

How to Write with Four Hands

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What first struck me about Toni Negri was his generosity. From the beginning he took me seriously intellectually and treated me as an equal. I had trouble accepting at first his offer of equality, but he insisted on it long enough that eventually it became the basis of our collaboration. The magic of collaborative writing can only take place, I am convinced, in a special relationship of equality. For me, in the context of this volume, the best way to celebrate the occasion of Toni's eightieth birthday is to reflect on the nature of our encounter and our collaboration.

I met Toni in Paris in the summer of 1986, year three of his fourteen-year exile. I visited for a week to address translation problems regarding his book on Baruch Spinoza, *The Savage Anomaly* (Negri 1991). We met several times during the week, and in the course of our discussions he suggested I move to Paris. We could meet once a week, I remember him proposing, walk in the Luxembourg Gardens, and talk about philosophy. The image appealed to me. I returned to Seattle, where I was in graduate school, completed my PhD exams, and moved to Paris the following summer without funding, a scholarship, a job, or a place to live. With Toni's help and that of the Italian exile circle, I found a way to survive happily.

Toni's first offer to collaborate came, quite unexpectedly, in the first year of my stay in Paris. He had been asked to contribute an essay on Karl Marx to the US journal *Polygraph*, and instead of asking me simply to translate his essay, he suggested that we write it together. Keenly aware of my lack at that time of sufficient knowledge of Marx's work (and just about everything else!), I refused. Toni thus wrote in Italian, and I translated into English his essay "Twenty Theses on Marx" (Negri 1992).

To have the right to work legally in France for twenty hours a week, I enrolled as a student in political science at the University of Paris VIII, Saint Denis, although I was still at an early stage of writing the dissertation for my US degree. I was awarded a DEA (roughly the equivalent of a master's degree) and entered the doctoral program (*troisième cycle*) with the support of Jean-Marie Vincent as my adviser. Toni taught as a visiting professor in the same department at Paris VIII, but I was never his student and never attended any of his classes. He did, though, continually open opportunities for me.

When discussions began about forming a new journal, eventually titled *Futur Antérieur*, with Toni and Vincent as the central figures, Toni invited Maurizio Lazzarato and me to join the small editorial collective. The journal editorial meetings were for me a great training in collaboration. Toni already had extensive experience. He had written a book with Félix Guattari before I arrived in Paris, but I think he learned how to collaborate primarily during his many adventures with political journals in Italy in the 1960s and 1970s. The methods developed in political journals form the basis, I think, of the mode of collaboration we invented later in our book projects.

Sometime around 1990, when I completed my US doctorate, Toni proposed another collaborative writing project, and this time I accepted. An editor at the University of Minnesota Press, Terry Cochran, had suggested that Toni collect his essays on the state written in the 1960s and 1970s for an English-language anthology. Toni feared such a collection would seem outdated, so he proposed that together we write some new chapters that analyze contemporary questions regarding the state to accompany and frame his older essays. The resulting book, *Labor of Dionysus* (Hardt and Negri 1994), published in 1994, was thus only a very partial collaboration: he had written alone over half of the chapters published in the English-language edition. (In Italy and other countries where Toni's older essays had already been published the book consists of only our cowritten material.) *Labor of Dionysus* thus was a stepping-stone for us, a partial and initial experiment in collaboration. When it came time to tell the press how our names should appear on the cover, I considered different ways to signal our partial collaboration. One possibility, for instance, was "Antonio Negri with Michael Hardt." Toni insisted, though, that the book belongs to both of us and our names should be listed equally, in alphabetical order.

Pleased with that book, we soon began another. Again the opportunity came first to Toni, and he shared it with me. An editor at a major French press proposed

that he write a manual of political theory. We began to discuss the project and make outlines, but within a year the opportunity at the French press dried up. We continued the project anyway, stripping it of its textbook-like qualities, and revised it into the book *Empire* (Hardt and Negri 2000). That was our opportunity to collaborate fully for the first time. Since then we have constantly been working together. It has become a condition of our friendship, I often think, that there always be a book project between us.

