

Romano Alquati

Co-research and Worker's Inquiry

Editor's Note

Co-research is not simply worker's inquiry. Although it retains some of the hereditary features, co-research represents a radical reformulation of the Marxist model of inquiry, a methodological and political reinvention in a changed context and according to new objectives. The following extract from Romano Alquati (taken from *Walking to Realize a Common Dream*, Velleità Alternative, 1994, pp. 70–81) measures this gap, trying to indicate the affinities and divergences between the author's argument and the practice of worker's inquiry, with the aim of proposing a schema of co-research valid for the range of social conflicts that have taken shape following the crisis of the Fordist compromise and the Keynesian politics of the postwar period. To take up this challenge, Alquati performs two operations: on one hand, he has to bring to light those aspects of co-research that are irreducible to the sociological form of the worker's inquiry; on the other, he is led to mobilize a series of innovative concepts to conceive its efficacy within the complexity of contemporary capitalism. The introduction of categories such “hyper-industrial” and “hyper-proletariat” (absent from Alquati's texts from the 1960s and 1970s) serves, in fact, to underline how the post-Fordist transformation does not coincide with the abandonment of Tayloristic techniques of disciplinary management of the labor force, but indicates, on the contrary, *a mutation in the forms of “industrialization” of production and social reproduction*, which tend to absorb the cognitive and affective qualities of living work in an increasingly pervasive way.

With regard to the first point, then, it is necessary to underline that Alquati insists on two variations that distance his argument from the classic schema of the worker's inquiry: an epistemological difference and a functional difference. The first concerns the mode of knowledge that is employed in the research. Whereas the worker's inquiry starts from a universalistic epistemological paradigm aimed at producing a model of the factory situation, co-research is instead founded on the partiality and asymmetry of the perspective taken: it does not produce a portrait of the social reality, but draws a cartography from below of the forms of domination and of the lines of fracture that structure its terrain. The starting point lies in the (always changing) subjectivities and their situated points of view, not a perspective tending to theoretical totalization and a global view of reality. The epistemology of co-research is an epistemology of the part as opposed to the whole and an epistemology of conflict, whose efficacy is measured in power relations and not merely on the basis of its internal coherence.

That characteristic, tied to the type of knowledge produced by co-research, must be revealed, then, in relation to its specific function, which determines its modalities of development and application. Whereas the worker's inquiry is carried out by a preexistent, organized structure (the Union, the Party, etc.) that seeks to keep itself apprised of the situation and reinvent itself politically, co-research aims instead to build the organization in its very development, starting directly from the class situation, from its materiality and stratifications—these being immanent to it. Co-research is thus the construction of an organizational and political process, the weaving of bonds with a view to the political and epistemological coevolution of the oppressed. By returning to this practice, Alquati faces the challenge of both the multiplication of work figures and the possible intersections between the many heterogeneous terrains of struggle for liberation. In the following brief excerpt, the Alquatian methodology thus reveals its incisiveness. The efficacy of the method is measured in terms of the desired political results, and it is defined as the form and substance of class struggle. Co-research, then, seems to push itself to the point of occupying the utopic and euchronic space of communist project, which, from a simple stage of historical development, becomes an articulated pathway, a “common dream” realizable in the actuality of social movements. The realization of co-research would consist, in fact, in the complete overlap of theory and praxis, subjectification and conflict, process of consciousness and process of struggle.

—Matteo Polleri

Co-research and Worker's Inquiry

It should be immediately evident that co-research is not “worker’s inquiry.” They differ in two respects. First, worker’s inquiry is *extemporaneous*: it lasts a few months and terminates! It therefore implies a different relationship altogether between the internal and the external (between internal militants and researchers who come from the “outside,” but who might themselves be more or less militant . . .). Furthermore, worker’s inquiry remains in a predominantly cognitive dimension, devoted merely to the production of knowledge. But then it *entrusts* the effective use of the acquired knowledge to a political agency typically different from the team that conducted the research, and it more or less consigns the produced knowledge to the action of specialized political actors. So it entrusts this knowledge to a political action that is more or less separated¹ (perhaps in terms of representation, etc.). The political actor is specialized in “partisan political intervention” but does not in its everyday activity produce knowledge of its own accord, applying—but how?—for the most part exogenous forms of knowledge, and even exogenous elaborations of applied theory.

One predicts and supposes that worker’s inquiries may profitably be used in co-research (especially in the beginning, though not only); but the two *do not coincide*. And, at any rate, the whole question remains as to if and eventually how the researchers give or refer the knowledge on the researched to the researched themselves (step by step and/or at the end) for *their own use*. And of the evaluation of the difference between them—a difference of position and ends. Or, rather, the question remains of what this means, of the meaning of these, certainly debatable, distinctions and propositions.

