

# **Autonomia**

Aufheben

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## Introduction: Autonomia

Whether we have liked it or not, *Aufheben* has often been pigeon-holed as an Autonomist Marxist magazine. It is certainly true that Autonomism had been a defining influence and inspiration for those of us who launched *Aufheben* in 1992. It was not so much the lucidity of the prose, the rigour of the logic or even the empirical robustness of the arguments contained in the autonomist writings which had been translated into English over the previous decade or so that impressed us. There were other more important reasons why we had been inspired by Autonomism.

First of all, autonomist theory could claim to have arisen from the practice of an actual mass movement. From the accounts we had read, it was apparent that the waves of class struggle that had swept across the world during the 1960s and 70s had occurred on a significantly greater scale and intensity in Italy (the home of Autonomism) than those that had occurred elsewhere. But more significantly, the struggles in Italy – with perhaps the brief exception of Paris for a few weeks in 1968 – could be seen to have gone far further than anywhere else. In Italy, the struggles of the 70s had given rise to a political and social movement that could be seen to have been breaking free from the fetters imposed by the organisational forms, practice and ideas of the old workers movement and the left. By reflecting this movement in theory it could be argued that the Italian Autonomism had given one of the most advanced theoretical expressions of the waves of struggles of the 1960s and 1970s.

Secondly, autonomist theory provided us with a starting point from which to understand non-traditional forms of social and political struggle in class terms. In our editorial to the first issue of *Aufheben* we pointed out that the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s had given rise to a revival of many of the theoretical currents of the classical workers movement which had previously been submerged by decades of Stalinism, such as Trotskyism, class struggle anarchism and council communism. These currents certainly put forward radical class analyses. However, we argued that to a large extent these currents had merely ‘regurgitated as ideology the theories they were [re]discovering’.<sup>1</sup> To this extent they had failed, as we rather obscurely put it, to ‘actually develop a theory adequate to modern conditions’.<sup>2</sup> Instead, we asserted that it had been the autonomists, along with the Situationists, that had gone furthest in recognizing that these ‘modern conditions’ – which had been established after the defeat of the revolutionary workers movements of the 1920s and 30s – had radically altered the nature of the proletariat.

It was claimed that the emergence of this new proletariat was giving rise to new needs, new demands and new forms of struggle. These new needs, demands and struggles could be discerned both in the growth of rank and file workers militancy, and in the ‘refusal of work’ – evident in individual acts of absenteeism and sabotage and the more general disaffection with labour amongst the working class. But it could also be claimed to be evident outside the workplace both with the spread of counter-culture – with its anti-work, hedonistic and libertarian ethos – as well as in the new social movements, which had largely grown out of this counter-culture, such as the women’s, student, peace and the ecology movements.

But such claims did not appear as particularly obvious, in Britain at least. After all, the counter-culture remained largely confined to life-style politics and various other forms of cultural rebellion. While counter-culture may claim to have created 'new proletarian needs', it had also facilitated their commodification. At the same time the new social movements rarely went beyond the limits of an ultimately reformist radical liberalism. What is more, both the counter-culture and the disparate new social movements had (for the most part) remained quite separate to militant workplace struggles of the time – and even at times radically opposed.

By developing and generalising the theories of workers self-creativity, class composition and proletarian subjectivity – as early Operaismo currents of Autonomism in relation to the workplace struggles of the Fiat car workers had – Toni Negri and other Autonomia theorists provided a way of understanding the diverse forms of struggles and social phenomena, which had emerged outside the workplace, as manifestations of the development of underlying class antagonisms driven by the proletariat itself. What is more, such notions as the 'social factory' and the emergence of the 'social worker' as the 'new revolutionary subject', which had been developed by the Italian Autonomia, seemed to have found their confirmation in the 'Movement of '77', and had appeared as aspects of a single mass political and social movement that had overtly challenged the Italian state.

Thirdly – and no less importantly – autonomist theory (particularly that of Negri and Autonomia) appealed to us because of its unabashed revolutionary rhetoric. In contrast to the scientific objectivism and realism of traditional Marxism, the autonomist theorists seemed to place themselves at the barricades – bolstering the 'optimism of the will' with an 'optimism of the intellect' in order to urge the movement forward. For them, what seemed most important was not to produce a 'boring' analysis of the 'empirical' reality of the current situation, but to anticipate and proclaim its revolutionary possibilities.

By the early 1990s the waves of struggles that had swept Italy and elsewhere in decade or so before had receded, but they were very far from being ancient history. With the fall of Thatcher, the return of economic crisis with the recession of the early 1990s and the uncertainties created by the end of the cold war, it was still possible to believe that the tide had not altogether turned. In such circumstances Autonomism still remained fresh and relevant. Even if Toni Negri, along with many others of the Italian Autonomia, had 'sold out' and joined the ranks of the post-modernists, the Autonomist theory was still being developed, particularly by the largely American Autonomist Marxist current mostly ably represented by Harry Clever and those surrounding the Midnight Notes collective.

However, even then the problems of Autonomist theory were becoming evident to us. Their revolutionary rhetoric, which so impressed us, was almost invariably based on heroic extrapolations of abstract social phenomena and trends that were then asserted as being all but realised.<sup>3</sup> But as the struggles of the 1970s receded, and the anticipations of autonomist theory were disappointed, the gap between such assertions and actual reality became evermore wider. In the case of Negri the 'difficulty' and obscurantism of much his writing – which it must be admitted we often all too easily mistook for profundity – served to cover up this gap. For our more plain speaking American friends, however, this was not the case.

In *Aufheben*<sup>#3</sup> we presented a review of *Midnight Oil*, an anthology of works by American Autonomist collectives Zerowork and Midnight Notes that had been published shortly after the Gulf War, that we republish in this volume. What immediately struck us about *Midnight Oil* was its crass attempt to explain the complex geo-politics of the Gulf War simply in terms of an

unmediated and barely disguised class confrontation between 'capital' and the 'oil proletariat'. The assertion that the war between the US and Iraq was really little more than a ruse by capital to defeat the 'oil proletariat', along with the argument that 'capital' had been able to arbitrarily raise or lower oil prices in order to impose its strategy on the working class, was for us far from convincing. Indeed, it exposed serious problems of Autonomist Marxist's central notion of the 'two strategies'; in which the development of capitalism could be simply explained in terms of an unmediated struggle between capital and the working class as if they were two already constituted, conscious and antagonistic subjects.

For us capital was essentially the self-expansion of alienated labour that necessarily took the objectified social form of value. Furthermore, capital, like the proletariat, was not an already constituted totality but a process of totalisation that resulted from the conflicting interests of individual capitals. As such it was not the case, as George Caffentzis sought to claim in his reply to our review of *Midnight Oil*, that the issue was merely a matter of emphasis in that the *Midnight Notes* collective sought to emphasise the 'subjective' while *Aufheben* sought to bring back the 'objective'. As we made clear in our response to his reply,<sup>4</sup> by attempting to escape the law of value *Midnight Notes* had abandoned any hope of understanding the complex mediations between capital and labour, subject and object and the individual and totality necessary to develop an adequate understanding of the concrete development and history of capitalism.

The review of *Midnight Notes*, and the subsequent engagement with Caffentzis, laid the basis of our critique and break with Autonomism that has been developed more recently. However, at the time we did not feel the need to go much further. After all interest in the Italian Autonomia, Negri or even American Autonomous Marxism remained largely confined to a small and diminishing circle of anarchists and ultra-leftists and seemed to have little more to say. However, the emergence of the anti-globalisation movement in the late 1990s brought a dramatic revival in interest in Autonomism in the English speaking world which was greatly boosted by the publication of *Empire* by Negri and Hardt in 2000.

For us it was clear that the attempt by Negri and Hardt to foist what were barely disguised post-modernist ideas on the anti-globalisation movement was merely an attempt to refurbish their threadbare appearance as radical intellectuals by attempting to make a tenuous connection with a real political movement. Their rejection of class and their uncritical and complacent celebration of the diversity of the movement only confirmed for that for all their apparent radicalism they were little more than radical liberal academics. Nevertheless, *Empire* and subsequent the writings of Negri and Hardt, along with Autonomism more generally, did have a significant resonance in the anti-globalisation movement. It must be admitted that we were at first perhaps a little tardy and haphazard in our responding to this.

In *Aufheben* #11 we took the opportunity of the publication of a new edition of Harry Cleaver's *Reading Capital Politically* and the publication of Steve Wright's *Storming Heaven* to carry a joint review comparing these two accounts of Autonomism. This review proved to something of a missed opportunity in re-evaluating Autonomism. Due to its haphazard conception, the review ended up with a rather confused brief.<sup>5</sup> Firstly, it was meant to promote that Steve Wright's more historically based account and definition of Autonomism as having superseded that of Harry Cleaver. Secondly, it was meant to criticise the political conclusion usually drawn by autonomists in general, particularly the well worn gripe of ultra-leftists that autonomists were 'soft' on left nationalists. Thirdly, the review was to criticise Cleaver in particular, both for his reading of Marx and his development of autonomous theory. As a result the review was unfocused. This allowed

Cleaver to make a rather patronising and schoolmasterly reply in which he annotated a copy of our review with his ‘corrections’.

This prompted us to make a more focused and sustained critique of autonomist theory that recognised and carefully distinguished its distinct strands that had grown up since the 1970s. Three of the more substantial articles and reviews of this critique are re-published in this volume: ‘The arcane of productive reproduction’, ‘Carry on smiling’ and ‘Value struggles or class struggle?’.

We began, perhaps more by accident than by design with a review in *Aufheben* #13 (2005) of Leopoldina Fortunati’s ‘The arcane of reproduction’, in which we analysed the Autonomist understanding of value production and its role in capitalism. In particular, we tackled the Autonomist rejection of the distinction between workers as ‘productive’ and ‘unproductive’ of value, and their view of capitalism as a ‘social factory’ in which everybody contributes to the overall process of value production.

Fortunati’s book cannot be considered a principal Autonomist work; it was a short, semi-obscure pamphlet. Yet it offered us the occasion to consider why it was so crucial for *Autonomia* to argue that everybody in the ‘social factory’ was ‘productive’. The answer to this question allowed us to put pieces of the Autonomist puzzle together: with the ‘law of command’ replacing the ‘law of value’, value becomes the immediate expression of subjective antagonism. This creates the Autonomists’ obsession with value: since production of value is taken as an immediate measure of antagonism, non-productive workers, students, housewives, etc. must produce value – or their struggle can’t be accounted by their theory. Thus *Autonomia*’s stress on value was not necessitated by the praxis of struggle, but by a problematic theory: either the unproductive was declared ‘productive’ (either by modifying the concept of value or just by butchering logic), or the Autonomist theory had problems in explaining reality.

Also, the stress on productivity did not impress us very much. Since most of us in the *Aufheben* editorial board were on the dole, we didn’t feel that our alleged production of value was essential to explain our antagonism with capital. Rather, with their obsession with value, *Autonomia* appeared to uncritically reproduce the Leninist worship of productivity, although in an inverted form.<sup>6</sup> Like the old Leninist, the young Autonomist assumes that the subject of struggle must be productive – only, the ‘factory’ includes the street, the classroom and the bedroom.

Fortunati took this doctrine to unexplored heights, as she laughably attempted to derive a formula for the value produced by housework. But in our review article we did not simply tease her embarrassing pseudo-mathematics – we also explored the role of value in all the Autonomist theory, and considered Cleaver, Negri and De Angelis, their common positions as well as their differences.<sup>7</sup>

We also realised that the claim that all society is a ‘factory’ undermined the understanding of an important distinction, that between the spheres of production and circulation in capitalism. If for *Autonomia* a subjective experience of ‘capitalist command’ only counts, capital can be seen as a personalised enemy of each individual subjectivity. Command, and so antagonism, can be experienced by the poorest migrant, but also by the stressed NHS manager, by the university professor, or by the shop keeper. They are all, equally, ‘commanded’ by capital either in the workplace or in the sphere of circulation.

