# The Spirit of Müntzer
## A Critical Consideration of Political Mythology

*Wu Ming*

Essay – January 17, 2011

**To what extent is the political use of myths justified? Wu Ming, a writers' collective based in Bologna, asks itself that question in this kaleidoscopic self-critique. The binding element is *mythopoesis*, a radical politics of storytelling that, says Wu Ming, must never be beyond all doubt.**

### 1. Marcos, Müntzer and *Q* (1994–1999)

It happened one chilly night of March 2001. It happened in Nurio, in the state of Michoacán, Mexico, where all the indigenous tribes of the country were gathered to demand an Indian Rights Act. It was the third meeting of the National Indigenous Congress (Congreso Nacional Indígena, CNI), largely a creation of the Zapatistas, those media-savvy poetic warriors who had seemingly appeared out of nowhere – out of the depths of time – seven years before. U2 were wrong, sometimes something changes on New Year's Day. Sometimes an army of balaclava-wearing Maya peasants occupy a city and get their message across to millions of people. It occurred in San Cristobal de las Casas, in the state of Chiapas, Mexico, on the first of January 1994.

And there we were, seven years later, in the darkness on the edge of Nurio, and the Zapatistas were there, Subcomandante Marcos was there, for the indigenous meeting took place during the famous and internationally covered *Marcha por la Dignidad* (March of Dignity).

The March: throngs of people travelling on battered coaches, covering thousands of miles, from the backwoods of Chiapas to a spectacularly crowded Zócalo, the biggest square in Mexico City. Twenty days of travel, twenty days of poetry delivered by Marcos in seven allegorical speeches called *Las Siete Llaves* (The Seven Keys).

Nurio was a stop on that journey, and we the Wu Ming collective were there as well, at least some of us. Marcos and the Zapatistas were accompanied by people from all parts of the world, a multifarious procession of journalists, activists, intellectuals, artists and parasites. We'd come all the way from Italy as members of a bizarre delegation whom the locals called *los monos blancos*, the white monkeys. That was a pun, as *mono* is also Spanish slang for 'overalls'. Back at home, we were usually called *le tute bianche*, the white overalls. In a strange semantic twist, a work garment had temporarily become a symbol of civil disobedience, and many people used to wear it at demonstrations. We kept the overalls on for the whole march, and they ceased being white long before we arrived in Mexico City.

*In the early / mid-1990s the 'Luther Blissett' collective identity was created and adopted by an informal network of people (artists, hackers, and activists) interested in using the power of myths, and moving beyond agit-prop 'counter-information'. In Bologna, my circle of friends shared an obsession with the eternal return of such archetypal figures as folk*

*heroes and tricksters. We spent our days exploring pop culture, studying the language of the Mexican Zapatistas, collecting stories of media hoaxes and communication guerrilla warfare since the 1920s (Berlin Dada stuff, futuristic soirées, etcetera), obsessively re-watching one particular movie,* Slap Shot *by George Roy Hill, starring Paul Newman as hockey player Reggie Dunlop. We liked Reggie Dunlop very much, he was the perfect trickster, the Anansi of African legends, the Coyote of Native American legends, Ulysses manipulating the Cyclop's mind. What if we could build our own 'Reggie Dunlop', a 'trickster with a thousand faces', a golem made of the clay of three rivers – the agit-prop tradition, folk mythology, and pop culture? What if we started a completely new role play game, using all the media platforms available at the time to spread the legend of a new folk hero, a hero fuelled by collective intelligence?*[1]
Henry Jenkins III



Shown here on horseback is Subcomandante Marcos, spokesman for the Zapatista movement, Chiapas, Mexico, 1996.




Portrait of Thomas Müntzer, engraving by Romyn de Hooge, 1701.