And then there is the distinction between that more or less militant model of worker’s inquiry, which, straddling the 1960s and 1970s, spread even (and even more so) outside of Italy and has been applied and discussed under the label “*research-intervention*.” Here the difference lies precisely in the *duration*, in the perspective of rootedness. But in my opinion the quantity of time configures a qualitative difference that can also be very large in times of social transformation.

1.1. Other Aspects of the Two Principal Characteristics of Co-research

If we turn to the two characteristics of the co-research process that I have from the outset drawn (particular) attention to,² we see here emerge two orders of obstacles within a certain ideological area. As I had foreseen and foretold from the start. Which was not difficult.

A—The first hypothesis of co-research defined it as a practical activity of the transformation of the existent, and in particular of the social relations concerning domination and thus “political” (in the sense of the intrinsically political or of the “Political”). And this already does not sit well with many. B—Secondly, I suggested that it might be a place of counter-cooperation of researchers with research capacities that are at least initially different (depending on three situations).³ And this other definition, in this other one, pleases very few. Let us inquire *a bit further* into both of these hypotheses.

1.1.1 Let Us Revisit the First Characteristic of the Co-research Process. I will subdivide the first characteristic, in turn, into two dimensions.

A.1 Research as a transformative practice *for its contents of knowledge*, and thus for its substantive aspects.

And with regard to this I would like to signal an obvious, well-known and long-standing contradiction of certain commentators. Figures who, like parrots, repeat ejaculatory prayers to the General Intellect (which they think was born just recently), which elaborates, innovates, and uses science, but then have not the faintest clue what this is, or how science itself is applied and works as its prerogative, or how it is produced and innovated, or why; nor much less why it might come to act as a resource (hot or cold, according to my model) and confer power to human action; perhaps even impoverishing it at the same time . . . If anything, these good folks proceed in their actions in an *artisanal way*, in *semi-impotent* micro-cooperations (in the sense of being almost devoid of available and ambivalent systemic power). Nevertheless, they enthusiastically dedicate themselves to the fetish of certain machines and technical procedures,⁴ used more, and with more “competence,” by “experts,” who, then, are considered privileged, and envied. Even if it is often the machines who use them! Micro-artisans in politics but hyper-machinists and hyper-scientific technologists in the supposedly playful but often rather destructive act of consumption: of themselves, among other things.

In general, science is seen by many in certain so-called transgressive or even revolutionary areas as something academic: blusters unmoored from practical ends and applications, spread like occasions for the distribution of shameful, parasitic revenues, collusive in power, oppressive and blood-draining to the people. And it is thus that even scientific researchers are often seen, all the more so if they are academics; which is idiotic.

On the other hand, they demonize science precisely for the practical dimensions of its application, as in the case of wars, weaponry, pollution, etc., *which are seen as the exclusive horizon* of the discourse of applied science.

And I will say nothing of the scientific method deemed in itself dehumanizing, and so forth; not only because it is based on individual and social separation or at least on the division of “manual” and “intellectual” labor, but precisely because it demands a rather instrumental or abstract mode of reasoning. But this remains for us, in truth, *an enormous issue to tackle*.

Even social science and sociology are linked to this image, which synthesizes and fuses two hardly compatible extremes. Appearance, ideological masking and frameworks that are useless in practice for the people, a mere pretext for cooptation and remuneration with revenues for corrupt academics; and yet, paradoxically, also a powerful instrument for the destruction of the planet, nature, and community, and for great massacres. And that’s about it.

Now it is not that this vision is altogether wrong. But neither is it completely right! *It is an enormous simplification*. And this ideological-religious simplification is intolerable; for us it is inadmissible.⁵ Nevertheless, this occurs often in our ideological contexts. But one does not realize that these two stereotyped and simplistic visions are *different enough from each other* and that if one is true the other cannot be true as well⁶—that we have there a contradiction that would be difficult to surmount, in which, if anything, one would have to fill in a few holes, among other things. But let us not limit ourselves to these two observations. One does not notice that, at any rate, these two stereotypes do not exist on the same level. And that between the two we have to choose. And so *choosing the second comes at a lesser price*, that is, it costs us far less unilaterally to demonize science, even as we recognize its power. And it is I, who places himself in front and within science in terms of a “*specific ambivalence*,” who says this!

