capitalist crisis lies in the ongoing struggle over the working day. For capitalism to generate surplus value necessary for profit accumulation, it must ensure that workers spend the longest possible time in unpaid labor (*surplus labor*) rather than just *necessary labor* (Negri 1991a, 72). Yet, this drive confronts a limit internal to the capital relation itself: proletarian constitutive power exceeds what exploitation can reach. It is precisely this structural limit—capitalism’s inability to reach beyond proletarian activity to the constitutive power that subtends it—that mass struggle directly exploits: by subjecting surplus labor to the requirements of necessary labor and prioritizing the specific demands and needs of the working class instead of those dictated by capital (Negri 1991a, 145).

In this precise sense, self-valorization deepens and concretizes the concept of class antagonism and explains the major confrontations occurring at the boundaries of conflicting demands and needs. Proletarian self-valorization becomes a positive act of refusal—not merely defensive but foundational—the working class’s affirmation of its own capacity to disrupt capital’s source of power, for ‘proletarian self-valorization is the strength to withdraw from exchange value and the capacity to base itself on use values’ (Negri 2005, 41).

The concept of self-valorization acquires its full precision when read against Negri’s analysis of ‘small-scale circulation’ in *Marx Beyond Marx*—the sphere of wage expenditure and proletarian reproduction that Marx planned but never completed. Negri (1991a, 130) argues that the book on the wage was never written not because the wage was subordinate but because ‘the whole theory of capital can only base itself and develop by way of the theory of the wage.’ In this sphere, a second and irreducible logic operates alongside capitalist valorization: ‘Simultaneity and parallelism distinguish the independence of the worker-subject, its own self-valorization face to face with capitalist valorization’ (Negri 1991a, 135).

In *Domination and Sabotage*, Negri offers what is perhaps his most substantive characterization of the concept:

The fundamental characteristic of the revolutionary development of the proletariat is the process of proletarian self-valorization. This is a material process, built on the direct appropriation of wealth and power, the development of radical needs and desires [...] (Negri 2005, 276).

This definition makes explicit what the *Marx Beyond Marx* analysis left implicit: self-valorization is not a theoretical category but a practical process, already underway within the existing terrain of capitalist production. Negri (2005, 241) specifies its ontological foundation in equally direct terms: ‘Proletarian self-valorization is the strength [*forza*] to withdraw from exchange value and the capacity to base itself on use values.’ The withdrawal from exchange value is not a utopian aspiration but an observable feature of the class relation: every time the working class refuses to make its labor available as a commodity on capital’s terms—through absenteeism, sabotage, the refusal of overtime, or the occupation of social spaces outside the wage relation—it is enacting, however partially, this logic of use-value against exchange-value.

The relationship between self-valorization and sabotage is stated with provocative directness at the opening of Part Two of *Domination and Sabotage*: ‘Self-valorization is sabotage’ (Negri 2005, 258). The equivalence is methodologically significant: it identifies destructuring of capital’s command as the negative power of the positive—the reverse-face of the working class’s affirmation of its own independent value-production. Negri elaborates:

The concept ‘proletarian self-valorization’ is the opposite of the concept ‘state-form’—it is the form that power assumes within a developed workers’ standpoint. Proletarian self-valorization is immediately the destructuring of the enemy power; it is the process through which workers’ struggle today directly invests the system of exploitation and its political regime (Negri 2005, 234).

What is theoretically decisive in this formulation is the word ‘immediately’: self-valorization does not first constitute itself as an economic force and then, secondarily, challenge political power. The two moments are simultaneous. Every act of proletarian self-determination is already, in the same gesture, a destabilization of the state-form that guarantees capitalist exploitation.

Self-valorization as an independent and parallel process running alongside capitalist valorization—not merely reacting to it—is the most precise articulation of what distinguishes Negri’s position from classical Marxist accounts of resistance. The proletariat does not merely resist capital’s valorization from a position of subjection; it generates its own process of value-creation, rooted in use-value and necessary labor, ontologically prior to the exchange-value logic capital imposes. Negri is explicit:

The basis of self-valorization has expanded to the point where we can define the revolutionary project as the construction of an opposition power based on the class dynamic... because use value is for the proletariat an immediate revindication and immediate practice of power (Negri 1991a, 136–137).

