Unemployment: from Ontological Fracture to Political Composition

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Abstract: This article offers a theoretical rethinking of unemployment beyond its institutional and economistic representations. Rather than approaching unemployment solely as a lack of work or income, it examines it as a condition that challenges dominant modern-capitalist notions of dignity, productivity, identity, and social recognition. Drawing on selected ethnographic insights from employment agencies – understood not as a full-fledged ethnography but as a heuristic starting point – the article develops a critical-analytical framework that intertwines ontological and political dimensions.

By engaging with debates on subjectivation, inoperativity, the common, and multispecies relationality, the article reinterprets non-work not simply as deficit or exclusion but as a potentially generative condition. In dialogue with contemporary post-structuralist and post-humanist thought, it proposes an onto-political perspective in which unemployment and inoperativity can reveal alternative forms of sociality and modes of being-together, already emerging within the ruins of late capitalism.

The contribution is thus primarily theoretical: it organizes a set of conceptual tools aimed at reconfiguring the anthropological understanding of unemployment and at opening new avenues for analyzing historically and socially situated contexts.

Keywords: Unemployment; Ontology; Post-Marxism; Post-humanism; Commons.

Introduction: being unemployed today

To be unemployed, in the modern sense, is not merely to lack an income. It is to stand suspended between visibility and erasure, between belonging and abandonment, between being and non-being. The unemployed person, in contemporary capitalism, becomes a figure who has fallen out of the

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order of recognition – a life that persists without qualification. Economists quantify this condition through statistics and rates, but as David Graeber reminds us in *Bullshit Jobs* (2018), labour itself is not only an economic category but a moral and ontological imperative. It provides a language through which existence is validated, disciplined, and made legible to others. In Graeber's view, the absurd proliferation of meaningless forms of employment reveals a society that fears the possibility of non-work – not because work is necessary, but because it has become the moral scaffolding of subjectivity itself (Graeber 2018).

From this vantage, unemployment appears not as a simple social failure but as a breach in the ontology of modern life. The unemployed subject embodies a paradox: biologically alive, socially present, yet symbolically suspended. The absence of work becomes an absence of legitimacy. To lack employment is to be deprived not only of income but of the very frameworks through which one is recognized as a participant in the social contract. In this sense, unemployment is an ontological fracture: a site where the capitalist articulation of life and productivity comes undone.

Slavoj Žižek (1989; 2010) situates this fracture within the structure of ideology itself. For him, capitalism functions by suturing the subject to fantasies of productivity, mobility, and merit – fantasies that conceal the structural impossibility of universal inclusion. When the machinery of productivity falters, unemployment reveals the Real of the system: the void at its centre, the impossibility that sustains its promise. The unemployed subject is thus both excluded and indispensable, embodying the trauma that capitalist ideology cannot fully repress.

Ernesto Laclau (2005) offers another lens. Exclusion, in his framework, is not merely an accident of hegemony but its constitutive moment. Every political order, he argues, relies on an unrepresentable lack – an empty signifier that organizes social meaning precisely by what it excludes. Unemployment, in this light, represents not just social failure but a necessary limit condition of productivity. The category of "the unemployed" sustains the coherence of "the worker" as its dialectical other. The unemployed body, positioned at the threshold of visibility, is what allows the productive subject to exist.

If Laclau and Žižek describe unemployment as the excluded remainder of capitalist hegemony, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2000; 2004) push the analysis toward potentiality. Within the framework of biopolitical capitalism, labour no longer confines itself to the factory or the office. It permeates life itself: communication, emotion, creativity, care. In this expanded field, unemployment cannot simply be understood as the absence of work; rather, it becomes a latent force – a reservoir of potential cooperation and commons production

that eludes capitalist measure. The multitude, for Negri and Hardt, is always already productive, even in its refusal. Non-work is not nothingness; it is the excess that capitalism cannot contain.

Alain Badiou (1988) offers yet another perspective. In *Being and Event*, he describes the count-as-one – the operation through which any situation is constituted as a coherent totality. Unemployment, in this schema, would be a rupture in the count, a moment when being is no longer accounted for, when elements fall out of the situation's ontology. Yet such ruptures, for Badiou, are not mere negations. They are the sites from which events emerge – moments when new truths can appear, when fidelity to what was excluded can reorganize the world. To think unemployment ontologically, then, is to attend to these ruptures, to the zones of uncounted existence where new political forms might germinate.

But this rethinking must also move beyond the human, as thinkers like Bruno Latour (2005), Philippe Descola (2005), and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2017) remind us. Modernity, they argue, rests on a narrow naturalist ontology that divides subjects from objects, humans from nonhumans, culture from nature. Capitalism inherits this division, valuing only those beings that can be integrated into circuits of production and exchange. Animals, landscapes, and technologies are treated as resources or tools, their agency denied except in service to human labour. To extend the concept of unemployment to these nonhuman realms is therefore to expose a deeper fracture – one that runs through the entire ontology of the modern world.

In this essay, I propose to trace this fracture in the dialogue between ethnographic experience and theoretical reflection, weaving together the lived experiences of unemployed humans with the silent testimonies of landscapes, machines, and nonhuman lives. The fieldwork that grounds this reflection takes place in a (post-)industrial municipality in Piedmont, in northwestern Italy – a town of 45,500 inhabitants whose factories, once humming with the rhythm of metal and labour, now stand in various stages of ruination. Here, employment agencies function as both therapeutic and disciplinary spaces, managing unemployment through bureaucratic rituals of activation, profiling, and employability. These rituals, as Carlo Capello (2020) has shown, are not simply administrative; they are performative mechanisms of recognition, designed to render the unemployed visible within a narrow grammar of productivity. They create the illusion of inclusion while perpetuating ontological exclusion.

This essay therefore asks how contemporary regimes of employability reconfigure subjectivity and value in a landscape marked by industrial decline, and how those caught in these regimes narrate, resist, or reimagine their condition. Writing from the dual standpoint of ethnographer and career counsellor – working daily within a job agency and a vocational training institution – I

seek to interrogate my own implication in these processes, positioning this inquiry as a situated form of reflexive engagement rather than detached observation. Methodologically, the work draws on postmodern ethnographic approaches that foreground partiality, intersubjectivity, and the entanglement of researcher and field (Denzin 1997). Following this lineage, the study treats ethnography not as a mirror of reality but as a dialogical, affective, and political practice – one that attempts to render visible the unstable boundaries between care and control, autonomy and dependence, work and its absence.