The communication strategies of the Zapatistas were a big influence on the LBP (Luther Blissett Project). What intrigued us most was the way the Zapatistas avoided framing their struggle in any of the hopelessly worn-out twentieth-century modes of thought, and refused old dichotomies such as Reformist vs. Revolutionary, Vanguard vs. Masses, Violence vs. Non-violence, and so forth. The Zapatistas evidently belonged to the left, but they seemed to refuse any linear, traditional left-to-right-scale thought, and in a way that had nothing to do with how some European fascists argue that they are 'neither left nor right'. The Zapatista language moved away from stereotypical 'third-worldism': they put creative re-appropriation and use of old myths, folk tales, legends and prophecies into a vision that encompassed a new transnationalism (Huey P. Newton – co-founder of the Black Panther movement [eds.] – might have called it 'Intercommunalism'). The 'community' the Zapatistas talked about was an open one, it went beyond the boundaries of the ethnic groups they spoke for. 'We are all Indians of the world,' they stated. They came from the most miserable corner of the known world, and yet they soon got in touch with rebels all around the globe.

The Zapatistas' strategy of communication was based on the refusal of traditional, camera-craving leaders. In the early days of the *Levantamiento*, Marcos stated: 'I don't exist, I'm just the frame of the window,' then explained that 'Marcos' was just an alias and he was a just a 'sub-commander', a spokesperson for the Indios. He asserted that everybody could be Marcos, and that was the meaning of balaclavas: the revolution has no face because it has all faces. 'If you want to see the face under the balaclava, grab a mirror and look at yourself,' Marcos said.

That's what Luther Blissett came out of. The Luther Blissett Project was roughly a Five Year Plan and lasted from 1994 to 1999. Hundreds of people, all over Italy and in some other countries, adopted the name and gave contributions in terms of media hoaxes, radio programmes, fanzines, videos, street theatre, performance art, radical politics and theoretical writings. At least 50 agitators remained active in Bologna from beginning to end. In 1995 some of them started to play with the idea of writing a historical novel. That novel was to become *Q*.

As filled as we were with fresh Zapatista suggestions, we almost immediately thought of recounting a peasant insurrection, nay, the mother of all modern insurrections, peasant or not. The Peasants' War was the biggest popular revolt of its time, it broke out in the heart of the Holy Roman Empire and was savagely repressed in 1525, one year before the Spanish *conquistadores* started their bloody invasion of southern Mexico and destroyed the Maya civilization. The Peasants' War (1524-1525 in central and southern Germany) was a prefiguring event, in the same way its main agitator Thomas Müntzer was a prefiguring character. It was literally a *pre*-figuration because the social order that Müntzer and the revolutionary peasants envisioned was far ahead of their time, indeed, it's still ahead of our time, and yet it wasn't just a collective hallucination followed by bursts of mass violence. Their needs were real and their practice was rooted in the social reality of their time. Their partial achievements were tangible: towns were conquered, revolutionary councils were established and the power structure was shaken from the foundations up to the princes' rotting teeth. They were defeated and massacred, but their legacy is still with us, buried in the ground beneath our feet, and it may resurface every time the social order is challenged from the bottom up. As to the peasant leaders' rhetoric, it still resounds throughout the centuries. In many ways and voices, Müntzer still speaks to us.

But why tell that story again? Why write a historical novel on such an anachronistic subject? What meaning could Thomas Müntzer and the Peasants' War have in the 'Roaring 1990s'? 'Communism' had been defeated, 'democracy' had won, belief in Free Trade was undisputed to the extent that the French called it *la pensée unique*, 'the only one thought [allowed]'. Market-centric 'neoliberal' ideology was triumphant. Did we really want to write a novel on some long-forgotten proto-communist bums? Yes, we did. In times of counter-revolutionary hubris, at the peak of 'the greediest decade in history' (as Joseph Stiglitz called it), we thought such a book was more necessary than ever.

Very soon, we bumped into a work by German playwright Dieter Forte, a 1970 drama entitled *Luther, Munzer, and the Bookkeepers of the Reformation*.[2] It was an explicit allegory of the 1968 movement in West Germany. That text had a powerful effect on us. It kick-started the writing process.