While some Autonomists like Cleaver and De Angelis continued using a Marxist language although stretching its original meanings, others, perhaps more coherently, took these positions to their logical consequences. Since the 80s Negri and other Autonomist theorists were already

moving along a trajectory that would lead them to repudiate the 'working class'. Negri enthusiastically adhered to a postmodernist view of society as made by a 'swarm' of 'free' individuals, and which disposes of the need for a class analysis. With *Empire and Multitude*, Negri criticised the category of 'working class' and adopted the postmodernist concept of 'multitude', elaborated by Autonomist Paolo Virno.<sup>8</sup>

Having missed the boat somewhat in reviewing *Empire* in 2000 in *Aufheben* # 14, we decided to review Negri's and Hardt's second book, *Multitude*. In this review article we critiqued Negri's optimistic view that capital has created its own grave-digger in its new process of production – the 'immaterial production'. We showed that this view was rooted in Negri's inability to consider the tragedy of production in capitalism – i.e. that (either material or immaterial) production in a wage-work relation unavoidably creates alienation. We also noticed that Negri's new production, like his old one, was unable to go beyond Leninism. Negri's celebration of immaterial production simply inverted the old Leninist productivism, while uncritically accept its basic assumptions.

The reviews of Massimo De Angelis's 'The Beginning of History' and Paolo Virno's 'Multitude' in *Aufheben* #16 concluded a long period of systematic analysis of *Autonomia*. In 'The beginning of history' De Angelis adopted a recent and popular reading of the class struggle as a struggle to defend 'commons' against capital's 'enclosure'; and built up a grand theory around these concepts. While we praised De Angelis's strong critique of Negri's immaterial labour, we were also critical of De Angelis's interest in 'commons' and 'enclosures'. We saw these concepts as the logical conclusion of a trajectory which has started from the idea that the class struggle in capitalism could be immediately see as a confrontation of autonomous subjects, capital versus the class. While in the 70s such a subjectivist reading made sense, the retreat of the class struggle left the Autonomist theorists bereft – the autonomous subject had vanished. In the review we showed how this problem led Negri to define immaterial production as the locus for an autonomous and antagonistic subjectivity. Rejecting Negri, De Angelis looked outside production for an unspoilt autonomous bubble of subjectivity, and found it in the 'communities' struggling to defend their 'commons'.

While the concept of common and enclosure appear new and exciting, we thought that it was a form of fetishism. Any conscious and collective antagonism against capital cannot be defined 'outside' it. We showed that outside and inside, are both necessary aspects for a conscious development of antagonism and for a struggle of the class of the dispossessed against capital.

Although Autonomism was a defining influence and inspiration on those us who launched *Aufheben* seventeen years ago we would certainly not call ourselves autonomists now. Times have changed, and it has become apparent to us that many of the things that had inspired us about the various strands of Autonomism have also proved to be serious weaknesses. However, although we have increasingly distanced ourselves from *Autonomia*, on our part there is no regret for our ongoing interest in it, as a theory that stressed the importance of subjectivity, antagonism, the experience of class struggle and that opened up to struggles outside the workplace. By looking at it retroactively for this anthology, we can say that in moving away from *Autonomia*, *Aufheben* has precisely done what it promised in it first Editorial:

'To recognise and seize the opportunity the changing situation offers we need to arm ourselves theoretically and practically. The theoretical side of this requires a preservation and superseding of the revolutionary theory that has preceded us' (#1, p.1).



In our dealing with Autonomia we have undergone a process of *Aufhebung* that goes beyond given ideas but preserves their moment of truth. The urge for a theory of subjectivity stimulated in us a process of understanding, which, unlike Autonomia, seeks to preserve a class view. We have never abandoned the importance to start from a materialistic (not moralistic or purely subjectivist) understanding of reality. This effort has not only led us to distance ourselves from Autonomia, but also from theories that appeared to be at its polar opposite, for example the Marxist Hegelianism of Postone and his likes, which collapse the subjective into the objective.<sup>9</sup>

It is worth stressing that this *Aufhebung* was not the result of pure theoretical thinking. Our practical experience of struggle in our last 15 years was central in this development: it faced us with questions about the relation between theory and reality, subject and object, 'inside' and 'outside', it forced us to adopt a class view. And so it forced us to continually reassess our fascinations and ideas critically.<sup>10</sup>

1. *Aufheben* #1, (Summer 1992), p1.

2. *Aufheben* #1, (Summer 1992), p1.

3. Thus for example, the introduction of robotics into the FIAT car plants, in response to the car workers struggles of the early 1970s, was taken as evidence that capitalist production in its entirety was all but fully automated. Hence, Marx's prediction in the *Grundrisse* (p. 705) that labour in the direct form would cease to be well great spring of wealth' and that as such labour-time ceases and must cease to be its measure', was now proclaimed as being almost fully realised. The law of value was therefore dead. Labour was now merely a means of command and control.

Similarly, the growth in the autonomists movements, and the 'new proletarian needs' it expressed, was extrapolated to the point where it was implicitly assumed that it was about to encompass the entire proletariat. Of course, the reality is that even in Italy at its height, the autonomist movement never came close to encompassing the entire proletariat. The vast majority of the Italian working class during the 1970s had little or no direct involvement in the autonomist movements.

4. The Escape from the 'Law of Value'?, *Aufheben* #5 (1996).

5. Originally the Harry Cleaver's *Reading Capital Politically* was to have been part of a joint review with Moishe Postone's *Time Labour and Social Domination*. The Postone half of the review failed to materialise, so the Cleaver half had to be rewritten to be counter posed to Steve Wright's *Storming Heaven*. Unfortunately the Steve Wright half of the review ended up not amounting to much either.

6. This worship substantiates Negri's rather dubious and rather apologetic conception of 'self-valorisation'.

7. In this anthology, the parts related to Fortunati's mathematics have been abridged.

8. 'The language of retreat: Paolo Virno's *A Grammar of the multitude*', *Aufheben* #16 (2008).

9. Review of Moishe Postone's *Time Labour and Social Domination*, *Aufheben* #15 (2007).

10. 'Theoretical criticism and practical overflow fifteen years on'', *Aufheben* #15 (2007).

# From Operaismo to Autonomist Marxism

Italy's 'Hot Autumn' of 1969 and 'Movement of 1977' were two of the high points of late 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary struggle. The recent publication of two books on workerism and autonomia testify to the continued interest in the theoretical development surrounding these events. Steve Wright's *Storming Heaven* presents a critical history of Italian workerism; and Harry Cleaver's *Reading 'Capital' Politically* has been influential as an account of the 'autonomist' tradition. The review of these two books gives us the opportunity for a critical reappraisal of the contributions of workerism. We suggest that Cleaver reproduces some of autonomia's problems as well as its useful theoretical tools. These problems include the inadequacy of the concept of autonomy for a class analysis; the absence of a critique of leftism; ambiguity over the 'law of value'; and an inability or unwillingness to theorize retreat. We also argue that Cleaver's 'political' reading of *Capital* lacks the analytical rigour needed to make the connections between the categories of *Capital* and the class struggle.

From Operaismo to 'Autonomist Marxism'

Review Article:

*Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* by Steve Wright (London: Pluto Press, 2002)

*Reading 'Capital' Politically* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn.) by Harry Cleaver (Leeds: AK/Anti-thesis, 2000)

Harry Cleaver's reply is located here: [www.eco.utexas.edu](http://www.eco.utexas.edu)

The Italian 'Hot Autumn' of 1969 was one of the high points of late 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary struggle, and is associated with operaismo ('workerism'), a Marxian approach that focused on rank-and-file struggles in contrast to what was seen as the politics and opportunism of the dominant (Stalinist) left. The wave of social struggles of that year was echoed, although with important differences, in the tumultuous 'Movement of 1977'. Under the banner of autonomia, the workerists' analysis of class struggle was extended through the actions of groups outside the workplace. Intense street-fighting, self-reduction or outright refusal of bills and fares, the explicit raising of radical demands such as the abolition of wage-labour: all this hinted at a movement for which what counts as 'political' had been seriously questioned by struggles around wider desires and needs. Readers will be aware of workerism and autonomia today through the works of its most well-known theorists, such as Negri, through the US journal *Midnight Notes*, and perhaps through the aut-op-sy website and discussion list.<sup>1</sup> For many of those dissatisfied with the versions of Marxism and anarchism available to them in the UK, the notions of 'autonomy' and 'autonomist' have positive associations. For example, the recent 'anti-capitalist' mobilizations of J18 and Seattle both drew on themes and language associated with autonomia, such as autonomous struggles and diversity.<sup>2</sup> However, the history and theory surrounding workerism

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<sup>1</sup> [lists.village.virginia.edu](http://lists.village.virginia.edu)

<sup>2</sup> The J18 mobilization sought to link up the autonomous struggles of "environmentalists, workers, the unem-

and *autonomia* are not always well known. The recent publication of two books on *operaismo* and *autonomia* and their theoretical heritage testify to the continued interest in this current. Harry Cleaver's Reading 'Capital' Politically was originally published in 1979, and has now been republished, with a new preface. Cleaver's Introduction, in particular, has been a point of reference to many in grasping the significance of post-war developments, including struggles that don't necessarily express themselves in traditional forms. Steve Wright's *Storming heaven* presents a critical history of the Italian movement's political and theoretical development in relation to the struggles of the 1950s, '60s and '70s — a history which, we argue, now supersedes the Cleaver presentation.

The publication of these two books gives us the opportunity for a critical reappraisal of the contributions of *operaismo* and *autonomia*, and Cleaver's attempt to keep them alive. In particular, we will examine five issues. First, there is the question of whether the concept of 'autonomy' is adequate as a basis for a class analysis. Second, we argue that the workerists and hence those who have followed them suffered from a lack of an adequate critique of leftism and nationalism. Third, there is the issue of the ambiguity of those influenced by workerism in their account of the status of the 'law of value'. Fourth, the failure of workerism and of *autonomia* to theorize retreat in the class struggle can be linked to an implicit (or even explicit) satisfaction among some theorists in this tradition with the current limits of the class struggle. Finally, there is the question of whether the political reading of Marx's *Capital* offered by Cleaver actually works. We conclude that the defeat of the movements that sustained the development of workerism has led both to the abandonment of the project of world revolution and the ideologization of theory among theorists in this tradition.

## 1. Promise and limits of an 'autonomist' class analysis

To understand the workerist and the subsequent 'autonomist Marxist' take on class we need to go back to the emergence of the current's key theoretical concepts.

### 1.1 Classical Workerism

The origins of *operaismo* lie in research carried out on workers' behaviour in the 1950s. The concern of the research was with workers' own needs and perceptions: their definitions of their problems on the shopfloor, and the nature of their struggles. Wright (p. 63) cites the following as

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ployed, indigenous peoples, trade unionists, peasant groups, women's networks, the landless, students, peace activists and many more". See bak.spc.org

<sup>3</sup> In political discourse in the UK, 'workerism' is usually a derogatory term for approaches we disagree with for fetishizing the significance of workplace struggles (and dismissing those outside the workplace). Italian *operaismo*, on the other hand, refers to the inversion of perspective from that of the operation of capital to that of the working class: "We too have worked with a concept that puts capitalist development first, and workers second. This is a mistake. And now we have to turn the problem on its head, reverse the polarity, and start from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class. At the level of socially developed capital, capitalist development becomes subordinated to working class struggles; it follows behind them, and they set the pace to which the political mechanisms of capital's own reproduction must be tuned." (M. Tronti, 1964, 'Lenin in England', in *Working Class Autonomy and the Crisis* (London: Red Notes/Conference of Socialist Economists, 1979). While the Italian usage is clearly positive rather than negative, as we shall see, one of the eventual limits of (versions of) Italian workerism was precisely the fetishizing of struggles on the factory floor.

the core features of the workerist perspective emerging from this research: the identification of the working class with the labour subsumed to the immediate process of production; an emphasis on the wage struggle as a key terrain of political conflict; and the insistence that the working class was the driving force within capitalist society.<sup>3</sup> All these features were a reaction against, and the basis for a developed alternative to, the productivist reformism and (bourgeois) politics of the traditional (Stalinist) left, i.e. the PCI (the Italian Communist Party, by far the largest Communist Party in Western Europe). For the PCI, 'politics' was conducted primarily through parliament (and the union bureaucracy). By contrast, in stressing the significance of workers' own struggles within industries, the workerists rejected the classical Leninist distinction between 'political' and 'economic' struggles.

Through relating workerist theory to the context of the struggles through which it emerged, *Storming Heaven* examines workerism's most well-known category — that of class composition, which Wright (p. 49) defines as the various behaviours which arise when particular forms of labour-power are inserted in specific processes of production. operaismo also introduced the concept of the mass worker, which describes the subject identified through the research on the FIAT and Olivetti factories. What characterizes the mass worker is its relatively simple labour; its place at heart of immediate process of production; and its lack of the bonds which had tied skilled workers to production (Wright, p. 107).