In conducting this research, particular attention is devoted to the ethical implications of an inquiry that unfolds within the very institutional and professional contexts in which I am personally embedded. The dual position of counsellor and ethnographer entails both privileged access and heightened responsibility: it requires constant negotiation between institutional expectations, clients' trust, and the demands of critical reflexivity. Following the ethical orientations outlined by Carolyn Ellis (2020), this project adopts a relational ethics framework that prioritizes care, transparency, and reciprocity in all encounters. Every narrative, conversation, and observational note has been anonymized to safeguard the identities of participants, while composite characters and altered identifying details ensure confidentiality without erasing the specificity of lived experience. Rather than claiming neutrality, this work acknowledges its partial, situated nature, recognizing that ethnographic practice and professional activity are inseparable dimensions of the same ethical and political engagement.

The Bureaucratic Theatre of Employability

Each morning, in the waiting room of the employment agency where I work as a counsellor, the scene repeats itself. Men and women sit in rows of plastic chairs, clutching folders filled with documents: résumés, certificates, proof of attendance. The air is thick with the quiet hum of fluorescent lights and the muted tapping of smartphones. The institutional vocabulary – activation, profiling, re-employment pathway – echoes through the hallways, alternating with sighs, small talk, and the occasional nervous laugh. These are the rituals through which unemployment is administered, translated into measurable tasks and digital traces.

In this perspective, employment agencies may be understood as bureaucratic theatres of employability, institutional spaces where unemployment is translated into administrative categories, moral evaluations, and performative expectations. In these bureaucratic theatres, work is both absent and omnipres-

ent. People arrive to prove that they are trying to work, that they deserve to be reintegrated. The system demands not productivity but performance: the performance of employability. A man in his fifties, once a machine operator in an automotive factory, puts it bluntly: "I come here every month to sign forms. It feels like my new job is proving I don't have a job". His irony captures the paradox of neoliberal governance: to be unemployed today is to work continuously – on oneself, on one's résumé, on one's digital profile – without ever producing anything of value.

The reflections that follow do not aim to provide an exhaustive ethnographic account of these settings; rather, they draw on selected observations and encounters as a heuristic entry point into a broader theoretical inquiry. Within these spaces, people are interpellated as subjects in need of activation and self-entrepreneurial recalibration. The everyday interactions that unfold across desks, forms, and assessment interviews reveal how unemployment is not merely registered but normatively shaped, framed as a temporary malfunction to be corrected through appropriate conduct, training, and motivational alignment. The unemployed person is subtly repositioned as an insufficiently optimized subject, someone whose value must be restored through compliance with institutional pathways of reintegration.

Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitics (1979) illuminates this paradox. In the biopolitical regime, governance extends beyond the management of populations to the production of subjectivities. The unemployed are not abandoned but regulated through apparatuses that measure, activate, and normalize their behaviour. The goal is not to exclude them entirely but to maintain them within a field of potentiality – as bodies available for reinsertion, as data points in a labour market algorithm. Through these technologies of control, the unemployed become active subjects, endlessly improving their employability, even when no employment exists.

Franco "Bifo" Berardi (2009) has described this as the pathology of activation – the compulsion to remain active in a world where activity no longer guarantees meaning or sustenance. The result is a condition of exhaustion without productivity, anxiety without purpose. Berardi's *The Soul at Work* captures precisely what I witness daily: lives stretched between the demand to remain useful and the impossibility of fulfilling that demand. The unemployed are condemned to a paradoxical form of hyperactivity that produces no recognition.

A young woman, classified as a NEET, tells me after a compulsory training course: "They want you to teach us how to write CVs for jobs that don't exist. We all know it. But they want us to smile while doing it". Her remark resonates with Laclau's concept of disarticulation (Laclau 1996): the symbolic chain – training, employability, employment – no longer coheres, yet the ritual

persists. The course becomes a performance of faith in a promise long expired. Like the sacraments of a fading religion, these bureaucratic rites sustain a social order by reproducing its illusions.

From a phenomenological standpoint, this repetitive performance generates what Sara Ahmed (2010) might call an affective atmosphere of waiting. Waiting becomes the temporality of unemployment: a suspended time in which movement continues without direction. People attend meetings, fill out forms, refresh job portals, and check their phones – not because they expect results, but because the ritual itself is all that remains. The temporality of the unemployed is not linear but circular, looping endlessly between hope and resignation.

This circularity mirrors the logic of what Maurizio Lazzarato (2012) calls the indebted man. Unemployment, like debt, functions as a form of moral regulation. It creates subjects who must constantly prove their worthiness, their willingness to work, their gratitude for the possibility of reintegration. The unemployed person becomes a debtor of society – indebted not financially but ontologically. Their existence demands justification.

Ethnography of Absence, Ecologies of Non-Work

The ethnographic scene of unemployment is not defined by what happens, but by what fails to happen. It is a field of absences: of work, of recognition, of predictable futures. Yet these absences are not empty. They are thick with affects, with unspoken gestures, with what Tim Ingold (2011) calls the lines of life that continue to unfold beneath the surface of institutional scripts.

A man in his early sixties, a former mechanic, tells me: "It's not that I don't work. I repair things every day – for my neighbours, for my family. But that work is invisible here. The office doesn't see it, the system doesn't count it. I am unemployed, even when I work". His words echo David Graeber's critique of value (2019): productive activity only counts when it passes through the wage relation. Everything else – care, repair, maintenance – is ontologically annulled.

In this sense, unemployment reveals what feminist theorists like Silvia Federici (2012) have long argued: that capitalism depends on vast realms of invisible labour. Housework, emotional care, ecological regeneration – all these forms of work are rendered external to value precisely so that waged labour can appear as its privileged form. The unemployed, like unwaged caregivers, embody the system's constitutive outside: the life that sustains production but is denied its recognition.

If unemployment is an ontological suspension, it is also an ecological one. The same processes that render human lives superfluous also render lands, animals, and technologies obsolete. Machines are decommissioned, soils are left fallow, rivers are rerouted. The unemployed subject, in this broader sense, is not only a worker without a job but a being expelled from the circuits of recognition that define the capitalist cosmos.