To tell the truth, the Peasants' War and Müntzer's preaching were just the beginning of the story we would tell. *Q* covers more than 30 years of European history, from 1517 (when Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg cathedral) to 1555 (the year of the Peace of Augsburg). Those tumultuous years provide historians and storytellers with a lot of pre-figuration and first attempts, as radicals of that age seem to have tried practically every revolutionary strategy and tactic. If we listen attentively to what the sixteenth century has to say, we'll encounter anarchists, proto-hippies, utopian socialists, hardcore Leninists, mystical Maoists, mad Stalinists, the Red Brigades, the Angry Brigade, the Weathermen, Emmett Grogan, Friar Tuck, punk rock, Pol Pot and Comrade Gonzalo (of Peru's Shining Path guerrilla movement). A whole army of spectres and metaphors. Also, we'll find all kinds of culture jammers, body artists, pamphleteers and fanzine publishers. Our main character, the nameless hero, gets involved in each and every subversive project he bumps into, from the Peasants' War to the Anabaptist takeover of the city of Münster, from Jan van Batenburg's terrorist sect the *Zwaardgeesten* to the Loyist community in Antwerp, from book smuggling in Switzerland and Northern Italy to a final escape from Europe towards the Ottoman Empire. The third part of the novel echoes such Luther Blissett practices as the dissemination of false news and the creation of a virtual character (Titian the Anabaptist) with the purpose of bewildering the powers-that-be.

What we wanted to do was write a fierce and passionate book, a book that was conscious of itself as a cultural artefact (nay, a cultural weapon), but at the same time didn't raise the usual shield of postmodern detachment and allegedly all-explaining irony. A novel announcing the return of radical / popular narrative fiction. The world needed adventure novels written by folks who were serious about their writing, folks willing to soil their hands without ducking responsibility. In March 1999, the publication of *Q* was our final

contribution to the Luther Blissett Project, which ended at the end of the year.

### 2. Müntzer Mojo Rising, or: the Castle under Siege (1999–2001)

*They say that they are new, they christen themselves by acronyms: G8, IMF, WB, WTO, NAFTA, FTAA... They cannot fool us, they are the same as those who have come before them: the écorcheurs that plundered our villages, the oligarchs that reconquered Florence, the court of Emperor Sigismund that beguiled Ian Hus, the diet of Tuebingen that obeyed Ulrich and refused to admit Poor Konrad, the princes that sent the lansquenets to Frankenhausen, the impious that roasted Dozsa, the landlords that tormented the Diggers, the autocrats that defeated Pugachev, the government whom Byron cursed, the old world that stopped our assaults and destroyed all stairways to heaven. Nowadays they have a new empire, they impose new servitudes on the whole globe, they still play the lords and masters of the land and the sea. Once again, we the multitudes rise up against them.* [3]
Anonymous

The publication of *Q* was followed by an extended book tour all over Italy (and Ticino, the Italian-speaking canton of Switzerland). We were still travelling when the Battle of Seattle broke out.

It was 30 November 1999. That evening we arrived at Lodi, a small town in Lombardy, and met readers at the municipal library. Instead of talking about the book, we raved about what had just happened at the WTO summit. We felt it was the beginning of something big. And big it grew indeed. Very soon, the new movement erupted into a worldwide challenge to the global institutions regulating 'free markets' from the top down: the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and other bloodsuckers.

2000 was a year of intense organization, protest and disruption of important summits. The most relevant demonstrations took place in Prague at the end of September, when thousands of demonstrators ridiculed an IMF / WB joint meeting. We were there as well. At a certain point, the movement decided that the showdown – the litmus test of its strength – would be in the third week of July 2001 in Genoa, Northern Italy, where a G8 summit was scheduled. It would be the first G8 summit since the election of George W. Bush as president of the USA, and the first with right-wing clown Silvio Burlesquoni as Italian premier and grinning host of the event.

