INTRODUCTION

Transindividuality (A Concept for Marxism)

*It is impossible to know anything about men except on the absolute precon-
dition that the philosophical (theoretical) myth of man is reduced to ashes.*

LOUIS ALTHUSSER

The current historical moment can be described as the predominance of the individual over the collective. The individual reigns supreme in politics, as an ethic of individual rights and freedoms displaces any project of collective liberation. In economics this is even more the case, as the utility maximising individual of neoliberal economics trumps not only any other idea of economic relations, but subsumes all social relations. Traditions and institutions have been stripped bare, revealing the calculating, self-interested individual that always supposedly lurked underneath. Individual self-interest has become the template through which all actions can be interpreted. The political and economic assertion of the individual is completed by a cultural ideal of complete and utter self-expression and independence. To deny this dominance, to assert that there might be other forces at work politically, other causes to be considered economically, and other values to aspire to ethically or culturally, is to be branded as a collectivist, to be burdened with the ghost of the past century’s crimes and catastrophes. The individual has become not only the basis of political, cultural, and economic understanding but also the extent of all of our aspirations; the individual is both methodologically and prescriptively dominant; it is simultaneously all one needs to make sense of the world and the best that one could hope from it.

This complete and utter assertion of the dominance of the individual, politically, economically, and ethically is haunted by the spectre of its own impotence. Forces beyond its control constantly risk dwarfing it. The names that are most often used to reflect the economic, social, and political changes of the past few decades, such as globalisation, financialisation, and various invocations of technology, media, and the Internet, have, as something of a common denominator, an inability to name organisations, ideologies, or goals, or any practice or subject orienting the changes. In its place we get the imper-
sonal force of finances, the development and progress of technology, or the sheer brutal assertion of the world, global connection as an unavoidable fact of existence. To the extent that the social or political appears, it appears then as not something that can be altered, acted on, and changed, but as something which exists only as an impersonal force. Thus, to complete this rough sketch of the reigning ideology, one could say that it is caught between an ideal of the individual and a dim awareness of social relations, of social conditions, that can only be perceived as a hostile or at the very least inevitable force.

Eclipsed by such a social imaginary is not only collectivity, but more importantly the point of intersection between collectivity, or social relations, and the individual. The two have become a strict binary: either we think in terms of the individual, making it both an analytic and evaluative centre of our thought, or we affirm an all-encompassing collective, which washes the individual away in a night in which all jumpsuits are grey. Such a division between the individual and the collective can be considered a remnant of philosophy's long cold war, which divided the history of philosophy into those who championed the individual, and those who championed the collective, understood in terms of nature, history, or the state. The former became the precursor of the reigning individualistic consensus, the latter precursors of the gulags and atrocities. That such a division is left over from the cold war would suggest that there is a need to overcome it, to rethink a binary between individual and society that is as trenchant as it is rigid. Moreover, as I have tried to hint above, it seems woefully out of touch with the changing contours and dimensions of contemporary social relations. Both sides of the divide, the individual and collective, have changed historically, and it is precisely such a static binary that makes it impossible to engage the history of individuals and collectives, obscuring both in a static binary of the individual versus society. Today's masses are connected by new forms of media, and are engaged in different relations of economic dependence and domination from those that haunted the nineteenth century. Similarly, our isolation and fragmentation have been transformed as well. Technology and economic relations have made it more and more possible to be alone, to work and live without intersecting with others. The problem is not just that we lack any understanding of collectivity, but also that we lack any understanding of how individuality and collectivity affect and transform each other. This limitation is not just found on the side of the dominant discourses, in neoliberalism and rational choice theory; it is also found on the side of the various political moments and discourses that endeavour to change the world. If the reigning order can be described as caught between the rational individual and the