To understand unemployment as more than a human crisis, we must read it ecologically. Karl Marx's reflections on the metabolic rift in *Capital* (1867) already diagnosed the violent separation between human labour and the natural cycles that sustain it. Industrial capitalism, he wrote, disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth (Marx 2004). Jason W. Moore (2015) later reformulated this as world-ecology: capital not only exploits workers but reorganizes nature itself into an apparatus of productivity. When that apparatus breaks, unemployment spreads across the biophysical world. Soil exhaustion, species extinction, and derelict factories are all symptoms of the same metabolic disorder.

In the post-industrial valleys of Piedmont, this disorder is palpable. The river that once powered textile mills now runs slower, carrying residues of dyes and oil. The abandoned plants are habitats for moss, pigeons, and stray cats. These non-human occupiers are, in a sense, the next generation of workers: silent agents reappropriating the ruins. Andreas Malm (2016) would call this the fossil afterlife of production – the residue of "fossil labour," in which energy once condensed from ancient organisms now lingers as waste and heat. The unemployed human and the polluted river share a condition: both are leftovers of exhausted value regimes.

Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015) offers a vocabulary for this coexistence. Her description of matsutake mushrooms flourishing in capitalist ruins shows that life persists in the gaps of production, forging what she calls collaborative survival (Tsing 2015). Likewise, in Piedmont's decaying factories, weeds pierce asphalt floors and fungi creep along steel beams – a quiet insurgency of growth beyond value. To speak of "non-work" here is not to name absence but to observe another kind of productivity, one indifferent to wages or GDP.

Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010) and Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013) expand this intuition. Both invite us to consider vitality as distributed across matter. Machines, metals, bacteria, and data possess their own rhythms of agency. Unemployment, then, is not simply a social phenomenon but a disturbance in these heterogeneous rhythms. When a factory closes, the disconnection reverberates through networks of steel, dust, and memory. The ontology of non-work is ecological because production has always been ecological: an assemblage of human and non-human forces (Bennet 2010; Braidotti 2013).

Bruno Latour's *Politics of Nature* (2004) insists that political modernity was built on excluding non-humans from deliberation (2004). What if unemployment were approached as a symptom of this exclusion? The laid-off worker and the idle machine, the dried river and the discarded algorithm, all demand a new assembly – a parliament of the unproductive. Their coexistence calls for what Isabelle Stengers (2005) terms a cosmopolitical attitude: the recognition that politics begins where beings negotiate their modes of existence rather than their market value.

Ruins and Afterlives: Technological Unemployment and Algorithmic Control

The ruins of industry have become emblematic of this ontological suspension. Anthropologists such as Ann Laura Stoler (2008), Shannon Lee Dawdy (2010), Christopher Harrison (2013), and Caitlin DeSilvey (2017) remind us that ruins are not static remains but living processes – afterlives where materials and memories decay together. In Piedmont, rust and ivy are not metaphors; they are temporalities. They mark the slow transformation of production into decomposition.

Walking through an abandoned metal-press factory, one encounters traces of human labour: names carved into lockers, calendars frozen in time, safety posters turned yellow. Yet the building is not dead. It vibrates with microbial life, humidity, the hum of distant traffic. Stoler would call this a ruin of empire, not because it once belonged to a colony but because it manifests the imperial temporality of capitalism itself – its capacity to produce waste faster than meaning. Anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin (2012) speaks of affective remains: material residues that continue to shape emotional and political life. The unemployed who revisit these ruins – to salvage tools, to reminisce, to photograph – engage in what DeSilvey describes as curation by decay. Their gestures refuse the clean separation between past productivity and present uselessness. In one such visit, a former steelworker ran his hand along a silent press and whispered, "It still has muscle." His touch reactivated the machine's dormant vitality, performing an unspoken claim: unemployment does not erase agency; it displaces it into other registers.

The anthropology of ruins thus converges with post-humanist ethics. Donna Haraway (2016) urges us to stay with the trouble, to inhabit rather than transcend the mess of coexistence. To stay with the unemployed factory or the unemployed field is to practice this ethic of staying – to attend to the persistence of life after value. Ruins are not endings but laboratories where new forms of relation are invented.

If ruins mark the past of production, algorithms script its future. The rhetoric of *automation* promises liberation from labour, yet the reality often reproduces dispossession. Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2015) have argued for embracing automation as part of a post-work utopia, but others – such as Nick Dyer-Witheford, Svitlana Matviyenko (2019) and Shoshana Zuboff (2019) – warn that digital capitalism simply replaces industrial discipline with data surveillance.
In employment agencies, this transformation is tangible. Algorithms rank candidates, assign probabilities of success, and generate personalized activation paths. Pierre Bourdieu's insight into symbolic power (1984) resonates here: the algorithm becomes a new bureaucratic priesthood, translating life into metrics. One client once asked me, after seeing his profile score – the score assigned by the employment centre to unemployed people participating in an active employment policy program that provides different access to the allocated measures (training, orientation, etc.): "So am I a 72-percent human now?" His joke revealed the violence of quantification – a reduction of being to employability data.
Bernard Stiegler (2010) described this as psychopower: the capture of attention and desire by digital systems. For the unemployed, whose time is already colonized by waiting, algorithmic interfaces extend the regime of control. Every click becomes both confession and command. Yet, paradoxically, this technological unemployment also produces spaces of refusal. Franco Berardi (2019) notes that the autonomy of life is implied in the automation of capital. When machines work without us, the possibility emerges to rethink what it means to live without work – not as deprivation but as liberation from the command of efficiency.
During a digital training session, a migrant woman from Ghana told me: "They want us to learn computers, but the computers don't learn us." Her phrase condenses an entire critique of artificial intelligence. Algorithmic rationality does not recognize the singularities of life; it classifies, predicts, and excludes. The "intelligence" of capital is precisely its indifference to experience. In this sense, unemployment today is increasingly algorithmic: it is produced by systems that decide who counts as employable, who remains invisible, and who becomes data waste.

The Metabolic Rift and the Unemployment of Nature

Returning to Marx through an ecological lens reveals how unemployment extends into the non-human. When capital withdraws from a region, it leaves behind landscapes of redundancy. Fields once cultivated by sharecroppers become monocultural deserts; rivers once channelled for mills are neglected; ani-

mals bred for labour lose their function. The very metabolism between human societies and the earth – what Marx called *Stoffwechsel* – is suspended.