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The method of writing together that we developed is based, as I said, on the practices typical of the editorial collectives of certain political journals, specifically what I think of as the “assignment” model. The primary intellectual activity in this model takes place in the discussions of the collective. Detailed arguments are worked out together, and extensive outlines of each essay and the journal issue as a whole are produced. Only then are assignments made among members of the collective around the table: you write the essay on X, I’ll write the one on Y, she’ll write the one on Z, and so forth. It can thus feel as though writing one of the essays is a straightforward task, since you only have to put on paper an idea and an argument that the collective has already generated. That is why it makes sense, in the context of so many political journals and newspapers, for essays to be unsigned. The assignment method creates the collaborative (and quasi-anonymous) nature of the writing.

Toni and I go through something like that process when writing our books. We each bring ideas to the table, and we discuss arguments over a long period. The process of writing the outline, extending it, and refining it provides the occasion for continuing the discussion. Sometimes we have conducted this phase of the work together at a table, other times on the telephone, and even by mail. Only when the outline feels close to complete and we think we are clear about the argument of each part of the book do we begin writing. That is when we start the assignments. We do not write together, sitting around the keyboard, but rather complete our assignments alone.

The assignment method, as I said, creates the impression that the real intellectual creation takes place in the discussion phase and that the writing is almost mechanical. This pretense certainly has the virtue that it can help overcome writing block: “you already know what to say, just write it.” But all writers recognize that a large part of invention, perhaps the major part, takes place in the writing

process itself. When you try to articulate an argument in writing, no matter how explicit the assignment, you always discover not only unexpected obstacles but also new possibilities. The great rewards (and torments) of the writing process derive from the fact that writing constantly requires creative solutions.

Since the writing process is so important, the fact that we draft our assignments separately could risk undermining the collaborative nature of the project. Indeed, if we each were to write entire chapters separately, the book could become simply a collection of single-authored essays. For the writing to maintain its collaborative character, it is important, first, that the assignments be very brief, sometimes only a few pages. Second, the drafts have to be submitted to a joint revision process. After we discuss together the drafts, we usually revise each other's work or add to it and pass it back again. Sometimes the process continues for so many steps that neither of us can remember who did the first draft.

In 2006, when Toni and I were fortunate to be able to spend four months together in Venice, we had ideal conditions for this process. Since we had already completed the outline of *Commonwealth* (Hardt and Negri 2009) before that Venice period, we were ready to start writing. Each morning we met to make assignments, and each afternoon we went home to write separately. The next morning we would meet, read the drafts together, discuss what each had written, decide on necessary revisions, and make new assignments for the afternoon. We followed that cycle of assignments and revisions until the outline was complete and we had a first draft. We then spent two more years revising the manuscript before it was ready for publication.

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The primary mystery of collaborative writing resides in the fact that the resulting text goes far beyond the sum of what the authors are capable of producing on their own. The work is based of course on the combined research—the sum of the books read and conversations engaged in together and separately. But in the process of working out the argument and especially in the writing process, a kind of alchemy occurs, and a new element emerges, something like the productive power that Marx says arises from cooperation itself. Marx (1977, 447) explains that when workers cooperate in a planned way, they strip off the fetters of their individuality and realize the capabilities of the species. In collaborative writing the process of leaving behind the fetters of individuality can feel like liberation, and discovering something new, not just a sum of our contributions but some-

thing different and additional, seems magical. The miracle of collaboration is the production of an excess.

The productive power of cooperation is recognizable not only in the content of the argument but also in the tone and style of the writing. Like for many other collaborative pairs, what we write together sounds little like either of our single-authored texts. It is not an alternation or even merging of voices. Instead, our joint writing seems to produce the voice of a third who stands both with and apart from us. That new voice is a sign of the alchemical process.

To allow that transformation to take place, you have to let go of certain things when you enter into a collaborative writing process. Such collaboration is rare not because it requires a talent of which only certain people are endowed but rather because it demands work, care, patience, and generosity. In the writing, first of all, you cannot hold on too tightly to your words and your specific formulations. You have to take the other's way of saying things and work with it. It is often a trick in fact to remain open to each other's words and yet make the resulting text both consistent and precise. I think that Toni and I are aided in this, perhaps paradoxically, by our language difference. We discuss in Italian but write drafts in our own languages, Italian and English. The language difference creates an opening and affords us each a margin of autonomy. Moreover, each of us is constantly forced to translate in our heads and in our discussions, which allows us to engage with the words of the other and effectively make them our own. Our revisions are always written in a mixture of Italian and English, and each of us throughout the revision process has to strive to make the whole cohere. Only at the final step is the language of the manuscript made uniform, usually in English and thus my responsibility.