This is not the refusal of work as simple negation but the affirmation of an alternative mode of value-production, rooted in collective needs, that already exists within the interstices of capitalist society—and that, when organized and expanded, constitutes the material foundation for a communist transition.

This expansive process of self-valorization has its historical and theoretical roots in the factory—the site where, prior to its generalization across the social fabric, workers first confronted capital’s command directly and without mediation. Since the entire production process depends completely on labor power, the proletariat is capable of developing various forms of resistance—such as strikes, boycotts, and sabotage (Harrison 2011, 8). The Italian worker theorist Mario Tronti identified the proletariat as the decisive force repeatedly compelling capital to adapt and renew itself; his conclusion was unequivocal: the only way to end this relationship is through the refusal of labor, while other worker theorists advocated more radical measures, such as factory occupations and self-management (Wright 2002, 16–21, 37–39).

In this regard, Negri asserts:

Sabotage is, therefore, the fundamental key to rationality that we possess at this level of class composition [...] From now on it becomes impossible, even in theory, to forget this paradox produced by the struggles: the more the form of domination perfects itself, the emptier it becomes; the more the workers’ refusal grows, the more full it is of rationality and value (Negri 2005, 285).

This makes explicit that Autonomous Marxism does not aspire to seize power or establish a ‘communist state.’ It rejects the *Communist Manifesto*’s goal of a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ and challenges the claim that an anti-capitalist order requires capturing state power (Harvey 2010, 16). This rejection is grounded not in anarchist principles but in the historical experience of working-class betrayal by left-allied governments that conspired with capital to impose austerity or repress workers—and in the theoretical position that the living power of labor is ontologically prior to any state form.

This theoretical architecture—from the ontological primacy of labor to the social factory and self-valorization—remains a site of intense contestation within contemporary Marxist scholarship. Recent critiques have challenged Negri’s focus on the productive vitality of the ‘multitude’ by foregrounding what Søren Mau (2023) terms the ‘mute compulsion’ of economic power—an impersonal form of domination that operates through the structural environment of capital rather than direct command, potentially eluding the reach of self-valorizing struggles. Furthermore, the social factory thesis and the subsequent hegemony of immaterial labor continue to face objections regarding empirical underdetermination, with critics like Camfield (2007) arguing that such frameworks neglect the persistent centrality of traditional industrial production in the global South. From a more philosophical register, Alberto Toscano (2009; 2016) has questioned whether Negri’s ‘ontology of immanence’ risks collapsing the specificity of political strategy into a metaphysical affirmation of productivity, thereby underestimating the necessity of organized mediation. However, the present study maintains its interpretive trajectory by asserting that these objections often operate within the very deterministic or *potestas*-centered frameworks that Autonomous Marxism seeks to transcend. To read Negri’s categories as strategically ‘insufficient’ is to miss their strictly Spinozist ground: they do not offer a blueprint for party organization, but an immanent *potentia* that constitutes the condition of possibility for any capitalist valorization. By engaging these contested points, the analysis reaffirms that Negri’s project is a rigorous ‘immanent critique’ designed to retrieve constituent power from its institutionalized closure.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that Negri's three principal theoretical contributions—the ontological primacy of labor over capital, the social factory thesis, and the practice of self-valorization—are not discrete theoretical innovations but sequentially grounded and progressively presupposing moments of a single philosophical movement: the systematic liberation of Marx's own categories from the deterministic encrustation that Second International orthodoxy had imposed upon them. Autonomous Marxism, at its core, remains what this study has argued throughout: its emancipation from within, through the recovery of Marx's own categories against their orthodox misreading. As a corrective project, it carries three defining commitments: an optimistic outlook regarding the capacities latent within the working masses, a more democratic vision of the proletariat–party relationship, and a decisive rupture with the ideological rigidity that dominated Marxist discourse under the authoritarian rule of the Communist International. The emergence of autonomist Marxism is primarily a product of internal fractures—political stances and party practices—that led to a rethinking of Marxist heritage rather than its rejection. The disappointments of the Historic Compromise strategy created profound disillusionment, prompting critical reassessments of the proletariat–party relationship. Autonomist Marxism transcends the desire for absolute power and rejects the notion of proletarian dictatorship: rather than expressing abstract political ambitions, it functions as a movement of appropriation and liberation of thought and social space through refusal, resistance, strikes, and industrial sabotage.