Jason Moore (2015) describes this as the capitalocene, an epoch defined not by human activity in general but by the logic of capital's abstraction. In the capitalocene, value flows through everything, but recognition does not. Species and ecosystems that fail to generate profit are written out of the ledger of existence. Their unemployment is ecological, yet also political.

Consider the mules and sheepdogs once central to Piedmontese agriculture. Their disappearance from the fields – gradually supplanted by tractors, quad bikes, and drones – does not simply mark a passage from one set of instruments to another, but the fading of a web of reciprocal dependencies. Yet it would be misleading to suggest that these animals were ever regarded as replaceable "non-subjects." Shepherds and farmers in the Piedmontese Alps and plains attributed to their mules and dogs not interiority in the Amazonian sense described by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2017), but rather a pragmatic, affective form of companionship grounded in shared labour and endurance. Their relationships were not ontological statements about personhood so much as ethical and experiential practices of cohabitation. The ensuing mechanization did not therefore signal a shift from animism to naturalism, as Philippe Descola (2005) might frame it, but a reconfiguration within a local cosmology that had long acknowledged animals as co-workers rather than tools – partners whose disappearance transformed both the rhythm and the moral texture of rural life.

The environmental unemployment of soils and waters follows the same logic. In some Piedmont valleys, European subsidies encourage ecological set-aside – fields intentionally left uncultivated to restore biodiversity. Yet local farmers call these zones *terre ferme*, still lands, perceiving them as signs of abandonment. The soil itself, however, tells another story: worms return, moisture increases, plants diversify. From a human economic view, these lands are unemployed; from a multispecies view, they are flourishing. Here perspectivism becomes method, not metaphor.

The concept of the metabolic rift thus expands into what Moore calls the metabolic shift (2015): the reorganization of life's cycles under capital. Unemployment is part of this reorganization – the forced idleness of both bodies and ecologies that no longer fit productivity metrics. To repair the rift requires what Maria Mies (1986) called subsistence perspectives: practices grounded in care, reciprocity, and ecological interdependence rather than profit.

A former factory technician, who used to calibrate hydraulic systems for a metalworks company upstream, told me he uses to come to Po River to fish and "keep an eye on the current". "When the factory was alive, the river had a heartbeat. You could hear the turbines. Now it sleeps" – he says during a meeting.

His description anthropomorphizes the river, yet it also expresses recognition: a shared unemployment between man and water. The silence of turbines is not absence but a new acoustic ecology, filled with birds and insects. Our conversation drifts to his search for work. "They say there's demand for technicians", he sighs, "but not for our kind – the old kind who fix things by ear". His phrase by ear stays with me. It marks an epistemology of work based on resonance and attention rather than algorithmic precision.

From the factory technician's perspective, the river isn't resting – it's recalibrating. Its flow, altered by decades of industrial extraction and channelization, adjusts to new sediments, changing temperatures, and shifting microbial populations. Where once the river absorbed effluents and thermal waste, it now redefines its course and chemistry, redistributing nutrients, recolonizing abandoned banks with reeds and amphibians. Its metabolism continues, but according to nonhuman rhythms: a slow, biochemical labor of recovery and adaptation. For the former technician, waiting means confronting suspended time – the cessation of waged work, the bureaucratic limbo of job applications and retraining programs. For the river, waiting takes the form of metabolic recalibration, an ecological reorganization that exceeds human schedules of productivity or repair. As the industrial twilight deepens, the soundscape changes: frogs reclaim the margins, insects return, and the machines hum only faintly in the distance. This, as Deborah Bird Rose (2011) would say, is a multispecies knot of time – a site where asynchronous temporalities coexist, where both human and river dwell in intervals of unfinished transformation, inhabiting different but resonant kinds of waiting.

Toward a Politics of the Unproductive

To further unsettle the economistic understanding of unemployment, it is helpful to engage with Giorgio Agamben's notion of inoperativity – *inoperosità* (1993). Inoperativity does not simply denote inactivity, passivity, or the absence of function. Rather, it names a suspension of predetermined ends and productive imperatives, a condition in which established forms of doing are rendered inoperative so that their potentiality may be exposed. In this sense, inoperativity is not the negation of action but the opening of action to other possible uses. Introducing this concept allows unemployment to be reconsidered beyond the binary of productivity and deficit. If modern capitalist rationality equates human value with measurable output, inoperativity interrupts this equation by foregrounding a dimension of existence irreducible to performance. It is precisely this suspension –this deactivation of the compulsory link

between being and producing – that makes inoperativity a decisive conceptual hinge for rethinking unemployment as a site of ontological and political possibility rather than mere exclusion.

The unemployed, in this sense, enact politics not by claiming inclusion within the existing order but by disrupting the very distribution that renders them uncounted. Their political force lies in appearing as speaking and acting beings in a space that assigns them no part. What is at stake is not simply visibility but a reconfiguration of the sensible: the unemployed interrupt the alignment between worth and productivity that structures contemporary regimes of recognition. Jacques Rancière (1999) defines politics as the interruption of the police order – the implicit partition that determines who is qualified to speak, to act, and to be seen as a participant in common life. Unemployment exposes a miscount within this order: those who are present but not recognized as contributing subjects.

Extending this insight beyond the human does not anthropomorphize abandoned machines, feral dogs, or polluted rivers; rather, it foregrounds how the sensible order of productivity governs an entire ecology of relations. The idle vineyard, the decommissioned factory, the exhausted river basin each marks a site where the equivalence between function and value falters. They do not speak in a human sense, yet their material persistence unsettles the logic that renders only productive entities perceptible as meaningful. To politicize unemployment beyond the human is thus to confront the hegemony of productivity as the organizing principle of the sensible itself.

The unemployed workshop, the idle vineyard, the decommissioned machine all participate in this experiment. They form what I call assemblages of non-work – provisional constellations in which the suspension of assigned function makes other uses thinkable. Within these spaces, the binary of productivity and passivity loosens its grip. As Deleuze and Guattari (1980) remind us, there is always something working in the work of the non-working: potentiality circulates even where function has been withdrawn. The task of theory, then, is not to restore proper use but to attend to these minor displacements, to the vibrations through which new forms of commonality begin to compose themselves.