## 1.2. Workerism beyond workers

As Cleaver points out, the traditional Marxian analysis, and political practice, understands production and work itself as neutral. The aim is to take over the means of production, and run them 'in the interests of the workers', to the ends of a fairer distribution. However, the research on FIAT and Olivetti had shown that the division of labour, and the definition of skills, operated as a process of domination rather than being a technical matter. The workerists therefore proposed concepts intended to grasp this non-neutrality of factory organization and machinery. Particularly important here is the work of Panzieri, who had argued that, unlike the reformist Stalinists, the working class recognized the unity of the 'technical' and 'despotic' moments of the organization of production.<sup>4</sup> Such concepts pointed to the limitations of workers' self-management which could be seen to be merely the self-management of one's own domination.

Tronti developed this line of analysis with the notion of the social factory. The idea of the factory as locus of power was extended to the wider society as a whole which was seen to be organized around the same principles of domination and value (re)production.<sup>5</sup> The implication of this was that, since social organization in society is not neutral, then resistance outside the factory could be a valid moment of the class struggle.

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<sup>4</sup> "The new 'technical bases' progressively attained in production provide capitalism with new possibilities for the consolidation of its power... But for this very reason, working-class overthrow of the system is a negation of the entire organization in which capitalist development is expressed — and first and foremost of technology as it is linked to productivity." R. Panzieri, 'The Capitalist Use of Machinery: Marx versus the Objectivists' in P. Slater ed., *Outlines of a Critique of Technology* (London: Ink Links), pp. 49–60.

<sup>5</sup> "At the highest level of capitalist development, the social relation becomes a moment of the relation of production, the whole of society becomes an articulation of production; in other words, the whole of society exists as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive domination over the whole of society. It is on this basis that the machine of the political state tends ever-increasingly to become one with the figure of the collective capitalist." M. Tronti, *Operai e Capitale* (Turin: Einaudi 1971).

Yet the emphasis on those (factory) workers in the immediate process of production meant that operaismo was caught in a tension if not a contradiction. Tronti and others were unable to reconcile their notion of the social factory with the emphasis they wanted to place on what happened in large factories: even as they pointed beyond the mass worker, workerists continued to privilege the role of the factory proletariat.

Autonomia (the 'area of autonomy'), a loose network of groupings including and influenced by radical workerists, emerged in the 1970s, following the collapse of some of the workerist groups. This new movement also saw the influx of a lot of younger people; they were often university educated or working in small manufacturing or the service sector. They characteristically emphasized the localized and personal over class-wide struggle, need over duty, and difference over homogeneity (Wright, p. 197). They thus sought to stretch the concept of class composition beyond the immediate labour-process in the factories. They were also less committed to totalizing concepts of class and to their workplace identities; and they had less time for the PCI and the unions. Some of these tendencies found theoretical expression in Bologna's seminal 'The Tribe of Moles'.<sup>6</sup>

The most controversial theoretical development in this period was Toni Negri's argument that the mass worker had been replaced by what he called the socialized worker (*operaio sociale*). Negri's thesis was that capital, while maintaining the firm as the heart of its valorization process, drives toward a greater socialization of labour, going beyond the simple extension of the immediate process of production towards a complete redefinition of the category of productive labour. The extent of this category, according to Negri, was now "relative to the level of the advancement of the process of subsumption of labour to capital... [W]e can now say that the concept of wage labourer and the concept of productive labourer tend towards homogeneity", with the resulting constitution of "the new social figure of a unified proletariat".<sup>7</sup> In short, all moments of the circulation process, and even reproduction, were seen to be productive of value; the distinction between productive and non-productive labour was obliterated. While *Capital*, volume 1, assumes the reproduction of labour-power in the form of the family and education, Negri's theoretical innovation was to focus on this as a locus of struggle. Negri suggested that, historically, there had been a shift in emphasis after the end of the 1960s whereby capital adopted a strategy to avoid exclusive dependence on the traditional working class and to rely more heavily on the labour-power of social groups who were, at that time, marginal and less organized.<sup>8</sup> Thus he and his followers looked to the organized unemployed, the women's movement, the practice of self-reduction and the increasing instances of organized looting that characterised the Movement of 1977 as valid moments of anti-capitalist practice; the revolutionary process was understood as a pluralism of organs of proletarian self-rule (Wright, p. 173). As Wright discusses, Negri's account was criticized as ultimately too abstract because it identified power as the dimension linking all the social groups and practices referred to as constituting the socialized worker; this emphasis had the effect of flattening out differences between the different groups and practices. The redefinition of the category of productive labour is problematic for the same reason. Moreover, it led Negri to draw over-optimistic conclusions as to the class composition resulting from the real

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<sup>6</sup> S. Bologna (1977), 'The Tribe of Moles', in *Working Class Autonomy and the Crisis* (op. cit.).

<sup>7</sup> A. Negri (1973). 'Partito Operaio Contro il Lavoro', in S. Bologna et al., eds., *Crisi e Organizzazione Operaia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1974)

<sup>8</sup> See Negri's (1982) 'Archaeology and Project: The Mass Worker and the Social Worker', in *Revolution Retrieved: Selected Writings on Marx, Keynes, Capitalist Crisis & New Social Subjects 1967-83*. (London: Red Notes, 1988).

subsumption of labour to capital. The ‘socialized worker’ also seemed to change over time. At first, the socialized worker characteristically referred to precarious workers; later, as Negri’s perspective wavered with his disconnection from the movement, it was embodied in the ‘immaterial worker’, as exemplified by the computer programmer.<sup>9</sup>

The area of autonomy reached its zenith with the Movement of 1977. However, it wasn’t just the well-documented massive state repression, in the form of violence and imprisonment, that led to the breaking of *autonomia* and the collapse of workerism. The development of *autonomia* and the emphasis on extra-workplace struggles went hand in hand with the isolation of the radical workerists from the wider working class. It was this isolation and hence pessimism in the possibility of a wider movement that led many ultimately to end up back in the PCI – or to join the armed groups.

### 1.3 Cleaver’s account of the working class

One problem often raised against the communist project is that of the supposed disappearance of its agent – the working class. Marx’s conception of revolution is said to be linked with a class structure that was disappearing. This was a particularly pressing issue at the time Cleaver originally wrote *Reading ‘Capital’ Politically*, with Gorz’s *Farewell to the Working Class* and similar sociological analyses becoming fashionable. Cleaver offers a response to this by suggesting that the working class is just changing shape and is in fact everywhere.<sup>10</sup> For many of us, the most influential aspect of Harry Cleaver’s *Reading ‘Capital’ Politically* is less his ‘political’ account of the relation between value and struggles (which we discuss below) than his Introduction, in which a history of movements and ideas is used to develop an ‘autonomist’ conceptualization of the working class in opposition to that of traditional Marxism as well as to those who wanted to argue that the working class was disappearing. (In fact, while Cleaver’s book was photocopied and passed around by loads of people, most people we know only read the Introduction!)

Cleaver’s class analysis can be seen to follow on from Tronti’s concept of the social factory and Bologna’s ‘The Tribe of Moles’. Thus, in his account of developments in Italy, he suggests that the struggles of non-factory workers – predominantly women in this case – both embodied and clarified the new class composition (p. 71). ‘Community’ struggles around the self-reduction of rents and food and utility prices, he suggests, enabled these women participants to become more conscious of their own role in value-production. Hence their own autonomous activity could be grasped as an essential part of the class struggle, rather than being limited to the auxiliary role of supporting the wage-based struggles of their menfolk. Cleaver takes the Wages for Housework campaign as the highest expression of this development.

In the new preface to *Reading ‘Capital’ Politically*, Cleaver (pp. 16–17) elaborates on this account of the nature of class. Descriptively, an essential point here is the extension of the category of the working class to cover not only the waged but also the unwaged. Cleaver claims that this expanded definition is justified by historical research (e.g. Linebaugh’s *The London Hanged*<sup>11</sup>)

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<sup>9</sup> See ‘Decadence: The Theory of Decline or the Decline of Theory? Part II’, footnote 83, *Aufheben* 3 (Summer 1994).

<sup>10</sup> An opposite Marxian response to the ‘problem’ of the class basis of revolution, as provided by Moishe Postone in *Time, Labor and Social Domination* and the Krisis group, is to retain Marx’s work as a critique of commodity society and value but disconnect this from class.

<sup>11</sup> P. Linebaugh, *The London Hanged* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991).

which, it is suggested, shows in the political culture of artisans and others that the working class predates the predominance of the wage. Conceptually, the crux of Cleaver's argument is in terms of a social group's exploitation by, and hence struggles against, capital. Moreover, the struggles of the social group as such, rather than their subsumption within a general working class struggle, are taken to be significant for their self-transformative potential. For Cleaver, the ability of such social groups to re-create themselves in struggle points to a problem with traditional (narrow) definitions of the working class, which said nothing about this self-re-creation.<sup>12</sup> In line with the tradition of *autonomia*, Cleaver's account recognizes resistance to capital as an inherent feature of the majority of humanity, rather than — as in sociological and some Marxist accounts of Western class structure — limited to the industrial proletariat.

Cleaver's account of an 'autonomist' tradition of struggles and theories was important for us, as for many people seeking an adequate account of class struggle in the 1980s and '90s. But, re-reading Cleaver's definition of the working class now, and in particular the social groups he seeks to include (as social groups) within this definition, leads us to argue that his account is not sufficient as a class analysis. The question is whether exploitation is a feature of the social group he refers to as such, and therefore whether resistance is inherent for the group as such. Our argument is that there are differences and distinctions that matter within and between the social categories that Cleaver identifies as part of the working class. Wright argues that *operaismo* and *autonomia* employ concepts which serve to flatten out and lose important differences and distinctions in class analysis. Our point is that Cleaver is heir to this tendency.

To flesh this argument out, let us consider each of the social categories that Cleaver wants to (re-)define as part of the working class.

Before doing so, however, we need to stress here the inadequacy of playing the game of treating classes as categories into which we place people. For us, class is not a form of stratification but a social relation; rather than attempting to classify people we need to understand how class is formed, as a process, within a relationship of antagonism.<sup>13</sup> It is true that individuals are situated differently with regards the fundamental social relation of how labour is pumped out of the direct producers (and that identities and perceptions of interests linked with these identities can form

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<sup>12</sup> Negri introduced the term 'self-valorization' for this process of autonomous self-development. See Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the 'Grundrisse' (New York/London: Autonomedia/Pluto, 1991). The attraction of the concept lies in its implication that the working class is an active subject, not just a function of capital's valorization needs, and whose strategy is to take what it needs. However, in Marx, the concept of 'valorization' refers to capital's own operation — specifically, its use of our activity to expand value, that is, our alienated labour. It therefore seems extremely odd to employ it to refer to our activity against capital — unless that activity too is itself alienated in some way. In the preface to the second edition of *Reading 'Capital' Politically*, Cleaver acknowledges that the concept is problematic (as he does in his interview with Massimo de Angelis in *Vis-À-Vis*, 1993). However, he still uses it to explain that, in being against capital, autonomous struggles are also for 'a diverse variety of new ways of being'. See also his 'The Inversion of Class Perspective in Marxian Theory: From Valorization to Self-valorization' in W. Bonefeld, R. Gunn & K. Psychopedis eds., *Open Marxism: Volume II: Theory and Practice* (London: Pluto).

<sup>13</sup> The point is well put in 'Marianne Duchamp talks to Tursan Polat about Class': "First, there are differences, and not mere differences but oppositions of the first order, between the sociologic conception of socio-economic categories on the one hand and the hegelo-communist conception of social-class on the other. In the sociological conception, socio-economic categories, including 'class' and an inexhaustible number of constituent sub-strata, are defined: (a) beginning with the particular i.e. the individual, i.e. analytically/inductively; (b) as transtemporal aggregates of individuals who share commonalities of occupation, income, and even culture; (c) as static and normal presence within any society, i.e. biologically. In the hegelo-communist conception, social classes are defined: (a) beginning from the whole i.e. the social form i.e. synthetically/deductively; (b) as active bearers of the mutually opposed historical interests inherent within the social form; (c) with a view toward the abolition of state and economy; i.e. necrologically."

around these situations). But our argument with Cleaver's (re)classifications is inadequate in its own right, and needs to be read within a broader argument about class as a relation not (just) a stratum.