In the meantime, curious things were happening in Italy and elsewhere. The ghost of Thomas Müntzer (none other!) was reappearing in unexpected places. There was some sort of short-circuit between *Q* and the movement. Thanks to word of mouth and the Internet, the novel had become an international bestseller. We began to see Müntzer's sentence *Omnia sunt communia* [All things are to be shared] on banners and placards. We began to see quotations from *Q* used by activists as e-mail signatures. In forums dedicated to the movement, people would adopt such aliases as 'Magister Thomas' or 'Gert-from-the-Well'. It was only the beginning of a strange, controversial, troublesome relationship between our literary efforts and the ongoing struggle. In the months leading to the Genoa showdown, the names 'Wu Ming' and 'Wu Ming Foundation' came to be associated more with 'agit-prop' activities than our literary output. It was mainly our fault, as we plunged into the struggle so deeply that it became difficult to avoid confusion of roles. For example, even if it had no byline, everybody knew we were responsible for the epic appeal known as *From The Multitudes of Europe...* which in the spring and early summer of 2001 was constantly forwarded, Xeroxed, printed on leaflets and journals, broadcast on the radio, recited by actors, scribbled on walls and so on.

Quite obviously, Müntzer was one of the ancestors claimed by the 'narrating we' of the edict: 'We are the army of peasants and miners that followed Thomas Müntzer.... The

Lansquenets exterminated us in Thuringia, Müntzer was torn to pieces by the headsmen, and yet nobody could deny it: all that belonged to the earth, to the earth would return.'

*The text is a declaration of war. A political and historical war, but also a trans-historical and trans-political one. The powerful of the Earth gathered in Genoa for the G8 summit, as well as their educated and overpayed consultants and collaborators, shall not have to face the 'people of Seattle', the students, the thugs of the social centres plus some poor sods and freaks strumming guitars or breaking windows. Or rather, all those people will be there, but together with them, behind them, inside them an immense Army of the Dead will be marching. And the text calls on those fallen ones, it makes a list of those troops covered with the dust of centuries and dispersed by the wind of history, with the epic punctiliousness of Homer's 'Catalogue of Ships'.* [4]
Franco Cardini

Looking back, we think that Müntzer's ghost, *Q* and – as a consequence – the novel's authors found themselves at the centre of the mobilization because a general metaphor was taking shape in that midst: ever more often, empire was described as a castle besieged by a manifold army of peasants. That metaphor recurs in several texts and speeches. Sometimes it's explicit, very often it's only implied, but it's there. Although it was inspiring and effective, the metaphor was a misrepresentation. There was no real siege going on, as you can't besiege a power that's everywhere and whose main manifestation is a constant flow of electrons from stock exchange to stock exchange. That misrepresentation would prove fatal in Genoa. We were mistaking the power's formal ceremonies for the power itself. We were making the same mistake Müntzer and the German peasants had made. We had chosen one battleground and a supposed field-day. We were all heading to Frankenhausen.




A demonstration of disobbedienti at the G8 in Genoa, 20 July 2001. – Photo by Merijn Oudenampsen




Wu Ming is the pseudonym of an Italian writers' collective formed in 2000, a group with roots in a branch of the Luther Blissett community in Bologna.

### 3. Frankenstein in Frankenhausen (2001–2009)

*'... I fought... alongside men who really thought they would put an end to injustice and wickedness on earth. There were thousands of us, we were an army. Our hope was shattered on the plain at Frankenhausen, on the fifteenth of May 1525. Then I abandoned a man to his fate, to the weapons of the lansquenets. I carried with me his bag full of letters, names and hopes. And the suspicion of having been betrayed, sold to the forces of the princes like a herd at a market.' It's still hard to utter the name. 'That man was Thomas Müntzer.'* [5]
Luther Blissett

Thomas Müntzer spoke to us, but we couldn't understand his words. It wasn't a blessing, but a warning. It is impossible to disclaim the responsibility the Wu Ming collective had, at least in Italy. We were among the most zealous in urging people to go to Genoa, and helped to pull the movement into the ambush. After the bloodbath, it took quite a while – and a lot of reflection on our part – to understand our own (specific) errors in the context of the (general) errors made by the movement. We had underestimated the enemy, and overestimated ourselves. Clearly, something had gone wrong with the practice of 'mythopoesis' or 'myth-making from the bottom up', which was – and still is – at the core of our philosophy.