Rosi Braidotti (2022) has recently argued for a post-human ethics of affirmation – one that acknowledges shared vulnerability while cultivating joy in interdependence. Applied to unemployment, this perspective invites a shift from narratives of deficit toward practices of recomposition: collective gardens, repair workshops, mutual-aid networks, ecological restoration projects. Such initiatives do not deny precarity; rather, they rework it into forms of situated cooperation. In the Piedmont town where I work, some former factory workers have created a cooperative that transforms industrial scrap into furniture. "We

recycle ourselves," one of them jokes. Their laughter does not erase the history of industrial decline; instead, it signals a fragile but tangible reappropriation of agency – an embodied affirmation that alternative ways of inhabiting the ruins of production can be enacted here and now.

The Ethics of Inoperativity: Waiting, Care, and Productive Uselessness

Unemployment, when examined beyond its statistical face, becomes an apprenticeship in inoperativity. Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community* (1993) and *The Use of Bodies* (2016) describe *inoperosità* not as passivity but as the suspension of predetermined functions, a state in which potentiality is freed from obligation. To render something inoperative, Agamben writes, is to open it to a new possible use. In this sense, unemployment is not simply the collapse of labour but the exposure of life to other uses that escape the measure of capital (Agamben 1993; 2016).

This is also what Hannah Arendt (1958) distinguished in *The Human Condition* as the difference between labour – the cyclical maintenance of life – and action, which inaugurates new beginnings. Under neoliberalism, the two collapse: the constant demand for activation transforms action into endless labour. The unemployed are told to be active, yet this activity serves no new beginning. It is a parody of Arendtian action, a politics without world-building.

In Piedmont's employment agencies, this parody unfolds daily. During one counselling session, a woman, dismissed from a textile company after twenty-five years, told me: "I sew at home now. Not for money. For the silence". Her words unsettled the managerial categories that would call this hobby or coping strategy. Lucia's sewing is neither productive nor therapeutic; it is inoperative. Thread by thread, she practices what Agamben calls the use of the world without work – a relation to things that is intimate but non-instrumental (2016). The hum of her old Singer machine, inherited from her mother, resists the noise of employability seminars.

A migrant from Mali repairs discarded computers he collects from recycling bins. He cannot sell them legally, so he gifts them to neighbours. "I don't work for money", he smiles, "I work for connection." His tinkering evokes what Steven Jackson (2014) calls repair work: the unseen labour that maintains infrastructures in the face of neglect. Through repair, he restores not only circuits but relations – between humans, machines, and trust. This is a modality of inoperativity: an of maintenance detached from economic reward yet dense with meaning. They expose what Lauren Berlant (2011) called slow death – the

attrition of life under precarity – but also its counterpoint: slow life, the art of persisting otherwise.

Veena Das (2007) reminds us that everyday life after catastrophe is not the opposite of politics but its continuation by other means. Her attention to small acts of repair – boiling water, sweeping dust, tending to the sick – reveals an ethics grounded in endurance. Likewise, among the unemployed, endurance becomes the invisible labour of living. Care for oneself, for others, for the remnants of a past world: these are practices of inoperativity, of keeping potential alive when recognition is withdrawn.

Elizabeth Povinelli's (2011) concept of economies of abandonment offers another angle. She shows how late liberalism produces zones of endurance where life is maintained without flourishing. The unemployed inhabit such zones: kept alive through bureaucratic care but deprived of social worth. Yet within these spaces, Povinelli also finds geontological creativity – the ability of beings to re-compose relations even in exhaustion. In this light, unemployment is not only a space of neglect but a laboratory of alternative ethics.

In the corridors of the agency, people exchange small gifts: a jar of jam, a repaired phone, advice on paperwork. These gestures are not transactions; they are forms of reciprocal inoperativity. They refuse the logic of equivalence. Here the commons are not declared but enacted through care that does not seek return. As Kathleen Stewart (2007) would note, such gestures form an ordinary affect: a texture of life that cannot be captured by policy or theory but sustains worlds in suspension.

To wait is to work without recognition. Anthropologists of bureaucracy have described waiting rooms as theatres of slow violence. Time is confiscated, stretched, and returned as moral judgment: those who wait too long are seen as undeserving. But waiting also generates its own solidarities. Among the unemployed clients, shared time becomes shared knowledge – of loopholes, sympathetic clerks, better coffee. Waiting together produces an interval of equality. Jacques Rancière (1999) would call this the politics of appearance: when those without a part make themselves visible simply by being there.

One afternoon, a group of long-term unemployed men began meeting in the square outside the agency. They brought old folding chairs, cards, and a portable radio. They joked that they had formed the unemployed union of benches. Their gathering, informal and half-ironic, became a fixture of the town. Passers-by smiled, sometimes joined in. No manifesto, no program–only presence. And yet this idle congregation embodied what Jean-Luc Nancy (2000) names being-in-common: existence as coexistence, without shared work or identity. Their union had no demands because its existence was already a claim – the right to linger without purpose.

Such moments reveal what I call productive uselessness: the capacity of inactivity to produce relations, affects, and meanings that escape calculation. They recall Georges Bataille's (1988) notion of *dépense*, the unproductive expenditure through which life exceeds utility. For Bataille, festivals, laughter, and mourning are economies of loss that reaffirm existence beyond profit. The unemployed bench union participates in this excess; their time, socially wasted, becomes cosmically lavish.

The feminist tradition also illuminates this field. Silvia Federici (2012) and Kathi Weeks (2011) have long argued that the refusal of work is a demand for another measure of value. Weeks's call for a feminist utopia of work insists that liberation requires re-imagining the relation between time, necessity, and care. For many unemployed women I met, care was not a retreat from politics but its re-foundation. One participant who balances child-care with part-time cleaning, said: "They say I'm inactive. But every hour I'm holding something together". Her sentence crystallizes the invisible infrastructure of life that the statistics call inactivity.

Ontologies of Rest and the Post-Productive Immanent Commons

The anthropology of unemployment must end, paradoxically, with an anthropology of rest. If capitalism measures life by activity, rest becomes heresy. To rest is to interrupt circulation, to reclaim time from value. Baruch Spinoza's notion of *conatus* – the immanent striving of each being to persevere in existence – offers a way to rethink rest not as inertia but as affirmation. In *Ethics. Demonstrated in Geometrical Order* (2018), Spinoza writes that joy arises when a body's power to act increases. Rest, then, can be joyful when it restores the capacity to affect and be affected. Unemployment, stripped of moral stigma, may harbour this potential: a collective pause in which new forms of power assemble.