It is important to acknowledge what this study does not claim. The corrective and revisionist character of Autonomous Marxism does not make it immune to criticism: the tension between the local specificity of the Italian experience and the universalist ambitions of the *Empire* trilogy remains a genuine theoretical problem. The concept of the *Multitude* has been criticized for its empirical vagueness and its underdetermination of the specific organizational forms through which collective resistance might be institutionalized (Harvey 2010). While the transition from the Operaist factory-centered analysis to the biopolitical and Spinozist framework might appear to involve discontinuities, these are more accurately understood as strategic reorientations or ontological deepenings necessitated by the evolving terrain of capitalist command and the internal logic of Negri's immanent critique. Far from undermining the philosophical unity, these shifts represent the adaptive capacity of Negri's project to consistently ground the constituent power of labor against ever-more complex forms of constituted power, thereby affirming the singular trajectory of his emancipatory thought. These tensions are acknowledged here not as deficiencies to be minimized, but as the productive openings that any theoretically honest engagement with Negri's project must preserve.

Despite the geographical specificity of the Italian workers' experience, capitalism's imperial drive to subsume all social life into the logic of valorization has contributed to the internationalization of the autonomist Marxist tendency, confirming the enduring relevance of the corrective and revisionist project this study has traced.

It is this constitutive force of living labor—ontologically prior to capital's command yet perpetually exposed to its biopolitical subsumption—that Negri's project identifies as the irreducible ground of emancipatory politics. This study thus culminates in the understanding that Negri's intellectual trajectory offers a rigorous conceptual apparatus for discerning the constituent power that resists capital's totalizing capture—framing it not as a guaranteed revolutionary outcome but as the essential condition of its possibility.

- 1 This strategy of tension must be analyzed as a phenomenon entirely distinct from the PCI's constitutional-political positioning: conflating the two risks reproducing misleading narratives about the PCI's institutional role—see [Pons \(2024\)](#).
- 2 The choice of 'Marxism' over 'Communism' avoids conflating theory with practice and the automatic association with 'Communist' states or parties blamed for twentieth-century atrocities. Those regimes were state capitalist in nature, not genuine realizations of socialist theory.
- 3 Every social product has two values: exchange value—its abstract, quantitative monetary aspect detached from ethical or human context—and use value—the product's qualitative significance for life. Under capitalist competitive market laws, exchange value predominates and use value recedes, leaving prices and quantities as the sole criteria for comparing products—see [Marx \(1976, 125–126\)](#).
- 4 Autonomist Marxists tie their analysis to globalization: Antonio Negri argues that post-World War II imperial sovereignty became a global 'Empire' beyond any single nation-state. Its industrial, managerial, and financial mechanisms reshaped capital, produced a new class, and inaugurated a novel era of class struggle. While many on the left lamented communism's collapse, autonomist theory recast the terrain of conflict within globalized capitalism—see [Buchanan \(2018, 906\)](#).
- 5 Post-Marxist critics argue that Negri's ontology of immanence risks collapsing 'the political' into spontaneous productivity, thereby underestimating the necessity of hegemonic articulation and political mediation. For an analysis of how the *Multitude* lacks the 'constitutive outside' required for a unified political subject—see [Laclau and Mouffe \(2001\)](#).
- 6 The Italian feminist movement later clashed with Autonomist Marxism, and a conflict emerged between the two over what the feminist movement described as an 'excessive masculine readiness' among autonomist Marxists to resort to armed violence—see [Cunningham \(2000\)](#).

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Khudhyer LM
Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory
 DOI: 10.33134/rds.498

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Khudhyer LM. Contributions of Antonio Negri in Building the Theoretical Foundations of Autonomous Marxism. *Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory*. 2026; 29(1): 54–72. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.498>

Submitted: 15 July 2025

Accepted: 7 June 2026

Published: 14 July 2026

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Redescriptions: Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press.