Cleaver states (p. 73):

The identification of the leading role of the unwaged in the struggles of the 1960s in Italy, and the extension of the concept [of working class political recomposition] to the peasantry, provided a theoretical framework within which the struggles of American and European students and housewives, the unemployed, ethnic and racial minorities, and Third World [sic] peasants could all be grasped as moments of an international cycle of working class struggle.

The unemployed

Organized unemployed struggles played a significant role in the Italian experience of the '70s – the Neapolitan movement for example was able to mobilize thousands of unemployed workers, becoming the region's central reference point for militant activity (Wright, p. 165). In these pages and in other publications, we have given much attention to such struggles, which for us are often over benefits, for the very simple reason that benefits are the other side of the coin of the working wage<sup>14</sup> (and because we ourselves have relied on benefits so much!). The unemployed are the lowest stratum of the proletariat – the most dispossessed – and are likely to have a background in the working class as such. In *Capital*, volume 1, Marx demonstrates that the unemployed are necessary to value-production. Since they are defined as a category by their relationship to the wage, the unemployed are obviously part of the working class. But Marx also makes clear how the unemployed function to instil discipline in those in work and hence put "a curb on their pretensions".<sup>15</sup> For traditional Marxism, the unemployed as such cannot play the same role as the industrial working class; they lack both the leverage and the potential for revolutionary class consciousness of those in work. In this perspective, unemployed struggles must necessarily be reduced to the role of tail-ending workers' strikes; any unemployed 'autonomy' could too easily take the form of scabbing.<sup>16</sup>

However, the functions of a social stratum for capital do not necessarily define the limits of the subjectivity associated with it. Historically, it has often been the least self-organized, or the least autonomous, among the unemployed who have scabbed. The unemployed are, among those Cleaver cites, the social group which can least controversially be defined as part of the working class.

'Race'

In the case of 'race' and ethnicity, what is being referred to here by Cleaver is the construction by capital of divisions within the working class in order to create and justify competition amongst workers. To the extent that 'racial' and ethnic identities are constructed, working class organization itself is 'racialized' or 'ethnicized'. In other words, it is because racialization and

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<sup>14</sup> See Dole Autonomy versus the Re-imposition of Work: Analysis of the Current Tendency to Workfare in the UK (now only available on our website), 'Unemployed Recalcitrance and Welfare Restructuring in the UK Today' in *Stop the Clock! Critiques of the New Social Workhouse and 'Re-imposition of Work in Britain and the "Social Europe"'*, *Aufheben* 8 (Autumn 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Penguin edition, p. 792.

<sup>16</sup> For example, in the 1930s, the Communist Party, which nominally controlled the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM), saw the NUWM's role as limited to tail-ending existing industrial strikes. The NUWM leaders, despite their membership of the CPGB, asserted the role of the unemployed movement to act in its own right. See Wal Hannington, *Unemployed Struggles 1919–1936: My Life and Struggles Amongst the Unemployed* (Wakefield: EP Publishing 1936).



ethnicity is part of way that class division is constructed and the working class decomposed that people might use 'racial' and ethnic identities as a basis for organizing against capital. Blacks and those other ethnic minorities who organize and resist autonomously do so because they, as a social stratum, experience class more harshly, and are more often located at the proletarian pole of the class relation; and this is because of the way 'blackness' and 'whiteness' have been socially constructed (in the USA). Those ethnic minorities which do not engage in such autonomous action tend to be those that are more socially mobile; i.e. in US terms they become 'white'.

Particularly in the USA,<sup>17</sup> blacks are atypical of ethnic and 'racial' groups: always at the bottom of the pile, even in relation to other ethnic minorities. Blacks are the prototype of the working class; and the black middle class is the exception that proves the rule.

#### Women

The emergence of women as collective subjects of social change contributed to a reassessment of operaismo's class analysis (Wright, p. 133). In particular, women's demands for a universal social wage were seen to point to a solution to the limits of the over-emphasis on the working wage (Wright, pp. 123, 135). Some in autonomia, such as the Rosso group, began to talk of the emergence of a 'new female proletariat'; for them, along with the unemployed, feminists were seen as integral components of the new social subject – the 'socialized worker'.

Likewise, for Cleaver, women are a key example of a social category that, through their struggles, should be grasped as part of the working class – in particular 'housewives' demanding wages for their work of reproducing labour-power.<sup>18</sup> From our perspective, it is clear that it is working class women – defined here in terms of the class position of their family – who are more likely to be involved in such struggles. Better-off women are less likely to need and want the 'transitional demand' of a wage, and can achieve 'autonomy' individually (through pursuing a career) rather than needing to organize collectively. Moreover, the form through which women have challenged exploitative gender relations has varied historically. The identification and questioning of women's roles that emerged in the 1960s was part of a theorization and challenge to the reproduction of capitalist society more broadly, and hence tended to be expressed as a movement of social change. But, particularly since the retreat of the wider class struggle, feminism has instead tended to be an ideology justifying either a reduction of the political to the personal (with no link to social transformation) or a vehicle for middle class women's careerism. Without being grounded in – rather than trying to form the basis of – a class analysis, the emphasis of the struggles of women as women inevitably risks this dead-end.

#### Peasants

Cleaver's inclusion of peasant struggles as part of the working class differentiates him from statements in classical workerism. Although the early workerists recognised that peasant struggles could contribute to working class internationalism, they also suggested that the two should not be confused, and that the 'salvation' of peasants ultimately lay with their counterparts in the more developed parts of the world (Wright, p. 66).

To state that peasant struggles are in effect working class struggles at least serves to convey something about the social location of the peasant in a capitalist world and the consequences of their actions for the broader class struggle. Despite not depending exclusively upon a wage,

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<sup>17</sup> American black struggles inspired the Italian workerists: "American Blacks do not simply represent, but rather are, the proletariat of the Third World within the very heart of the capitalist system... Black Power means therefore the autonomous revolutionary organisation of Blacks" (Potere Operaio Veneto-Emilano, 1967, cited in Wright, p. 132).

<sup>18</sup> An examination (and critique) of the issues around the Dalla Costa & Selma James pamphlet *The Power of*

peasants' work is often commodified; the way they produce goods is subject to the demands of the world market. Hence some peasants' attempts in some sense to act like 'the working class' — i.e., collectively to resist capital's requirements.

But Cleaver's redefinition of 'peasants' as part of the wider working class glosses significant differences within this heterogeneous social category. The term 'peasant' covers a multitude of economic positions: there are varying degrees of communal relations, varying degrees of production for the market (versus for subsistence), varying extents to which some are moving towards the capitalist class, and varying degrees to which peasants engage in wage labour. It is for this reason that 'peasants' as such do not act like and therefore cannot simply be lumped in with a broad working class.

Even if we take it that Cleaver simply means the majority of peasants who have no chance of becoming capitalist farmers, there is nevertheless a logic to their struggles which characteristically prevents them from constituting themselves as the negation of capital. The peasant is defined by a relationship to the land, and land is characteristically the issue over which peasants struggle. Given this, the successes of peasant struggles are also their limits. In the case of the wage, a quantitative success (more money) preserves the qualitative relationship of alienation but can point to its supersession: victory is still unsatisfactory but any setback for the capitalist class may suggest the vulnerability of the capital relation itself. But a victory in a struggle over land is an end in itself which thereby impels no higher level of struggle. There is no essential imperative in land struggles to abolish land ownership itself. As we argued in a previous issue of *Aufheben*, while we might acknowledge the revolutionary subjectivity of peasant-based struggles such as that of the Chiapas Indians, the peasant condition entails a conservative stability in social relations. Peasant resistance tends to reflect external threat rather than internal class antagonism. Consequently, the form of that resistance may often entail alliances between small private farmers and those who depend on communal landholdings — or even between a peasant mass and a leftist-nationalist and urban-based leadership.<sup>19</sup> Thus, we do not see the resolution of 'the agrarian (i.e., peasant) problem' simply in 'autonomous' peasant struggles, nor, obviously, in the proletarianization of the peasantry; rather, with Marx<sup>20</sup> (and Camatte),<sup>21</sup> we might look to a revolution in which peasant communal possibilities are aided by a wider proletarian uprising at the heart of capitalist power.

#### Students

For workerist groups such as *Potere Operaio* (Workers' Power), student struggles had to be subordinated to those of factory workers. But student movements were a part of both the Hot Autumn of 1969 and the Movement of 1977, and were important for workerism's attempt to

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Women and the Subversion of Community, the 'Wages for Housework' demand and more recent discussions (e.g. Fortunadi's *The Arcane of Reproduction*) would be useful, but is beyond the scope of the present article.

<sup>19</sup> See 'A Commune in Chiapas? Mexico and the Zapatista Rebellion', *Aufheben* 9 (2000), especially pp. 20–22. While we took Holloway as the academic Marxist overestimating the working class and revolutionary significance of the Zapatista rebellion, Cleaver represents this tendency even more clearly. His refusal to consider criticisms of the Zapatistas and Marcos come across as just as ideological as previous Marxist defences of 'actually existing socialism'. For example: "a woman said of the '96 *encuentros*: 'the women [were] doing all the cooking and cleaning, including of toilets, invariably without any footwear (the men had the boots), even after the heavy rainfall... Harry Cleaver said 'Well, maybe they like it'..." (cited in *You Make Plans — We Make History*, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> See T. Shanin ed., *Late Marx and the Russian Road* (London: Routledge, 1983); and T. Shanin, *The Awkward Class* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

<sup>21</sup> J. Camatte (1972) *Community and Communism in Russia*.

theorize the proletarianization of intellectual labour.<sup>22</sup> One of the interesting developments of the Hot Autumn was the appropriation of a faculty building at the Turin Medical College for the purpose of a permanent general assembly.<sup>23</sup> The 1977 Movement involved practical attempts to link workers and students both organizationally and in terms of demands such as the generalized wage, which was seen as a way of enabling more working class young people access to university.

Cleaver's categorization of students as part of the working class might be seen as somewhat prescient since the gulf between university students and others in the labour market has narrowed in recent years. As more students gain degrees, so the value of the degree decreases and the jobs that graduates go into may often be no more privileged or well-paid than those of their more basically-educated counterparts. Graduate unemployment is higher now than ever.

However, these are only tendencies. Students are overwhelmingly middle class in terms of their family background (income, values and expectations) and their destinations. In line with the notion of the social factory, Cleaver deals with such considerations by defining students' education as work to reproduce the commodity of labour-power.<sup>24</sup> But their work as students is more than, and different from, the simple reproduction of just any labour-power. In the first place, the end product of the work of the university student isn't necessarily skills at all but rather a qualification, the point of which is just to provide access to more privileged occupations. What is being reproduced, therefore, is hierarchy within the workforce — a division of labour to enhance competition. This process is also ideological to the extent that its beneficiaries internalize and identify with the resultant hierarchical division — believing that they deserve their privilege, and that only a talented and hard-working minority can achieve their kind of status. Second, the 'skills' that are reproduced through university education are not only those of supervision and management, but also (for those graduating in the humanities and social sciences) those of classifying, bullshitting and playing a role — all of which don't make sense outside of alienated social relations.

In focusing on autonomy and its possible consequences for capital, Cleaver's redefinition of student struggles as working class therefore loses some important features of this social category.<sup>25</sup> It is an overly cynical point of view, perhaps, to state that 'student radicals' mostly end up pursuing the same well-paid establishment careers as their parents; but the moment of truth in such a claim lies in the fact that there is no equivalent expectation for young working class radicals mostly to end up becoming managers! Unlike students, the young working class (in working class jobs) don't usually have the same choice.

Whatever happened to the middle class?

The 'middle class' is a label largely absent from Reading 'Capital' Politically, which is because for Cleaver it largely doesn't exist, except perhaps sociologically. The 'autonomist Marxist' argu-

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<sup>22</sup> "The student was already a proletarian by virtue of a subordinate location within the university division of labour. To the extent that existing stipends became a fully-fledged wage, she would be transformed from an 'impure social figure on the margins of the valorisation process' into a fully-fledged 'wage worker producing surplus value'" (Cazzaniga et al., 1968, cited in Wright, p. 95).

<sup>23</sup> See 'The Worker-Student Assemblies in Turin, 1969' in *Working Class Autonomy and the Crisis* (op. cit.).