Deleuze's reading of Spinoza transforms *conatus* into *potentia*, the active force of life's immanence. For Gilles Deleuze, every being is a composition of speeds and slownesses, a rhythm rather than a substance (Deleuze 1988). The unemployed, human or non-human, inhabit altered rhythms–neither productive nor inert but vibrating differently. To think ontologically of unemployment is to attend to these temporal modulations, to the possibility that slowness itself is a form of resistance. Franco Berardi (2011) calls this the right to slowness, a counter-tempo against the accelerations of semiocapitalism.

In Piedmont, this right manifests in modest ways. Former factory workers meet once a week to cook polenta together in the community hall. The gathering be-

gan as mutual aid but has become ritual. They chop, stir, and talk slowly. One morning, a man who once managed the furnace line, said: "In the factory we raced against the clock. Here, the clock waits for us". His phrase captures the shift from chronometric time to what the philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2017) calls the time of resonance: a temporality of attention rather than accumulation.

About it, Spinoza's immanence dissolves the boundary between individual and collective striving. Power (*potestas*) imposed from above differs from power (*potentia*) generated in common. Antonio Negri (1999) reads this as the foundation of constituent power: the capacity of the multitude to create institutions of life without sovereignty. Applied to unemployment, this means that the jobless multitude already embodies a constituent potential. Deprived of wage mediation, they experiment with new forms of cooperation – repair collectives, informal childcare, urban gardens. These are not residues of the old economy but embryos of a post-productive commons.

The commons here are neither romantic return to pre-capitalist community nor digital utopia. It is, as Hardt and Negri (2009) argue, the biopolitical commons – the shared production of affects, knowledge, and care that exceeds property. Rosi Braidotti (2022) extends this to the post-human: the commons are not only human but planetary, composed of organic and technological forces. Unemployment, viewed from this angle, exposes how much life already operates beyond work: ecological cycles, informal exchanges, machine autonomies. To recognize these as commons is to broaden politics beyond the factory and the office, into the interstices of everyday life.

Jean-Luc Nancy (2000) insists that being-in-common is not a project to be achieved but a condition always already given. The unemployed bench union, the gardeners, the stray-cat feeder – all enact this given-ness. Their gatherings are not instruments toward productivity but affirmations of coexistence. The post-productive commons are thus less an institution than a rhythm – a shared breathing among beings suspended from value.

Gaia and the Multispecies Multitude: Rest as Resistance

Bruno Latour's late work on *Gaia* (2017) reframes politics as terrestrial attachment. He urges us to abandon the illusion of global progress and return to the ground – to the network of reciprocal dependencies that sustain life. Unemployment, in this geophilosophical light, signals the exhaustion of a civilization that sought to detach itself from the earth's rhythms. The idle machine, the polluted river, the discarded animal, and the jobless worker are all symptoms of a planet made uninhabitable by productivity.

Donna Haraway's (2016) call to "make kin, not babies" resonates here as an invitation to compose post-productive kinships. In the Piedmont valley, I have seen such kinships forming: between ex-workers who cultivate gardens with migrants, between farmers and environmental activists who restore irrigation channels as communal infrastructure, between old mules kept as companions and children who learn care through feeding them. These alliances blur species and generations, creating what Anna Tsing (2015) would call patchy commons: temporary yet vital assemblages of coexistence.

The post-productive commons also include machines. Bernard Stiegler (2018) envisioned a neganthropocene – an era in which technology serves care rather than control. When unemployed technicians refurbish obsolete devices, they practice this neganthropic art: reversing entropy through attention. Their workshops smell of solder and coffee; conversations mix engineering with philosophy. One participant, a guy, once a robotic-arm programmer, told me: "I used to teach machines to imitate humans. Now I learn from them how to slow down". His paradox condenses the shift from automation to contemplation.

Rest, often dismissed as idleness, is perhaps the most radical form of non-work. The global proliferation of burnout, insomnia, and anxiety reveals how capitalism colonizes rest itself. Jonathan Crary (2013) in *24/7* shows that sleep remains the last frontier of resistance, the temporal gap that cannot be commodified. For the unemployed, however, rest is ambivalent: too much sleep becomes stigma, too little anxiety. To reclaim rest as collective right requires redefining it as political time.

In one small country village not so far from employment agency where I work, a group of women started *la stanza del riposo* (the room of rest). They meet weekly in the different houses of the participants creating a quiet space with mats and cushions. There is no meditation teacher, no productivity goal. They sit, breathe, sometimes nap. "It's the only hour where no one asks what we're doing," says a woman, once a metalworker assembler. Their practice recalls Peter Sloterdijk's (2016) idea of anthropotechnics: exercises that cultivate being. But here the exercise is non-doing, a disciplined rest that resists acceleration.

The ethics of rest aligns with Berardi's (2019) plea for futurability: the capacity to imagine futures from within the ruins of exhaustion. Rest, in this sense, is not withdrawal but a generative suspension – a refusal of acceleration that opens space for reorientation. To rest together is to practice a different relation to time, one that resists the capitalist injunction to incessant productivity. It is to engage in what Isabelle Stengers (2018) calls slow science: a science that proceeds with hesitation, attention, and attachment, cultivating knowledge through care rather than control. Slow science is not a methodological deceleration but an ethical stance – an insistence on the situated, collective, and

interdependent nature of thinking. Similarly, feminist collectives have long framed such pauses as acts of collective care, where rest becomes both method and resistance, allowing bodies and ideas to recover from the violence of extraction. In these interstices of non-doing, the multitude gathers its scattered conatus – its striving to persist – transforming fatigue into a shared experiment in survival and imagination.

Toward an Ontopolitics of Recognition: The Afterlife of Work

Unemployment, when followed to its ontological depth, is not the end of work but the beginning of another politics of existence. It reveals how recognition in capitalism depends on productivity and how being itself is policed by the wage. The unemployed-human, animal, machine, and landscape–expose the fragility of this measure. They invite us to think politics as the art of composing value otherwise.

Anthropology's task, then, is not to rehabilitate the unemployed into old categories but to accompany their experiments in non-work: gardens, repairs, benches, rests. As Marisol De la Cadena (2015) suggests, ethnography must learn to listen to earth-beings-entities that speak in silences, rustlings, and pauses. In the Piedmont field, these voices are everywhere: the drip of a leaking pipe, the sigh before signing a form, the hum of an idle motor. They articulate what Laclau (1996) would call the surplus of being – that which cannot be signified yet sustains all signification.