By 'myth' we never meant a false story, that is, the most banal and superficial use of the term. We always used the word for a narrative with a great symbolic value, a narrative whose meaning is understood and shared in the community (for example a social movement) whose members tell it to one another. We've always been interested in stories that create bonds between human beings. Communities keep sharing such stories and, as they share them, they (hopefully) keep them alive and inspiring, ongoing narration makes them evolve, because what happens in the present changes the way we recollect the past. As a result, those tales are modified according to the context and acquire new symbolic / metaphorical meanings. Myths provide us with examples to follow or reject, give us a sense of continuity or discontinuity with the past, and allow us to imagine a future. We couldn't live without them, it's the way our minds works, our brains are 'wired' to think through narratives, metaphors and allegories.

At a certain point, a metaphor may suffer sclerosis and become less and less useful, until it becomes void of all meaning, a disgusting cliché, an obstacle to the growth of inspiring stories. When this happens, people have to veer off, looking for other words and images. Revolutionary and progressive movements have always found their own metaphors and narrated their myths. Most of the time these myths survived being useful and became alienating. Rigor mortis set in, language became wooden, metaphors ended up enslaving the people instead of setting them free. The following generation often reacted by negating the past and developing iconoclastic attitudes. The vanguard of each generation of radicals described the myths they inherited as nothing more than false stories. Some demanded that the radical discourse be 'de-mythologized', be it in the name of reason, 'political correctness', nihilism or even plain stupidity (as in the 'myths-are-intrinsically-fascist' argument). No-one can erase mythological thought from human communication, because it's embedded in the circuitry of our brains. Cognitive scientists and linguists such as George Lakoff are proving that beyond doubt. We think through metaphors and narratives.

Every iconoclasm eventually generates a new iconophilia, against which new iconoclasts will rage. The cycle will be endless if we don't understand the way these narratives work. The trouble with myths is not their intrinsic falsehood, truth... or truthiness. The trouble with myths is that they sclerotize easily if we take them for granted. The flow of tales must be kept fresh and lively, we have to tell stories by ever changing means, angles and points of view, give our tales constant exercise so they don't harden and darken and clog our brains.

This, of course, is an extremely hard task, for several reasons. First of all, it's too easy to underestimate the dangers of working with myths. One always runs the risk of playing Dr Frankenstein or, even worse, Henry Ford. We can't create a myth at will, as though on an assembly line, or evoke it artificially in some closed laboratory. To be more exact: we could, but it would have unpleasant consequences.

Expanding some observations by Karoly Kerenyi (Hungarian-Swiss researcher in the field of Greek mythology), the Italian mythologist Furio Jesi drew a sharp distinction between a 'genuine' approach to myths and a forced evocation of myths for a specific (usually political) purpose. Think of Mussolini describing the 1937 invasion of Abyssinia as 'the reappearance of the Empire on the fateful hills of Rome'. Kerenyi and Jesi called the latter strategy 'technification of myths'. Technified myth is always addressed to those Kerenyi called 'the sleeping ones', that is, people whose critical attitude is dormant, because the powerful images conveyed by the technifiers have overwhelmed their consciousness and invaded their subconscious. For example, we may 'fall asleep' during the incredibly beautiful first half-hour of Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (1938).

On the contrary, a 'genuine' approach to myths requires staying awake and willing to listen. We have to ask questions and listen to what myths have to say, we have to study myths, go looking for them in their territories, with humbleness and respect, without trying to capture them and forcibly bring them to our world and our present. It is a pilgrimage, not a safari. Technified myth is always 'false consciousness', even when we think we're using it to good purpose. In an essay entitled 'Letteratura e mito' ('Literature and Myth'), Jesi asked himself: 'Is it possible to induce the people to behave in a certain way – thanks to the power exerted by suitable evocations of myths – and then induce them to criticize the mythical motives of their behaviour?' **6** He answered himself: 'It seems practically impossible.'