I am obliged, then, to say, in the meantime and among other things, that in truth science,⁷ even academic science, is not at all so blusteringly doctrinaire; but it is for the most part, and in an ever growing measure, *applied to practice* and to the development of technologies (which the subversive, oneiric ones fetishize). Science in general, even social science, is not only a practice, but also strengthens and produces (in a practical way) use-values as well as practical utilities for human practice. And especially today, when we have a crisis and funds are scarce, scientific research (even of the academic type) has to be productive if one wants the collective capitalists and their state to finance it; and so research is *aimed at applicability*. It aims at and obtains practical utilities more or less directly, which enter into the daily life of the hyperproletariat; given that by now, whether it be in the means of labor and action, or in consumption as in politics, nothing of what is utilized, used, and consumed is left out of it, but rather everything that functions and has power in our soci-

ety is made *powerfully by means of science* and so also by means of academic scientific research and thus is applied and used. And it is this science that has merged with the co-General Intellect to qualify it for at least a century—with the “co-General-intellect” necessarily combined with the means and the machinery. The income to be gained and the academic games are not today its principal aspect, not even in the university.

Even sociology today is put into practice. In fact, it is not only used to legitimate the form of the system—is not only appearance—but also enters directly into technological and organizational innovation, and so forth. And it is interesting to note that there are now many different sociologies competing among themselves, *which are distinct enough depending on their differing levels of systemic social reality!*⁸ This is very important. And it goes for all of today's social science. So much so that—I will reiterate—it is not enough for me to say that the main characteristic of co-research is that it is already a practice, but I also have to point out that co-research itself should from the outset be aimed at forming itself methodologically⁹ *so as to realize, if anything, a counter-practice! I am obliged to point out that co-research is, if anything, a practical counter-activity.* And a political one at that since it aims at the political ends of hyper-communist liberation/transformation. And therein it also aims at a long and very difficult process of the progressive elaboration of a counter-science.

This is, thus, the first characteristic in substantive terms. And then, with respect to this characteristic, I would like to underline the question of the intrinsically political character of the science-means in its ambivalence. And instead counter-science, or even a counter-social-science (this is the point), must be completely invented, imagined, developed, either as an alternative use, or as a development of alternative, embryonically present use-values in the twice specific ambivalence of the means themselves and so also of the science-means, of the social-science means (and capital-means), in substantive terms.

A2. In addition, there is *the method* (scientific, of a scientific rationality) and the practical organization of its practical and transformative co-research process: the method of this research-based action that counterfeits science and produces it as commodity and capital. In fact, the “cold” *method of the scientific research process*, which we find, for instance, in the manual, is *capital-means*. And even more so the techniques and procedures, and so forth.

The production of science presents itself as the most typical and central of today's “immaterial” factories and “immaterial” productions; how a great number of those who demonize our alternative use of social science fill

their mouths (with the immaterial . . .)! I prefer to say neo-material . . . And so, among other things, we might find, with regard to the method, that even the “public” university” is a site for a particular immaterial production . . . On the subject of the *scientific method in and of itself*, which is then that which most fully gives strength to this special form of knowledge, with its systematicity based on rational calculation, I refer the reader to *In order to do co-research*. . . . A strengthened (and strengthening) induction, above all.

And now I have only to point out the convergence of this method with that of the truly hyper-industrial factory. And I will do as much for the “organizational method,” which must be distinguished from the (preceding) “scientific method.” For now, I will only point out that both meet and merge in the “factory method.” With which we turn to the *key question*: is it right for us to use the method of the hyper-industrial factory for our co-research? And then: for our political organization?¹⁰

I would wager that we have *two currents of thought* as concerns the use of the scientific method in the co-research process, which are polarized depending on two opposed unilateralities: those who condemn the immaterial factory itself, as they would any factory, in the name of a romantic return to a mythic, primitive, and “pre-rational” past, and those who bask in the immaterial, the abstract and the mental in itself, in a manner I would term hyper-liberal, and who sometimes even confuse the cognitive with the communist. And in the middle, as usual, there is little. But I¹¹ reject both of these streams of thought, which are prevalent today. And I place myself against them, in scant company. In fact, I would venture to sustain that the method of Galilean science contains an ambivalence for which it might be *critically* used in some of its aspects in our organization of co-research. At least at the outset. And I have in the past affirmed as much for the Toyota model of organization. So that in my opinion we can explore without false modesty the co-research-oriented, and thus critical, use of the factory method, *cleansing it, however*, of everything that pertains to exploitation as such, and so of everything that does not work toward our ends. Some people think that the communist organization is legitimated in exploiting its members for common ends. But, according to the definition I have given it, this is impossible. By definition.