Spinoza's *conatus* runs through them all: the unemployed worker who repairs a bicycle for a friend, the vineyard soil reclaiming itself from herbicides, the cat sleeping in the shade of a rusted press. Each strives to persevere, to compose relations that make life possible. To recognize these strivings is to practice an ontopolitics of recognition – a politics not of inclusion into productivity but of affirmation across difference.

In this ontopolitical horizon, unemployment ceases to be a pathology and becomes a pedagogy. It teaches how to live when usefulness fails, how to care when systems collapse, how to rest without guilt. The unemployed multitude, far from being surplus humanity, is the living laboratory of the post-productive commons. From the ruins of work, they cultivate the fragile but persistent art of existing together.

When the factory gates close for the last time, the sound lingers. Not only in memory but in the air of the town, in the slow breathing of its streets. What follows is not silence but another kind of noise: the hum of small repairs, the chatter of coffee bars, the echo of radio songs leaking from open windows.

Unemployment, in this afterlife of work, becomes the rhythm through which the social body learns again how to listen to itself.
The Piedmont town where this research unfolded is filled with such residual acoustics. The factory bell has stopped, yet people still glance at their watches around its old ringing time. This persistence of rhythm recalls Henri Lefebvre's (1992) insight that everyday life is structured by overlapping temporalities–some imposed, others improvised. The disappearance of industrial rhythm does not produce chaos; it exposes the multiplicity of other times that industrial discipline had repressed: domestic time, ecological time, animal time, the time of care.
A former metalworker once described the closure of his plant as "a silence that made space for thinking". His phrase could have been written by Walter Benjamin, who in his *Arcades Project* (1999) imagined the ruins of modernity as dialectical images: fragments where the past interrupts the present to reveal unrealized futures. In the post-industrial landscape, unemployment acts as such a dialectical interruption – an opening that forces thought to slow down and recompose (Benjamin 1999).
Benjamin's angel of history, blown by the storm of progress toward an accumulating pile of debris, finds a contemporary cousin in the unemployed subject standing before the ruins of labour. Yet, unlike the angel, this subject cannot fly away; he must inhabit the debris, repurpose it, turn ruins into shelter. This is where the politics of recomposition begins.

Ruins, Remains, and the Reassembly of Value: Temporal Commons and the Slowing of History

Anthropology has become increasingly attentive to ruins – not as symbols of loss but as spaces of reconfiguration. Ann Laura Stoler's *Imperial Debris* (2013) and Shannon Dawdy's *Patina* (2016) both demonstrate how material remnants carry forward political affects. Ruins are not dead; they are temporal laboratories in which new alliances are tested (Stoler 2013; Dawdy 2016).
In the decommissioned industrial zones of northern Italy, these laboratories proliferate. Young people organize concerts in abandoned workshops, migrant associations transform storage halls into cultural centres, elderly workers build community gardens between rusted rails. Every act of occupation redefines what counts as value. Marx's notion of use-value – once subordinated to exchange – returns as an aesthetic and ethical principle. Value becomes what sustains life, not what extracts surplus.
This movement resonates with Jason W. Moore's world-ecology perspective (2015), which understands capitalism as a regime that organizes the cheap-

ness of nature, labour, and energy. When the machine stops, this cheapness unravels, and new ecologies of value emerge. In Piedmont, retired workers trade vegetables for bicycle repairs; an unemployed engineer maintains the irrigation canal in exchange for honey. These are micro-transactions of care that quietly undermine the ontology of scarcity. They instantiate what Arturo Escobar (2018) calls autonomous design – collective processes of world-making grounded in relationality rather than accumulation.

To inhabit the ruins is also to slow history down. The anthropologist Ghassan Hage (2009) speaks of existential velocity: the speed at which people experience their capacity to act. Under neoliberal precarity, existential velocity oscillates wildly – between frantic job-searching and paralysing inertia. The unemployed learn to modulate this speed, often inventing micro-rituals to manage the stretch of empty days. Some walk the same route each morning, as if clocking in to the city itself; others keep notebooks where they list tasks that are not tasks – "go to market, feed birds, call mother". These gestures re-temporalize life.

Philosophically, such modulation evokes Hartmut Rosa's theory of resonance (2016): the idea that a good life depends not on acceleration but on meaningful attunement. Unemployment, stripped of external compulsion, can become a pedagogy of resonance. To survive long-term joblessness requires cultivating sensitivity – to one's body, to weather, to community rhythms. The anthropological literature on waiting (Auyero 2012; Hage 2009) often describes it as passive endurance, yet in these practices, waiting becomes an art of resonance, a slow tuning with the world.

Deleuze once wrote that philosophy is the creation of concepts that express new ways of living (Deleuze, Guattari 1994). If so, the unemployed invent their own minor concepts: the useful uselessness, the dignity of time, the slow repair. These are not slogans but living definitions that reshape experience.

From Ontological Fracture to Political Composition: Nonhuman Companions in Political Becoming

The earlier sections of this essay argued that unemployment functions as an ontological fracture – a suspension of being within the nexus of productivity. Yet fractures can also become joints, sites where new structures are assembled. The challenge is to move from fracture to composition without losing the radical openness that the fracture disclosed.

Ernesto Laclau's theory of the empty signifier (2005) helps illuminate this transition. For Laclau, political identities are built around lacks – absences that demand articulation. The unemployed, lacking work, become the embodiment

of such absence; but by naming themselves as a collective, they transform lack into universality. What would happen if informal groups of job seekers began independently organizing roundtables where they could exchange stories of failure and resilience? These assemblies could gradually become recognized by the municipality as interlocutors in urban policy. From the standpoint of hegemony, they filled the signifier unemployment with new content: not victimhood, but mutual listening.

This shift echoes Jacques Rancière's idea of subjectivation (1999): politics arises when those who have no part assert themselves as speaking beings. The unemployed who gather not to demand jobs but to affirm existence are performing this subjectivation. Their politics does not seek reintegration into productivity; it redefines what counts as participation.

If the unemployed human is a figure of suspension, the unemployed nonhuman expands the field of political imagination. The post-industrial landscape is populated by beings in similar states of waiting: idle machines, feral plants, semi-wild dogs, half-flooded quarries. Following Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think* (2013), we can treat these entities as semiotic agents participating in the collective semiosis of place.