<sup>24</sup> An irony of such an approach is that it implies that the right thing for them to do is be bad students, yet Cleaver himself has been a good student and gathers other such good students around him.

<sup>25</sup> In fact, a focus on the side of struggle today might lead Cleaver to re-re-define students as middle class after all. With the wider retreat of collective proletarian resistance, and even as more people have entered university from working class backgrounds, so the incidence of overt struggles in the universities has declined.

ment seems to be that, in conditions of the ‘social factory’, the middle classes are just a sector of the working class.

On the one hand, Cleaver’s analysis again reflects real tendencies. In a number of domains, middle class work has been de-skilled and proletarianized. Casualization, once limited only to working class jobs, has now come to many in the middle classes. Moreover, many salaries, particularly in the public sector, have increasingly lost value over the past 20 years or so. At the same time, the salaries of those at the top end of the middle classes, and particularly in the private sector (e.g., accountants, lawyers and the various types of ‘consultant’), have continued to rise. Hence, as a shared identity assumed by people whose conditions vary widely – from white-collar workers in insecure jobs with salaries lower than their blue-collar counterparts, to executives and senior managers – the ‘middle class’ as a whole is to say the least a problematic category if not a mystification. In the USA, Cleaver’s home country, the term is even more problematic due to the (self)description of large sections of the (white) working class as ‘middle class’.

On the other hand, to take these disjunctions, anomalies and tendencies to mean that the category ‘middle class’ can be dispensed with is one-sided. The analytic subsumption of most of the middle classes within the working class is one-sided because it loses the explanatory power of the middle class as a category.

Here again, we would argue, Cleaver’s analysis reflects the limits of the approach he is heir to. As Wright argues, for all its vital contributions to our understanding of struggle, one of the problems with *autonomia* and *operaismo* more broadly is the way it misrepresents one tendency as standing for the totality. In the same way, Cleaver misrepresents a particular tendency as a characteristic of the class situation as a whole.

While tendencies to proletarianization might push many of the middle classes toward throwing in their lot with the working class, there are other features of the middle class condition as such which operate in the other direction. What is absent from Cleaver’s class analysis is an acknowledgement of the ties that bind the middle class individual to his role or class position and hence to the alienated world that gives rise to that role and class position.

One feature which distinguishes the middle class from the working class, and which has consequences for the possibility of revolutionary practice and subjectivity, is the presence or absence of a career structure. While wages in working class occupations typically rise to a relatively early peak and then plateau off, middle class salaries more typically develop in continual increments within which the middle class individual can foresee a future of continually rising income and enhanced status. In effect, the longer she carries on and sticks to the job, the relatively less interest the middle class individual has in escaping since the greater comfort the job provides him or her. Because the working class job typically provides no such prospect, the imperative to escape remains a lifespan constant.

Second, while pride in one’s role can arise in many types of occupation, middle class jobs often engender an identification of a type which is characteristically absent in the case of working class jobs. Such middle class identification has consequences for the form taken by resistance – and for whether resistance takes place at all. The academic, social worker, lawyer etc. may wish to attack capital but they characteristically do so by premising their resistance on the continued existence

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<sup>26</sup> In fact, for many Marxist academics, the prefix ‘radical’ has now been replaced by ‘critical’, reflecting the general retreat of the class struggle which for the intelligentsia takes the form of a (still further) retreat into the realm of ideas and arguments.

of their own role in a way unthinkable to the working class individual. Thus there are radical psychologists, radical philosophers, radical lawyers and so on,<sup>26</sup> but not radical bricklayers or radical roadsweepers! The latter are simply radical people who wish to escape their condition. By contrast, the former wish to engage in the struggle while at the same time retaining their middle class identities, including their specialized skills and roles. As such, their participation presupposes rather than fundamentally challenges the institutions and social relations that provide the basis of these identities.<sup>27</sup> It is no coincidence, it seems to us, that the leading figures of a post-autonomia scene which rejects (or at least neglects) the situationists' critique of roles and academia, and which redefines all areas of life – including academia – as working class, are themselves academics.<sup>28</sup>

Some groups, such as the professionals – doctors, lawyers, academics – who retain control of entry into their profession, should obviously be defined as middle class. But there are other groups for which the situation is less clear-cut. For the most part dealing with the thorny issue of class, and in particular the status of the middle classes, is inevitable messy. This is because class is a process not a box into which we can simply categorize people, as in sociology.<sup>29</sup> In Argentina, for example, we are seeing a process where middle class identity breaks down; but to understand this it is necessary to recognise that such an identity exists and has a material basis. As we see it, the problem with the way Cleaver flattens out everything into the working class is precisely the absence of class composition and decomposition as a process. Class (composition) involves a constant dynamic of proletarianization and 'embourgeoisment'. But if these poles are not recognized – and if the middle classes are understood as already working class – class composition appears only as a static given.

#### **1.4 Autonomy as basis or function of working class composition?**

As we have seen, Cleaver's fundamental point is that the unwaged, and hence the other social categories he refers to, are part of the working class only insofar as capital has sought to exploit and alienate their unwaged labour or particular condition, and since these unwaged and other categories are now fighting back against capital. It is their struggle not their social category

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<sup>27</sup> This point was ably made in Refuse (BM Combustion 1978): "The 'opposition' by counter-specialists to the authoritarian expertise of the authoritarian experts offers yet another false choice to the political consumer. These 'radical' specialists (radical lawyers, radical architects, radical philosophers, radical psychologists, radical social workers – everything but radical people) attempt to use their expertise to de-mystify expertise. The contradiction was best illustrated by a Case Con 'revolutionary' social worker, who cynically declared to a public meeting, 'The difference between us and a straight social worker is that we know we're oppressing our clients'. Case Con is the spirit of a spiritless situation, the sigh of the oppressed oppressor, it's the 'socialist' conscience of the guilt ridden social worker, ensuring that vaguely conscious social workers remain in their job while feeling they are rejecting their role... The academic counter-specialists attempt to attack (purely bourgeois) ideology at the point of production: the university. Unwilling to attack the institution, the academic milieu, the very concept of education as a separate activity from which ideas of separate power arise, they remain trapped in the fragmented categories they attempt to criticise... In saying social workers are just like any other worker, he [the Case Con social worker] conveniently ignores the authority role that social workers intrinsically have, plus the fact that when they participate in the class struggle they don't do so by 'radicalizing' their specific place in the division of labour (e.g. radical dockers, radical mechanics) but be revolting against it." (pp. 10–11, 23).

<sup>28</sup> See 'A Commune in Chiapas? Mexico and the Zapatista Rebellion', footnote 33, *Aufheben* 9 (2000).

<sup>29</sup> "we cannot understand class unless we see it as a social and cultural formation, arising from processes which can only be studied as they work themselves out over a considerable historical period." E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1963).

membership as such that makes them part of the working class. Thus the key for Cleaver is autonomous action against capital.

As such, Cleaver is again consistent with the tradition that has come out of workerism, which sought to distinguish itself and go beyond the poverty of traditional Marxism through focusing on precisely the independent or autonomous activity of workers in struggle; their collective activity and organization of resistance was shown to occur without the mediation of the party or union — or even in opposition to them. Antagonism itself, in the form of autonomy, was thus the basis of class analysis.

In the sixties, the workerists subsumed the specificity of different working class locations and experiences to those of the mass worker. In the seventies, Negri's work threatened to dissolve even this partially concrete understanding of class into a generic proletariat, the 'socialized worker'. Bologna in 'The tribe of moles' identified new subjective determinations of class: "Classes have tended to lose their 'objective' characteristics and become defined in terms of political subjectivity".<sup>30</sup> For Bologna, questions of social and cultural identity, of acceptance or refusal to accept the norms of social behaviour required by the state, now played a role in the reproduction of classes. These new determinants were said to be evidenced in "the continuous reproduction and invention of systems of counter-culture and struggle in the sphere of everyday living, which has become ever more illegal".

In fact, Negri and others abandoned the central investigative approach of the workerists — that of examining the relationship between 'material conditions of exploitation' and 'political behaviours'. As Wright discusses, the radical workerists overemphasized the subjective, the "will of destruction" (Potere Operaio, 1972, cited in Wright, p. 138), as judged, *post festum*, from an analysis of the struggle rather than location in the labour process. The abandonment of the material determinants of class composition leaves unresolved the question of how the different subjects, or strata of the class, recognize themselves and each other as proletariat, the universal revolutionary class.

For us, the reason why different groups organize autonomously against capital is because they are already proletarian (or, at least, being proletarianized). Antagonism arises because of class. It is implicit in our arguments above in relation to the different social categories referred to by Cleaver that the possibility of 'autonomy' may be necessary but it is not sufficient for a class analysis. 'Autonomy' requires, and therefore cannot be the basis of, a proper class analysis: the subjective requires the objective.

## 2. Beyond leftism?<sup>31</sup>

It was a vital insight of workerism to see workers' refusal to participate in union-sponsored token strikes not as the absence of class conflict but as evidence of their autonomy. In debates today about the state of the class struggle, the danger is to take such 'passivity' as just a refusal of representation when it might in fact be doubled-edged: at the same time as being an expression of

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<sup>30</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> 'Leftism' is a concept we find useful but is perhaps tricky to define. It can be thought of in terms of those practices which echo some of the language of communism but which in fact represent the movement of the left-wing of capital. However, for us an important point is to get away from the picture in which there is a pure class struggle only interfered with and prevented from generating communism by the interference of an exterior force (from the bourgeoisie) of leftism. A question arises of why the class struggle allows itself to be so diverted. It is important to

hostility to capital it might also entail a paralysing fatalism. However, a weakness of workerism was not an exaggerated sense of the significance of workers' autonomous antagonism not only to capital but to the institutional left; rather it was an unwillingness or inability to reconcile their insights with their conceptions of organization. Time and again, the same theorists who provided us with the theoretical tools for a new approach caution us to be modest in our understandings of workers' struggles. For example, Panzieri stressed that sabotage merely expressed workers' political defeat (Wright, p. 61); and Classe Operaia ('Working Class') suggested that spontaneous struggles were not enough (Wright, p. 69). While we agree that different particular struggles need to be linked up if they are to go beyond themselves, there is a crucial question of the nature of this organization and how it may arise. For the most part, the workerists tended to fetishize formal organizational structure in a way which reflected their Leninist origins.

In the first place, there was for a long time an unwillingness to cut the ties to the PCI. Thus, Tronti continued to argue for the necessity of working within the PCI in order to 'save' it from reformism. Tronti was not typical and ultimately abandoned workerism; but Potere Operaio too maintained links with the PCI until the events of France 1968, and even then still saw itself as Leninist. And Negri, despite having written about the contradiction within autonomia between those who privileged 'the movement' and the champions of a 'Leninist' conception of organization, affirmed his commitment to the necessity of the Leninist Party even during the events of 1977 (Wright, p. 214).

In part, autonomia emerged as a grouping of militants who felt the need to criticize Leninist forms of organization and practice (including the formal party structure), placing emphasis instead on class needs: "To articulate such needs, organization was to be rooted directly in factories and neighbourhoods, in bodies capable both of promoting struggles managed directly by the class itself, and of restoring to the latter that 'awareness of proletarian power which the traditional organisations have destroyed'" (Comitati Autonomi Operai, 1976, cited in Wright p. 153). Ultimately, however, as Bologna argued, autonomia failed in this regard, reverting to a vanguardism which forgot that "organisation is obliged to measure itself day by day against the new composition of the class; and must find its political programme only in the behaviour of the class and not in some set of statutes."<sup>32</sup>

Despite their attempt to escape the 'political', the workerists themselves were in fact caught up in a politicism, in that they both constantly tried to express the social movement's needs in terms of unifying political demands and were forever trying to reinvent the party. Although they innovated in some ways, with ideas like the armed party, their conception of organization remained Leninist in its fetishism of formal organizational structure, and showed little sense of Marx's quite different conception of the (historical) party.<sup>33</sup> As such, a proper critique of the left and of leftism was still not developed. This problem is reproduced in current versions of the workerist approach.

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recognize that, though some leftists are clearly part of the bourgeoisie or at least of the state, the power of leftism/trade unionism etc. comes from the fact that the working class generates leftism from within itself as an expression of its own current limits.

<sup>32</sup> 'The Tribe of Moles', op cit., p. 89.

