From the Standpoint of the Multitude

‘All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare’: the last sentence of Spinoza’s Ethics, designed to convince exhausted and confused readers to return to a work that so often seems strangely opaque and unfamiliar, might well serve as the most efficacious introduction to Antonio Negri’s Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State. Even those who possess a reading knowledge of philosophical and theoretical idioms other than those derived from the analytic tradition will find Negri’s text a difficult book that demands from the reader almost as much as it offers in return.

First, Negri’s approach is resolutely historical; he thus rejects any reduction of problems to basic elements or first principles, preferring instead to measure his ideas against or in relation to those that already occupy the field. Marx and Spinoza are the central reference points, as has been the case in everything Negri has written in the last thirty years, but their presence is so total that they almost take the form of immanent causes indistinguishable from their effects. The reader must be prepared to engage with figures as diverse as Schmitt, Arendt, Weber, Machiavelli, Harrington, Burke, Jefferson, Hamilton, Calhoun, Sieyès, Tocqueville, and Lenin, together with their modern commentators. Further, Negri refuses to treat their arguments in a necessarily disembodied form to determine whether or not they are coherent. Instead, he situates arguments historically, discovering in the incoherences of certain thinkers ideas far more powerful and illuminating than the carefully crafted doctrines of the official philosophers, insofar as the contradictions of the former express the necessary conflict of forces in a given historical period, a conflict that more ordered works seek precisely to dispel or transcend. Thus, the privileged interlocutor of the English Revolution becomes Harrington, rather than Hobbes or Locke, of the French, Sieyès instead of Kant or Hegel. Surprisingly, the antagonisms engendered by the American revolution can be glimpsed more readily in the writings of John C. Calhoun, theoretician of the Confederacy, than in Tom Paine. In short, there is immense historical as well as philosophical erudition in this work. I can think of no other writer as capable of situating texts in the events that made them possible, and thus of presenting them in their specificity and, simultaneously, establishing between them, even across
many centuries, a vital interchange such that we can hardly imagine ever again examining them in isolation. These qualities alone would suffice to render the work a formidable challenge to even the most prepared readers.

But the difficulty of Negri’s text is not only a matter of content, but of form; or, perhaps, a matter of the form imposed by the nature of the content. The history of capitalist development, as Negri understands it, is not a linear succession of social totalities; its time is not linear at all, but a time replete with reversals and roads opened but not taken. It is a time of struggle, even of war with periods of acceleration and deceleration, of the convergence of forces and their dispersal, of explosion and drift. Negri not only describes this history, his style embodies it. Like a kind of prose poem, *Insurgencies* makes us experience directly, not just reflect on, this time. It is as if the work itself pulsates, concentrating meaning only then to disgorge it in excess. I so often found reading the work frustrating and tiring that I finally obtained the original Italian text, only to discover that, like Spinoza, Negri’s work must always be retranslated, that no one translation (into English at least) can convey the range of meanings emitted by the text.

The original title is *Il potere costituente: saggio sulle alternative del moderno* or ‘constituent power: an essay on the alternative to modernity’. To understand Negri’s central concept, constituent power, we must situate the work, as Negri himself does the work of others, in its historical context. First published in 1992, the work is clearly a response to the growing tendency among Marxists, beginning in the late 1970s, to retreat from revolutionary politics, not merely to social-democratic positions, but even more fundamentally to frankly liberal tenets. The European Left, in particular, had begun to respond to the ability of the capitalist powers to resist the revolutionary wave that swept much of the world and which peaked in the period 1968–75. But, all too often, the response did not take the form of an analysis of the specific conditions of this defeat, together with a candid inventory of oppositional forces that might have been expected from those who had read their Lenin (and Trotsky). Many of those writing in this period preferred abstract speculation on first principles, rather than a sober examination of results and prospects. Of course, who would not prefer the consolations of philosophy to an assessment that could only culminate in an acknowledgement of a decimation so complete that to rebuild the forces of opposition would be the work of decades? Marxists from the most diverse backgrounds found themselves able to agree that the project of socialist emancipation had not simply been defeated (because, as Lenin noted, even revolutionary forces guided by the correct line can suffer defeat in the face of the extraordinarily complex and unpredictable reality of war) but was fundamentally and deeply flawed. In particular, both the depletion of its mass base in the capitalist world and the failure of the régimes of the Eastern Bloc