One spring morning, I visited an abandoned factory courtyard overgrown with weeds. Amid the debris stood a rusted robotic arm, frozen mid-gesture. Moss had colonized its joints; a blackbird nested in its cavity. The scene condensed Latour's (2005) actor-network principle: agency distributed across metal, moss, and bird. The robot's unemployment had created a niche of life. It was an image of what Jane Bennett (2010) calls vibrant matter – the vitality of things once deemed inert. To acknowledge this vitality is to extend solidarity beyond the species barrier: the solidarity of the unemployed with the unproductive world.

Donna Haraway's concept of sympoiesis (2016) – making-with rather than self-making – becomes crucial here. The unemployed worker and the derelict machine are not analogues but partners in co-invention. In several workshops, former technicians repurpose old industrial robots into art installations or mechanical gardens. One collective attached brushes and ink to robotic arms, programming them to draw random lines as visitors moved nearby. "They still work," said one technician, "just differently". This "different work" is the emblem of sympoietic politics: cooperation without command.

Care and Hope as Counter-Production. For a Planetary Commons

Throughout this research, care repeatedly emerged as the counter-term to productivity. Joan Tronto's ethics of care (1993) defines caring as everything

we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible. This definition could serve as the manifesto of the unemployed commons. Where production extracts, care sustains; where labour consumes, care repairs.

In Piedmont, care takes material form in small infrastructures: benches painted, walls cleaned, cats fed, water channels unblocked. These acts recall Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) argument that care is a speculative ethics: it imagines futures through attention to neglected matters. The unemployed gardener who saves seeds from an abandoned field speculates in this sense – investing not in profit but in continuity. Her garden becomes a time-machine of care, linking human and more-than-human agencies across temporal scales.

What keeps people going amid long unemployment is rarely faith in institutions. It is hope in a quieter sense: what Ernst Bloch called *das Prinzip Hoffnung* (1986) – the principle of hope as an anticipatory consciousness embedded in everyday gestures. Hope, for Bloch, is not optimism but the unfinished texture of reality. Every act of repair, rest, or companionship carries a utopian surplus.

This resonates with the minor utopias described by anthropologist Stefania Pandolfo (2018) in her studies of waiting and prayer in North Africa – moments where the impossible is imagined through repetition. In the Piedmont field, similar minor utopias arise in daily improvisations: a meal shared, a computer resurrected, a garden replanted. They do not promise systemic change, yet they hold open the possibility of another relation to time and to the earth.

As global automation, climate breakdown, and demographic shifts redraw the meaning of labour, the unemployed condition becomes planetary. Environmental degradation produces what some ecologists call ecological unemployment: forests no longer sequestering carbon, soils exhausted, oceans acidified. These nonhuman job losses reveal the absurdity of measuring life by productivity. What we are witnessing is the generalization of unemployment to the biosphere itself.

The challenge, then, is to articulate a planetary commons where human and nonhuman agencies cooperate in regeneration. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's (2010) notion of *ayllu* – the Andean community of humans and nonhumans – offers inspiration. In an *ayllu*, work and rest are distributed across beings: the river flows, the llama grazes, the farmer plants, all participating in reciprocal sustenance. Translating this to post-industrial Europe means recognizing that the idle factory, too, belongs to the commons – not as heritage but as potential habitat, energy reservoir, or memory archive.

New political experiments point in this direction: cooperative renewable-energy projects, repair cafés, urban compost networks. These initiatives echo

Negri's (1999) concept of constituent power: the capacity to invent forms of governance from below. They are not utopian detachments but practical ontologies of coexistence, materializing Spinoza's insight that power is the composition of bodies.

Relearning the Art of Existence: The Future as Commons

Reconsidering unemployment through the lens of inoperativity does not mean aestheticizing deprivation, nor denying the material violence of involuntary non-work. The absence of remuneration – or the experience of chronically insufficient income – remains a structural axis of contemporary exclusion, exposing individuals and their networks of interdependence to economic fragility, social devaluation, and affective strain. Entering unemployment often precipitates what may be described as a social drama, reverberating through households, partnerships, kin relations, and local communities. Yet to acknowledge these constraints is not to reaffirm the dogma that wage labor is the sole horizon of dignity. On the contrary, confronting the material consequences of unemployment requires questioning the regime that makes access to livelihood contingent upon participation in productivist circuits. The point is not to compensate for exclusion from work, but to unsettle the ontological primacy accorded to work itself.

If capitalism trained subjects to live through work, the post-productive condition demands learning how to live through relation. The unemployed are not simply its victims; they are its reluctant pioneers. Their biographies chart a passage from wage-centered identities to precarious but inventive forms of relational subsistence. To follow them ethnographically is to observe practices of collaborative survival unfolding within damaged landscapes (Tsing 2015). As Tsing's study of matsutake mushroom foragers shows (*Ibid.*), value can emerge from salvage rather than production, from coordination rather than accumulation. Likewise, the unemployed foragers of Piedmont – searching not for mushrooms but for meaning – experiment with forms of collaborative survival that bind human endurance to ecological regeneration. In their gestures, unemployment becomes apprenticeship: a difficult training in coexisting with what remains after the promises of growth have withered.

Closures do not automatically generate renewal; ruins are harsh teachers. Yet in the suspension of productivity, other capacities become perceptible. Care, rest, attention, maintenance, and mutual reliance – long subordinated to output and efficiency – emerge as infrastructural conditions of collective life. In the ruins of productivity, the multitude does not simply wait for reintegration;

it composes provisional worlds. These practices are fragile and uneven, but they expose the contingency of the equation between usefulness and worth. To conceive unemployment as ontological suspension is to recognize that life exceeds every economy and every calculus of productivity. Anthropology's task is not to romanticize marginality but to register this excess: the undercurrents of existence that persist beneath metrics of value. From Spinoza's *conatus* to Haraway's making-kin, from Agamben's *inoperosità* to Negri's commons, a shared intuition surfaces: being cannot be reduced to function. What persists, what relates, what composes with others – these precede and exceed the wage relation. The Piedmont unemployed, the stray animals, the idle machines, the recovering soils all participate in this dispersed affirmation. They are not inert residues of a superseded order but active indicators of another possible arrangement of life, one in which usefulness no longer monopolizes worth and interdependence replaces competition as the primary grammar of coexistence. To imagine such a world is not escapism; it is a refusal of fatalism. As one worker once told me: "We thought work was life. Now we're learning that life works by itself".

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