<sup>33</sup> For Marx formal organizations were only episodes in "the history of the party which is growing spontaneously everywhere from the soil of modern society." Quoted in J. Camatte, *Origin and Function of the Party Form*. Camatte's discussion there in a sense takes the discourse on the party to the extreme where it dissolves, allowing his later perspectives of this in *On Organization*.

Our argument is that, if the concept of autonomy is insufficient for a class analysis, it is also inadequate — in the sense of being too open or ambiguous — for a critique of leftism. Whose ‘autonomous struggle’ is it? The emphasis on autonomy itself, and the consequent absence of an adequate critique of the left, has meant that some of the inheritors of the tradition are uncritical of nationalism.<sup>34</sup>

Cleaver (p. 25) states “The [Vietnam] antiwar movement joined many of these diverse struggles, and its linkage with the peasants of Southeast Asia became complete with the slogan of ‘Victory to the NLF [National Liberation Front]’ and with the flying of Vietcong flags from occupied campus buildings.” In relation to this, the idea of ‘circulation of struggles’, which refers to how struggle in one area inspires that in another, certainly described something of the social movements of the ‘60s and ‘70s (though we’d also have to acknowledge the reverse process whereby defeat of one section after another discouraged the rest). But such a concept is inadequate in itself if it means, for example, that the struggles of the Vietnamese peasants are considered without referring to the nationalist and Stalinist frame in which they took place, and if it means treating uncritically the way that an anti-imperialist ideology dominated the minds of the students (i.e. they tended to see the western proletariat as irretrievably ‘bought off’ and themselves as a front for the ‘Third World’).<sup>35</sup> Harry Cleaver’s ‘autonomist Marxist’ treatment of leftists and nationalists is reflected currently in his uncritical attitude to the Zapatistas.<sup>36</sup> In Cleaver’s texts there isn’t a proper critique of the role of leftism and nationalism in struggles because such expressions are considered — equally with the struggles of ‘housewives’, students, the unemployed and the industrial proletariat — moments of autonomy to the extent that they appear to challenge the capitalist strategy of imposing work within particular national and international frameworks. Any criticism of nationalism in struggles, as in the case of Zapatistas, is dismissed by him as ideological or dogmatic.

Given their necessary antipathy to the project of the negation of capital, the ‘autonomy’ of leftist and nationalist tendencies must mean their subsumption and indeed crushing of proletarian autonomy! This analytic gap, through which the forces inherently opposed to working class self-organization can emerge as equivalents to that working class self-organization, appears to be a function of the failure of the autonomia tendency to make quite the radical break from Leninism which is sometimes claimed for it, and which Cleaver has inherited (despite the fact that, unlike Negri, he has never endorsed any party). At its worst, far from being an alternative to a leftism in which political representation and nationalism are supported as vehicles of ‘revolution’, ‘autonomist Marxism’ can end up being just another variety of such uncritical leftism. While they may reject the idea of the formal party, the ‘autonomists’ still seek to formulate political demands for autonomous struggles in a similar way to the leftists.

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<sup>34</sup> Wright (p. 66) suggests that the earlier workerists had no time for the left’s Third Worldism and support for nationalist struggles. However, a front cover of *Potere Operaio* magazine from the 1970s called for victory to the PLO-ETA-IRA.

<sup>35</sup> This (moralistic) attitude of cheer-leading ‘Third World’ (national liberation) struggles and contempt for the Western working class was an expression of the middle class social relations characteristic of these students.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, [lanic.utexas.edu](http://lanic.utexas.edu)



### 3. Negotiating the ‘law of value’

A further workerist tension reproduced in Cleaver’s book is that surrounding the status of the ‘law of value’. On the one hand, the very emphasis on workers at the sharp end of the immediate process of production appears to speak of a commitment to the centrality of value-production in the explanation of the dynamic of class struggle. On the other hand, the seeds of a revisionist approach were sewn as early as 1970, when Potere Operaio argued that class struggle had broken free of the bounds of accumulation; the mass worker was said to have disrupted the functioning of the law of value, forcing capital to rely more and more on the state (p. 137). Potere Operaio cited the Hot Autumn as the turning point, but their analysis was prompted by a revolt in the second half of 1970 among the population of Reggio Calabria against proposed changes to the city’s regional status which seemed to speak of a widespread violent rejection of the institutions. This line of reasoning was developed by Negri, who was led by his understanding of the crisis as a product of class antagonism to argue that the law of value was being superseded by relations of direct political confrontation between classes,<sup>37</sup> and that money now needed to be understood in terms of its function as ‘command’.<sup>38</sup> Subsequent to this, a distinctive feature of those influenced by the *autonomia* tradition is the stress on the class struggle as a struggle not in relation to value but for control over work: imposing it or resisting it.

A major thrust of the whole American ‘autonomist’ scene has been to argue not to follow Negri too far. But it seems to us that Cleaver’s attempt to both embrace certain post-*autonomia* and ‘heretical’ ideas that go ‘beyond Marx’ while at the same time claiming fidelity to Capital gives rise to ambiguities in relation to this question of value.

Thus, on the one hand, *Reading ‘Capital’ Politically* suggests, at least in a footnote, that control is always tied to value; and in the second edition of the book, against those (‘autonomists’) who forget, Cleaver re-iterates that the labour theory of value is the “indispensable core” of Marx’s theory (p. 11). On the other hand, throughout *Reading ‘Capital’ Politically*, food and energy (Cleaver’s main examples) appear essentially as means to struggle for control itself rather than value-producing sectors; and work appears as a means of control in its own right:

the ultimate use-value of the work, which is the use-value of labour-power, is its role as the fundamental means of capitalist social control. For the capitalist to be able to impose work is to retain social control. But the use-value of labour-power for capital is also its ability to produce value and surplus-value. (p. 100)

The use of the word ‘also’ seems indicative of the relative weighting given to control over value as an explanation for the dynamics of class struggle.

We accept that, although capital essentially treats all use-values as arbitrary sources for valorization, capital cannot be unconcerned with the particularities of use-values. Thus Cleaver is right, for example, to point back to the moment of primitive accumulation where capital creates the working class by driving peasants off the land and thus their source of food. Moreover, with contemporary features like the Common Agricultural Policy and similar measures in other countries, it is true that the special use-value of food (and the political significance of classes engaged in food production) has led to it being perhaps more subject to strategic planning measures by capital-in-general in the form of the state and supranational bodies.

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<sup>37</sup> See ‘Crisis of the Planner-State: Communism and Revolutionary Organization’ (1971) in *Revolution Retrieved* (op. cit.).

<sup>38</sup> Though we like his phrase “money is the face of the boss”.

Retrospectively, however, it now appears to us that the politicization of the prices of food and energy — their appearance as manipulated instruments of struggle between self-conscious capitalist and working class subjects — was a particular feature of the crisis conditions of the 1970s (e.g. the energy crisis and the focus on inflation state intervention in bargaining between the working class and capital). Cleaver, like others in the post-autonomia tradition, uses these historically specific moments in the class struggle to make generic points. In the present period, there has been a ‘depoliticization’ of these price issues in conditions of low inflation; and the ideological model has been that ‘there is no alternative’ to the ‘globalized’ market.

As we have argued in these pages before, there is a problem with the abandonment of the law of value by theorists identifying with autonomia.<sup>39</sup> On our reading of Marx, and our understanding of capital, capital as a whole comes to constitute itself as such out of disparate and indeed conflicting elements. The conceptualization of capital as a subject in conflict with the working class subject, each with their distinctive strategies (‘imposition of work’ versus ‘refusal of work’), which Cleaver ultimately shares with Negri,<sup>40</sup> if taken as more than a shorthand or metaphor, suggests an already-unified capital. Capital as a subject can have a strategy only to the extent that there is a (price-fixing) conspiracy among the different capitals or that one particular capital (who? US capital? The World Bank?) agrees to act as capital-in-general in the same way that a national government acts for the national capitalist interest. Capital as a totality of course has its interests; but these — all founded on the need to exploit the working class as hard as possible — arise from and operate precisely through its conflicting elements: the competition between individual capitals. Capital may attain more consciousness at times of heightened class conflict, and this consciousness may become institutionalized. But capital is not essentially a conscious subject.

#### 4. Grasping retreat

Tronti famously argued that each successful capitalist attack upon labour only displaces class antagonism to a higher, more socialized level (Wright, p. 37). Following this, Negri, Cleaver and others in and influenced by the autonomia current stress the role of working class struggle in driving capital forward. Working class activity is seen not (just) as a response to the initiatives of capital but as the very motor of capitalist development — the prime mover.<sup>41</sup> In this account, capitalist crisis — the shutting down of industries, mass unemployment and austerity — means that working class struggle simply changes form rather than retreats. Class struggle is argued to be ubiquitous and manifold in form.

This perspective therefore offers a valuable corrective to traditional Marxism’s objectivist account of the workings of capital. Traditional Marxism’s frozen and fetishized conceptions of class struggle could lead one to wonder where resistance has gone and whether it will ever reappear. By contrast, ‘autonomist Marxism’ finds it everywhere.

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<sup>39</sup> See ‘Review: Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War, 1973–92’, *Aufheben* 3 (Summer 1994) and ‘Escape from the Law of Value?’, *Aufheben* 5 (Autumn 1996).

<sup>40</sup> See Cleaver’s useful summary of Negri’s position in his Introduction to Negri’s *Marx beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse* (New York/London: Autonomedia/Pluto Press, 1991).

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Toni Negri, ‘Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State post-1929’ in *Revolution Retrieved* (op. cit.).

However, we would suggest that workerism in general and Cleaver in particular perhaps bend the stick too far the other way. In arguing that class struggle is ‘everywhere’ and ‘always’, there is the explanatory problem of the evidence of historical retreats in class struggle, as well as the ‘political’ problem of responding to this retreat in practice. These problems are linked.

#### 4.1 Confronting the evidence of decomposition

In positing the ‘unity of abstract labour’ as the basis for the recomposition of the class, Negri almost welcomed the ‘disappearance’ of the mass worker and believed the defining moment of confrontation was approaching: “At the very moment when ‘the old contradiction’ seemed to have subsided, and living labour subsumed to capital, the entire force of insubordination coagulates in that final front which is the antagonistic and general permanence of social labour”.<sup>42</sup> At a time which could arguably be characterized as the beginning of capital’s counter-offensive of restructuring which resulted in a decomposition of the class, he gave an account of a massive process of recomposition — a qualitative leap in class unity. Wright (p. 167) concludes that this account did not match up to Italian experience of the time. There appears little evidence of the concrete unification between sectors upon which Negri’s whole argument rested; the fierce industrial struggles in the small factories of the North were cut off from other sectors of the class. Wright suggests that, in 1975–6, it was proletarian youth circles rather than the factory struggles that were making links across the wider working class. The workers of the large factories were in a state of ‘productive truce’ at best, rampant defeat at worst — and subordinate to the official labour movement, which had regained control in the factories after the explosion of autonomous struggles in 1969 and the years after. The unions’ commitment to tailor labour’s demands to the requirements of accumulation was mirrored in the political sphere by the PCI’s ‘historic compromise’ with the ruling Christian Democrats. The historic left, PCI and CGIL were committed to the ‘management’ of the nation’s economic difficulties.

Bologna (1976, cited in Wright, pp. 170–1) accused Negri and autonomia of “washing their hands of the mass worker’s recent difficulties”. He argued that there had been a “reassertion of reformist hegemony over the factories, one that is brutal and relentless in its efforts to dismember the class left”. Negri had failed to come to terms with the disarray and defeat of the mass worker and preferred instead to “ply the traditional trade of the theorist in possession of some grand synthesis”. The *Comitati Autonomi Operai*, the Roman wing of autonomia, also rejected Negri’s optimistic vision, and criticized his lack of an empirical basis for his abstractions, something which had been so important to the earlier workerists.<sup>43</sup>

In the intervening quarter of a century, little has happened, it seems to us, to bear out Negri’s optimistic prognosis. The mass worker has been decomposed through the flexibilization of labour, territorial disarticulation of production, capital mobility in the world market, the rationalization of production, decentralization; but the ‘socialized worker’ that has supposedly emerged from the ashes of the mass worker has not been visible as a new universal proletariat capable of

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<sup>42</sup> Negri *Proletari e Stato* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Milan: Feltrinelli, 1976).