In the heyday of the global movement (from Autumn 1999 to Summer 2001), we tried to operate in the space between the adverb ('practically') and the adjective ('impossible'). We tried to use the adverb to break open the adjective. We deemed Jesi's answer too pessimistic. We thought that 'opening the laboratory' and showing the people how we processed 'mythologemes' – the basic conceptual units, the metaphoric 'kernels' of

mythological narratives – was enough to provide the people with the tools of criticism. 'Correct distance' from a myth was our chimera: not too close lest we fall into a stupor, not so far that we no longer feel its power. It was a difficult balance to sustain, and in fact we didn't sustain it.

Because the problem is also: Who is the artificer of mythopoesis, the evocator, the obstetrician? It should be up to a whole movement or community or social class to handle myths and keep them on the move. No particular group can appoint itself to that office. At the end of the day, we ended up being 'officials' assigned to manipulate metaphors and evoke myths. Our role became a quasi-specialized one. An agit-prop cell. A combo of spin doctors. Sure, *From the Multitudes of Europe...* could make your nerves sing, it made you feel like going to Genoa right away, but that was not enough. We never looked for ways to 'criticize the mythical motives of our behaviour'. 'Practically' never cracked 'impossible'.

At present, there is no alternative but continuing the work: we have to continue the exploration, prick up our ears and approach myths in a way that's not instrumental. We have to understand the nature of myths without wishing to reduce their complexity and test their aerodynamic properties in the wind tunnel of politics.

What happened in Genoa was not a 'military' defeat: it was a cultural catastrophe. The tragedy was not being defeated in the street. The tragedy was being defeated in the street and as a cultural wave. After Genoa, the movement stopped being able to communicate in effective ways, and the media sucked all our blood. Less than two months after Genoa came 9 / 11. The situation in the country and the world got much tougher, and the metaphor of the 'siege' turned upside down. In 2003 the Italian movement was already in a deep crisis. Not even mass mobilization against the war on Irak could infuse new energy into its body. At last, it regressed to a marginal presence, a presence occupying the semantic space of traditional far-leftist discourse. The usual boring role played by boring rules. A bunch of 'professional revolutionaries' took over what was left, made all kinds of mistakes and proved to be immensely inadequate. Fossilized sub-Leninist tactics and strategies resurfaced. A lot of time and energy was dissipated in intra-group identity wars. Meetings became pathetic cock fights. The majority of sensitive, 'unregimented' activists (especially women) got bored and quit. We were among those who quit. We didn't give up the struggle, far from it, but never again will we play Frankenstein with technified myths. And we keep going, and no defeat is definitive, and hearts are still beating.

**Wu Ming** (full name: Wu Ming Foundation) is a collective of four writers currently based in Bologna, Italy. They have authored such historical novels as *Q* (under the name Luther Blissett), *54* and *Manituana*. See further: www.wumingfoundation.com.

## Footnotes

1. Henry Jenkins III, 'How Slap Shot Inspired a Cultural Revolution: An Interview with the Wu Ming Foundation', Confessions of an Aca / Fan weblog, oktober 2006. See: www.henryjenkins.org.
2. Dieter Forte, *Luther, Munzer and the Bookkeepers of the Reformation* (Berkshire: McGraw-Hill, 1973).
3. Anonymous, *The Multitudes Of Europe Rising Up Against The Empire and Marching on Genoa, 19, 20 and 21 July 2001.* See: www.wumingfoundation.com.
4. Franco Cardini (historian), *L'Espresso* (weekly) 22 June 2001.
5. Luther Blissett, *Q* (Londen: Arrow Books, 2004).
6. Furio Jesi and Andrea Cavalleti, *Letteratura e mito* (Turin: Einaudi, 1968).

## Tags

Activism, Democracy

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