I will take up, as an example, the University, which is a place of work and exploitation composed for the most part by hyper-proletarians who work, and which exists as part of the immaterial factory and is itself a significant part of it. But then it follows that scientific researchers, even those of the social sciences and a great many sociologists and academics, *are a significant part of the co-General intellect; and precisely insofar as they are also part of the*

social worker, which some prefer to call *mental worker*¹² or even *cognitive worker*: a truly absurd reduction! Well, then, how do we, at any rate, use for ourselves these great, typical agents who conduct co-research today, between politics and technique? In the perspective of a hyper-communism?

1.1.2. *Let us (re)visit the second characteristic of co-research.* B. Let us move on to the second of the two characteristics, which, as I have said from the outset, defines the co-researched process, that is, let us move to the cooperation of agents with different research capacities. When I affirm that professionals of social scientific research, even academics¹³, ought to cooperate with militants and proletarians of key sites and that these last become “barefooted” researchers, connected with other hyper-proletarians, what do I mean? I mean that hyper-proletarians of the production of consciousness, and therein also militants in turn, cooperate (or if one wishes or anticipates that they will cooperate) in a truly synergetic way and with organizational power to produce counter-consciousness together with other, differently situated militants¹⁴ and hyper-proletarians, thus cooperating with others still in the workers’ so-called “free time.” In such a way, all will work together on themes that we have strategically foregrounded: education, communication, production of (scientific) consciousness. And, therefore, in (key) sites adapted to the task. And they will conduct this research on certain nodes, exchanges and (intrinsically political) social processes with *research capacities* that are, at least at the outset, quantitatively and qualitatively different. Even if they aim these capacities at the highest level possible, and *from the start*. Aim at . . . But they are all hyper-proletarians; and almost all militants!

That there are different capacities is by now a given. And so either one refuses to use the different capacities of the individual and the micro-groups—with the consequence that one refuses to conduct co-research with the slightest bit of power, afforded by *scientificity* as well as by synergetic organization and difference—or one accepts this fact for what it is from the start and uses this current difference critically; I hypothesize that the use of different capacities is indispensable at acceptable costs. And this social situation, proper to our disgusting society,¹⁵ can only be surmounted if one accepts it; it cannot be removed and ignored! It is a question, for instance, of using the different useful capacities of certain sociologists, for their powers. And thus acting in concert with them, we attempt to appropriate it for ourselves; *but on par with them*! Or rather, not giving the sociologists special powers pertaining to “political” decision-making. So: (hyper-)proletarians in different sub-functions should work synergistically and powerfully, even with targeted

technical sub-organizations, in a counter-activity of counter-production of tendentious scientific counter-knowledge on “social” nodes that they will counter-transform.

Notes

- 1 And even auto-referential, so that it legitimizes itself, searches for covers, alibis.
- 2 A, that this is an activity of knowledge production which is immediately practical, “politically” practical, of political action, even if not the only or necessary one, and already transformative; B, its way of starting out using positions and human capacities different from those of a scientific researcher in the social and in particular in the sociocultural field . . .
- 3 I repeat: 1. of diffuse communication, 2. of great communicational enterprise, and 3. of so-called transgressive communicational microagencies.
- 4 Let it be noted: I mean a technology of which they do not know the why or how, but which is of a “scientific” determination.
- 5 Especially for those who consider themselves heirs to Marx’s communism, which he, in his mature period, called scientific-socialism . . .
- 6 If it is a mere bluster or clientilistic raspberry, it is difficult to believe that it should be capable also of that immense, diabolic, destructive power. No?
- 7 More or less dehumanizing in the way it uses reason and rational calculation.
- 8 Even if sociologists are not the first to be aware of or recognize this.
- 9 Usually starting from the lowest levels but aimed at climbing to those highest ones *and so using in the process quite different social scientific disciplines*.
- 10 I have already hinted at this in the prologue.
- 11 With my experimental use of ambivalence, with my (hyper-communist) thesis of the development of an alternative use of Galilean science and in the more powerful recent paradigms—in a process of transformation and liberation that goes beyond it, developing a counter-science.
- 12 But—as I have already said—I prefer to say corporeal-psyhic laborer or, if anything, corporeal-psyhic (and so also spiritual) agent.
- 13 And even academic sociologists at various levels of the—more or less—hierarchical ladder internal to their work.
- 14 I, as Professor Alquati, consider myself a hyper-proletarian laborer and academic militant! Whether you like it or not!
- 15 As Marx used to say.