<sup>43</sup> “Your interest for the ‘emergent strata’ (proletarian youth, feminists, homosexuals) and for new, and reconceptualised, political subjects (the ‘operaio sociale’) has always been and is still shared by us. But precisely the undeniable political importance of these phenomena demands extreme analytical rigour, great investigative caution, a strongly empirical approach (facts, data, observations and still more observations, data, facts).” (*Rivolta di classe*, 1976, cited in Wright, p. 171).

fundamentally challenging the capital relation. Decomposition just is decomposition sometimes, rather than necessarily being itself a recomposition.

The 'autonomist Marxism' of Cleaver and those close to his perspective argues that we need to acknowledge the validity of diverse and 'hidden' struggles (absenteeism, theft at work, various forms of work to rule etc.) which are alive and well, despite the decline of the older forms of overt collective resistance.<sup>44</sup> There is, of course, always resistance to the specific way in which surplus-labour is pumped out of the direct producers. However, the fact that the working class currently tends to resist in a mostly fragmented and individualized form — the fact that resistance is so fragmented or hidden — reflects the historic weakness of the class as a whole. The significance of this is that it is not clear how such hidden and individualized forms of resistance can in themselves necessarily take us to the point of no return. Unless they become overtly collective, they operate merely as a form of antagonism that capital can cope with if not recuperate. This is the moment of truth in Tronti and Panzieri's warnings about the limits of autonomous struggle.

## 4.2 Escaping the harness?

Linked to this issue of retreat is the question of whether the working class will be driving capital forward forever. Do the 'autonomists' argue too successfully that class struggle is the motor? If working class struggle is always harnessed by capital, how does it escape the harness?

The argument that class struggle is alive and well in manifold forms is empowering; but it risks ending up as a satisfaction with the current limits of the class struggle. The focus on the validity and importance of the (plurality of) autonomous struggles themselves can mean the abandonment of revolution as a totality. And as the possibility and necessity of total revolution fades, so reformist campaigns, premised upon the continued existence of the capital relation, become the focus. A symptom of this worst side of post-autonomia is illustrated in demands for a guaranteed income, which have allowed those influenced by autonomia to link up with other reformists in campaigns which have dovetailed with capital's current needs for welfare restructuring.<sup>45</sup> Although not all the major figures of autonomia or the 'autonomist Marxist' scene would endorse this ultimately conservative view of the adequacy of fragmentation, it is not inconsistent with an understanding of class struggle based around the concept of autonomy.

## 5. A political reading of Capital: From 20 yards of linen to the self-reduction of prices in one easy step

In his attempt to render a political reading of Marx's critique of political economy, Harry Cleaver is again following in the workerist tradition: Negri's 'Marx on cycle and crisis', which was written in 1968, is an earlier example of the attempt to connect Marx's categories with notions of strategy and struggle. However, a sub-text of Cleaver's book is his defence of the importance of Capital against the arguments made by (the later) Negri that, for the revolutionary project of our time, Capital is superseded by the Grundrisse. In Marx beyond Marx,<sup>46</sup> Negri argues that

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<sup>44</sup> For a good account of the extent of recent 'hidden' struggles in the US today, see Curtis Price's 'Fragile Prosperity? Fragile Social Peace: Notes on the US'.

<sup>45</sup> See the Wildcat article 'Reforming the Welfare State in Order to Save Capitalism' in Stop the Clock! Critiques of the New Social Workhouse (Aufheben, 2000).

<sup>46</sup> Op. cit.

Capital has served to reduce critique to economic theory, that the objectification of the categories in Capital functions to block action by revolutionary subjectivity and to subject the subversive capacity of the proletariat to the reorganizing and repressive intelligence of capitalist power. The point of Marx's critique as whole is not 'intellectual' but revolutionary; hence the Grundrisse, which is traversed throughout by an absolutely insurmountable antagonism, is, according to Negri, the key text and can even serve as a critique of the limits of Capital.

Cleaver's Reading 'Capital' Politically argues that the right way to read Capital and its fundamental categories such as value is 'strategically', from the perspective of the working class. Cleaver therefore contends that any 'blockage' is due only to the inadequate ways in which Capital has been read, and that the solution is to read it politically.

We can agree with Cleaver that, despite the power of the Grundrisse and its crucial indications that Marx's theoretical project was wider than the material which appears in Capital,<sup>47</sup> Capital is nevertheless the better presentation of the critique of political economy (as Marx himself clearly thought). But this is not the same as arguing that a 'political' reading of Capital is useful or even tenable. Our argument is that Cleaver's 'political' reading ultimately fails.

#### 5.1 Aims of Reading 'Capital' Politically

The focus of Reading 'Capital' Politically is the first three parts of Chapter 1 of Capital, volume 1. Here, Marx shows how the commodity has two aspects — use-value (a product of the concrete useful labour that creates that particular commodity) and value (a representation of that labour considered as general abstract labour); he shows how value must take different forms; and from this he derives the logical necessity of money as the universal equivalent form of value. Along with the chapter on money, these are undeniably some of the most difficult parts of Capital. While a lot of the rest of the book is fairly straightforward, this beginning is often enough to make the reader turn away in frustration. Thus it is worth acknowledging the merit of Cleaver's attempt at an accessible commentary.

The central thesis of Cleaver's reading is that the category of value, in its various forms (and aspects), needs to be related to class struggles around human needs — to the subjective — rather than (simply) to the objective workings of capital as a 'system'. In Cleaver's words, to read Capital politically is "to show how each category and relationship relates to and clarifies the nature of the class struggle and to show what that means for the political strategy of the working class" (p. 76). Cleaver's attempt to render the subjective in Marx's account of value operates by short-circuiting most of Marx's mediations, leaping directly from the commodity-form to particular struggles. He relates the material in Capital, Chapter 1, partly to later material in the same volume over the struggle for the working day and primitive accumulation, but most of all to more contemporary struggles — around energy and food prices — in a way clearly distinct from Marx's own method.<sup>48</sup> He justifies this by saying "to the extent then that I bring to bear on the interpretation of certain passages material from other parts of Capital, or from other works, I do so

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<sup>47</sup> See F.C. Shortall, *The Incomplete Marx* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1994).

<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, Cleaver also contends that what he is doing is not so different from Marx: "Marx illustrates these relations [of use-value and exchange-value] with a variety of apparently innocuous commodities: linen, iron, watches, and corn (wheat). I say apparently because most of these commodities played a key role in the period of capitalist development which Marx analysed: linen in the textile industry, iron in the production of machinery and cannon, watches in the timing of work, wheat as the basic means of subsistence of the working class. To be just as careful in this exposition, I suggest that we focus on the key commodities of the current period: labour power, food and energy". (p. 98). However, while Cleaver is probably right that Marx did not make an arbitrary choice of which commodities to mention in Chapter 1, their function in Marx's presentation is arbitrary. Unlike the political

with the aim of grasping Chapter One within the larger analysis rather than reconstructing the evolution of what Marx wrote and thought” (p. 94, second edition).

## 5.2 Aims of Capital

A question Cleaver does not address is why it was that Marx said very little about struggles in Volume 1, Chapter 1. If it is so necessary to read *Capital* politically in the way that Cleaver does, then why didn't Marx save us the trouble and simply write *Capital* politically? In promoting *Capital* as a weapon for our struggles, Cleaver wants to stress the moments of de-reification and de-fetishization in relation to Marx's categories. Indeed he claims that this project of a political reading “is exactly the project called for in Marx's discussion of fetishism” (p. 76). Thus for Cleaver there is no need for a “separate analysis of Section 4 of Chapter One which deals with fetishism, simply because ... this whole essay involves going behind the appearances of the commodity-form to get at the social relations” (p. 80). Cleaver is right that the section on fetishism is crucial for “getting at the social relations”; but why did Marx insist on the type of presentation he does despite the possible difficulty it entailed for his intended audience, the working class? Moreover is Cleaver's kind of political reading really the way to understand what Marx deals with as commodity fetishism?

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economists, Marx does give attention to the use-value side of the economy; but here in his opening chapter he makes no mention of the concreteness of these use-values in the class struggle. At this point of Marx's presentation of the capitalist mode of production, the precise use-values are irrelevant. Marx's reference to linen, corn etc. is a part of a logical presentation, not a reference to concrete struggles.

<sup>49</sup> I.I. Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* (New York/Montreal: Black Rose Books 1973).

<sup>50</sup> Cleaver's claim (p. 138) that while Marxists have examined the question of the content of value at length almost no work has been done on the issue of the form of value (and hence the necessity for Cleaver's own analysis) includes reference to Rubin. But this in itself suggests that Cleaver hasn't understood (and perhaps hasn't even read) Rubin's book, the whole of which is concerned precisely with the social form of value.

<sup>51</sup> Up until the 1970s, at least in the English speaking world, Marx was seen as having simply developed and refined Ricardo's labour theory of value. In this traditional interpretation, Marx, like Ricardo, was seen to adhere to an embodied labour conception of value. What was common to all commodities, and hence what it was that made them commensurate with each other as manifestations of this common factor, was that they were all products of the “expenditure of human brains, nerves and muscles”, that is of human labour in general. Consequently, the value of a commodity was seen to be determined by the labour embodied in it during its production.

With this physiological, or quasi-physicalist, conception of labour, the Ricardian labour theory of value conceived value as merely a technical relation: the value of a commodity was simply determined by the amount of labour-energy necessary for its production. As such the Ricardian labour theory of value could in principle be applied to any form of society.

For Rubin, what was specific about the capitalist mode of production was that producers did not produce products for their own immediate needs but rather produced commodities for sale. The labour allocated to the production of any particular commodity was not determined prior to production by custom or by a social plan and therefore it was not immediately social labour. Labour only became social labour, a recognised part of the social division of labour, through sale of the commodity it produced. Furthermore, the exchange of commodities was a process of real abstraction through which the various types of concrete labour were reduced to a common substance — abstract social labour. This abstract social labour was the social substance of value. Rubin's abstract social labour theory of value necessarily entailed an account of commodity fetishism since it was concerned with how labour as a social relation must manifest itself in the form of value in a society in which relations between people manifest themselves as relations between things.

In the mid-1970s the labour theory of value came under attack from the neo-Ricardian school which argued that it was both redundant and inconsistent. Rubin's abstract social labour theory of value was then rediscovered as a response to such criticisms in the late 1970s. Although Cleaver dismisses Rubin there have been attempts to address his abstract social labour theory of value from the tradition of *autonomia* — see for example the article by Massimo De Angelis in *Capital & Class*, 57 (Autumn 1995).

An interesting comparison is Isaak Rubin's *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*,<sup>49</sup> which Cleaver mentions only briefly and dismissively, in a footnote.<sup>50</sup> While Cleaver does not comment directly on the section in *Capital*, Chapter 1, on fetishism, the whole first part of Rubin's book is on this subject. Rubin's book was seminal precisely for systematically grasping the inseparability of commodity fetishism and Marx's theory of value: "The theory of fetishism is, per se, the basis of Marx's entire economic system, and in particular of his theory of value" (Rubin, 1973, p. 5). Thus the value categories are expressions of a topsy-turvy world in which people's products dominate the producers, where people are related through things, and where objects behave as subjects and subjects as objects. Since Rubin's book became available in the English-speaking world through Fredy Perlman's translation, a whole school of Marxism has developed, insisting like Rubin does that Marx's is not a neo-Ricardian embodied labour theory of value but an abstract social labour theory of value;<sup>51</sup> such an analysis brings fetishism to the fore and emphasises Marx's work as a critique of political economy rather than Marxist political economy.

Thus Rubin can be seen to make similar points to Cleaver but to do so by explaining and illustrating value-categories in terms of such basic mediations as social relations, labour and commodity fetishism, rather than through the directly political reading favoured by Cleaver.

Moreover, the case of Rubin questions the schema Cleaver develops in his Introduction, summarized in the following table:

Ideological Readings	Strategic readings
Political economy readings	From capital's perspective
Philosophical readings	From capital's perspective
Political readings	Empty set
Approaches to the reading of Marx	From a working class perspective
(Cleaver, p. 31)	

Cleaver (p. 30) defines the bottom right box of this table as:

that strategic reading of Marx which is done from the point of view of the working class. It is a reading that self-consciously and unilaterally structures its approach to determine the meaning and relevance of every concept to the immediate development of working-class struggle. It is a reading which eschews all detached interpretation and abstract theorising in favour of grasping concepts only within that concrete totality of struggle whose determinations they designate. This I would argue is the only kind of reading of Marx which can properly be said to be from a working-class perspective because it is the only one which speaks directly to the class's needs for clarifying the scope and structure of its own power and strategy.