At the level of ideas an even greater effort is required to allow the power of cooperation to take effect. This is not so much a matter of eliminating those ideas that the other does not share. Direct disagreement is relatively rare, and it is seldom difficult to set those points aside. The primary work instead is to find ways to engage and develop the ideas of the other (and this of course is inseparable from the question of language). I can think of many instances when one of us has heard or read a lecture or essay of the other and thought, that's something I can work with. That person takes hold of the idea or argument, transforms it and extends it and sends it back. In this sense collaborative writing might seem to consist of a continual and mutual plagiarism. But that is not quite right. As Marx (1975) responds to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, any notion of theft assumes a prior and in

some sense a naturalized concept of property. The process of intellectual cooperation instead creates a zone in which ideas are all openly accessible between us for use; ideas are ours without being owned. Maybe that is why collaborative writing can feel so magical at times, because in the process ideas cease to be property and become truly common. We are freed from the fetters of individuality and possession and enter into a larger, richer productive relationship. The act of opening your ideas for free use and engaging fully with the ideas of the other as your own (without pretending to own them) is essential for collaborative writing.

To say that coauthors are equal of course does not mean that their contributions are the same. Nor is it required to set aside your differences or pretend that you bring the same elements to the table. In fact interaction among the different knowledges, talents, styles, and temperaments in the collaborative process is essential for producing the excess. You have to appreciate the differences and allow them free expression, but there is no point in trying to measure them and add them up to convince yourself of a balanced ledger. Equality in the writing process means in part that those kinds of calculations no longer make any sense to you.

That does not mean, however, that you can successfully collaborate with anyone. The real calculus and only relevant test is strictly Spinozian: Does the presence of and interaction with that person increase your power to think? Regrettably, our encounters with many (even most?) people actually decrease our power to think, our ability to understand the world, and our capacity to form clear arguments and create concepts. When you happen on an encounter that increases your power, stick with it and cultivate it. It is a gift. The equality that really matters in collaborative writing is that you both equally find that your power to think and write increases in the encounter.

I find also that the sense of and desire for equality in a writing relationship generates a constant striving, with sometimes productive, sometimes perverse effects. In my collaborations with Toni, even though a general relationship of equality is taken for granted, we each often fear that we are not keeping up in terms of production. I feel a very strong responsibility to meet the implicit commitments we make to each other to complete assignments. During the drafting of *Commonwealth* that I described earlier, for instance, I knew that Toni would write his five pages each afternoon, and regardless of teaching responsibilities or other tasks, I had to find a way to finish mine before the next morning. Deadlines

for the collaboration process are the only ones that keep me up working late into the night. At one point in the drafting of that book, my partner complained that Toni was driving me too hard, and at the same time Toni's partner said that I was driving Toni too hard. We were both caught up in and pushed by the collaborative process.

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It is a shame that collaborative writing is so rare in the humanities and the qualitative social sciences. There are of course several famous writing couples—Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Marx and Friedrich Engels come to mind—but in general collaborative research and writing is left to the scientists, who habitually collaborate in laboratories and publish joint-authored papers. I would not advocate, however, that political, social, or cultural theorists follow the scientific model, since its modes of cooperation are very different and, in my view, less powerful. The collaborative process of scientific laboratories is defined by hierarchical divisions of labor reminiscent of Taylorist factory production, and the order of author names on publications reflects these hierarchies, with the principal investigator's name listed first regardless of the specific contributions to the research. Such schemata of cooperation do of course generate a productive power greater than the sum of what the members of the laboratory team could create individually, just as does the cooperation of workers in an industrial factory. But the excess of this collaboration seems to me strongly limited by the hierarchical relationships.

In contrast, the alchemical and transformative properties of collaborative writing that takes place in a context of equality and creates a space of the common releases greater and altogether different powers. For such an encounter to take place, you have to be willing to strip off the fetters of your individuality, to return to Marx's phrase, and release ownership of your words and ideas so that you can think and write together in the resulting free and equal space. Perhaps, given the special circumstances and efforts required, it should be no surprise that this kind of collaborative writing takes place so infrequently. In my experience with Toni, though, the rewards are inestimably greater than any costs.

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