Though the Stalinist state recognized the political significance of Rubin's 'abstract reasoning',<sup>52</sup> Rubin's book does not meet Cleaver's 'political' criteria. But neither does Rubin's book seem to be obviously a political economic or a philosophical reading. We'd contend that one of the reasons that Rubin's is a seminal work is precisely because it transcends such a distinction. Prompted by the revolutionary wave of the 1910s and 1920s, Rubin, like writers of the same period such as Lukács and Korsch, was able to go beyond Second International Marxism and to understand *Capital* as a critique of political economy – but without, like the Frankfurt School, retreating into mere philosophy.

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<sup>52</sup> "An official Soviet philosopher wrote that 'The followers of Rubin and the Menshevizing Idealists ... treated Marx's revolutionary method in the spirit of Hegelianism... The Communist Party has smashed these trends alien to Marxism.' ... Rubin was imprisoned, accused of belonging to an organization that never existed, forced to 'confess' to events that never took place, and finally removed from among the living." (Fredy Perlman, *About the Author*, in Rubin's *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* (op. cit.))

The fourth part of *Capital*, Chapter 1, 'The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret', is crucial because in it Marx shows how the forms of value are an expression of reification, and hence fetishized in our experience. Rubin's approach is key for drawing one's attention to the inseparability of fetishism and the theory of value. By trying to short-circuit the process, by immediately moving to the de-fetishising aspect of class struggle, Cleaver jumps levels of abstraction. Our argument would be that, analytically, it is necessary to explain reification before examining its reversal. In other words, in order to relate value to the kind of struggles Cleaver refers to, a whole series of mediations must be developed,<sup>53</sup> not least the categories of absolute and relative surplus-value, constant and variable capital, and the relation between price and value (which Marx introduces later in Volume 1), circulation (which Marx introduces in Volume 2) and the distributional forms of surplus value – profit, rent and wages (which don't come until Volume 3). Volume 1 concerns capital-in-general, presented as particular examples of capitalist enterprises as an analytic device to derive the later, more developed, categories.

For us it seems essential to grasp what Marx was trying to do in *Capital*. If Marx's overall project was 'capitalism and its overthrow' it was nevertheless necessary for him first to show what the capitalist mode of production was, how it was possible; this led him methodologically to make a provisional closure of class subjectivity in order to grasp the logic of capital as an objective and positive system of economic 'laws' which is apparently independent of human will and purpose.<sup>54</sup> Objectivist Marxism takes this provisional closure as complete. What Cleaver is doing could be seen to be an attempt at opening up the provisional closure by bringing in the subjectivity of class struggle; but because he does not properly explain the marginalization of the class struggle in the pages of *Capital*, what he does comes across as bald assertion at variance with the flow of Marx's argument.

In short, in his understandable quest for the concrete and immediate, Cleaver abandons the analytic rigour needed to make the connections between *Capital* and the class struggle. While we may agree that *Capital* needs to be understood as a weapon in the class war, it does not need to be the crudely instrumental reading offered by Cleaver.

## 6. Whither autonomia?

### 6.1 Negri and the retreat from the universal revolutionary subject

The continuing influence of operaismo and autonomia is evident today in a number of recent movements, most notably perhaps *Ya Basta!* in Italy, who draw upon some of the ideas of Negri. Negri himself has lately caused interest in some circles. *Empire*, the book he has co-authored with Michael Hardt,<sup>55</sup> has struck a chord with the concerns of some 'anti-capitalist'/'globalization' activists, academics and even a New Labour policy adviser.<sup>56</sup> While Negri's ideas were sometimes controversial when he was part of the area of autonomy, after losing his connections to the movement he ceased to produce worthwhile stuff, and instead slipped into an academic quagmire whose reformist political implications are all too clear.<sup>57</sup> The disconnection of ideas from the

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<sup>53</sup> We made this same point in our reply to Cleaver's associate George Caffentzis of *Midnight Oil/Midnight Notes*. See 'Escape from the Law of Value?', *Aufheben* 5 (Autumn 1996), p. 41.

<sup>54</sup> See F.C. Shortall, *The Incomplete Marx* (Aldershot: Avebury 1994).

<sup>55</sup> Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2000.

<sup>56</sup> Mark Leonard, 'The Left Should Love Globalization', *New Statesman*, 28<sup>th</sup> May 2001. Leonard is director of the Foreign Policy Centre think-tank and apparently a Blairite.

<sup>57</sup> This break was, as for a lot of militants of that period, quite physical. Arrested in 1979, Negri went into exile in 1983. However, his particular form of escape (getting elected as a MP) and the warm welcome and relatively cushy position that awaited him in France were based on the different status he held (as a professor) compared with



movement, following the repression which culminated in the mass arrests of 1979, has also meant that there has been to some extent a battle for the heritage of the movement. Through journals like *Zerowork* and *Midnight Notes*, Anglo-American theorists have kept ‘autonomist Marxism’ going. Through emphasizing the continuing importance of value (albeit ambiguously, as we have seen), these and Harry Cleaver among others have distinguished themselves from the late Negri with his embrace of both post-structuralism and the ideas of the (pre-Hegelian) philosopher Spinoza.

But — and despite his innumerable self-contradictions — a continuity can be traced from the early Negri, through *autonomia* to the late Negri. For example, his recent arguments, along with other reformists, for a guaranteed income can be traced back to the demand for a ‘political wage’ made by the radical Negri of *Potere Operaio*. It would seem to be significant that, despite his earlier valuable insights, his relatively recent theoretical work can be seen as at one with the arguments of Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari justifying fragmented forms of resistance and denying the need to confront the state.

Empire contains any number of arguments we see as problematic if not counter-revolutionary and recuperative, including the abandonment of value, the centrality of immaterial labour, the call for ‘real democracy’ and political proposals for ‘global citizenship’. What stirred people’s interest, it seemed, was the thesis of ‘empire’ itself — that of the emergence of a single unified global political-economic capitalist entity — which seemed to offer an alternative to unsatisfactory orthodox theories of imperialism. With the US war on Afghanistan, however, the notion of imperialism has returned to the forefront of political discourse.<sup>58</sup> What we are left with, then, as Negri’s take on *autonomia*, is a celebration of fragmentation. The abandonment of the concept of the proletariat (now replaced by ‘the multitude’), the universal revolutionary subject, is the abandonment of world revolution. Negri’s work might therefore be said to express the profound sense of defeat and disillusion that followed the failure of the Movement of 1977.

## 6.2 History as ideology

Two different ways of writing history are evident in the books by Steve Wright and Harry Cleaver. Wright’s is a history of the politics of a movement. But it is also critical, from a communist perspective. We therefore thoroughly recommend it as an invaluable resource in helping our understanding of the development, contributions and tensions of workerism and *autonomia* in their historical context of Italy in the 1950s, ‘60s and ‘70s.

By contrast, for us, Cleaver’s account of the tradition of *autonomia* is far more tendentious. Rather than focusing, as Wright does, on what is clearly a single historical episode, Cleaver selects a number of different movements and theorists, going back as far as C.L.R. James and Raya Dunayevskaya, which he then designates as representatives of what he calls “autonomist Marxism”. Again, here Cleaver is consistent with the tradition of workerist historiography which, looking back, found the mass worker and hence a commonality with its own perspective in earlier struggles, such as the Wobblies and the working class movement in Germany in the 1920s.

In one sense it might seem there’s nothing wrong with Cleaver’s attempt simply to identify what he sees as the revolutionary use of Marx as a particular tradition. And if we look at the

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other militants; thus sections of the movement saw him somewhat as a traitor. His return to Italy has not succeeded in redeeming him; nor has his credibility been restored by recent pronouncements, such as his advice to the anti-globalization movement that the ‘20% of voters’ alienated from the political system need to be won back to electoral politics. (See ‘Social Struggles in Italy: Creating a New Left in Italy’)

<sup>58</sup> Of course, it is possible to reject the leftist inanities of ‘anti-imperialism’ while recognizing the realities of imperialist rivalries.

groups and theorists that he refers to (both in Reading 'Capital' Politically and also in his university course on 'autonomist Marxism'<sup>59</sup>) a very great deal of it corresponds with our own assessment of the most valuable contributions.

However, there are two, related, problems. First, in grouping the various movements and theorists together in the way that he does there is an element of the same homogenizing or flattening out — a neglect of differences — that we saw in Cleaver's 'autonomist' class analysis, as well as in the workerist concepts of mass worker and so on.

Second, it is revealing to consider which tendencies are excluded from Cleaver's canon, or at least addressed in only a cursory way. How might these neglected tendencies be in tension with the rest of the material? What contradictions might the formulation 'autonomist Marxism' suppress?

For us, as an account of developments in theory over the past century, the most notable absences from Reading 'Capital' Politically are the Situationist International<sup>60</sup> and the Italian left and those influenced by it, such as Barrot/Dauvé and Camatte. We can go so far as to say that the attempt to specify such a thing as 'autonomist Marxism' is ideological, with its emphasis on 'similar' ideas and its concealments (the glossing of the limits of the 'good' theorists and movements, the silence on those that don't fit). This is not unusual or strange. The capitalist counter-offensive which culminated in the defeat of the Movement of 1977 saw a disillusionment with the possibility of mass revolutionary change that was expressed in the destinations of those coming out of the area of autonomy: most went into the PCI or the armed groups. Likewise, the turning of the general insights of the operaismo and autonomia theorists into 'autonomist Marxism' can be seen as a reflection of the retreat of the movement giving rise to the ideas. Ideology is the freezing of theory; theory freezes when the practice on which it is based is halted. 'Autonomism' seems to be non-dogmatic and dynamic because of the emphasis on particular needs and diverse struggles etc.; but the very principle of openness to new struggles has itself become ideological as the wave of struggles has ebbed.

Thus the glossing of the limitations of those currents that Cleaver gives approval to, and even cites as exemplifying autonomous struggle (e.g. Wages for Housework),<sup>61</sup> goes hand in hand with the exclusion of those that would contribute to the critique of those same currents. Any radical current needs to critique itself in order to transcend itself, as in the proletariat's self-liberation through self-abolition. Cleaver's identification of a thing with the label 'autonomist Marxism' is ideological in that it is partial and attempts to close off rather than open up a pathway to its own self-critique.

### 6.3 Towards a critical appraisal and appropriation of the contributions of the workerists

While Cleaver's book, and particularly his Introduction, has been important to many of us in the past, we would suggest now that Wright's book is more helpful than Reading 'Capital' Politically in allowing us to appropriate the best contributions of the workerist tradition. Wright ends

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<sup>59</sup> [www.eco.texas.edu](http://www.eco.texas.edu)

<sup>60</sup> The Society of the Spectacle, at least, appears in Cleaver's bibliographical history of the 'autonomist Marxist' tradition, appended to Negri's *Marx Beyond Marx*, op. cit.

<sup>61</sup> While Cleaver's decision to leave Reading 'Capital' Politically as it was rather than re-write it is understandable, what is perhaps less understandable — unless one wants to suggest that he is simply dogmatic — is his failure to use the new Preface to acknowledge the weaknesses in his analysis that have emerged with hindsight. The continued uncritical lauding of 'Wages for Housework' is one example; another is the claims made about the role of inflation made in the 1970s.

his book with the sentence “Having helped to force the lock ... obstructing the understanding of working-class behaviour in and against capital, only to disintegrate in the process, the workerist tradition has bequeathed to others the task of making sense of those treasures which lie within.” In many ways Italian workerist analyses of class struggle promised much, but delivered little. The whole tendency, increasingly divided into separate camps, collapsed at the end of the ‘70s. Whereas one camp favoured libertarian themes of autonomy, personal development and the subjective determinations of class identity; the other instead turned to debates over the ‘armed party’ and the feasibility of civil war. Both camps abandoned the traditional workerist focus on the relationship between technical and political class composition – that is, between the class’s material structure in the labour process and its behaviour as a subject autonomous from dictates of both the labour movement and capital.

But what can we take from the whole experience? The “complex dialectic of decomposition and recomposition” of class forces, first elaborated by Tronti and others, was a significant departure from traditional leftist understanding of class struggle; the right questions were being asked: what material determinants are there in understanding the behaviour of the working class as (revolutionary) subject? But if the right questions were being asked, the answers the workerists provided were not always satisfactory; and tendency was often confused with totality. The early workerists were rightly criticized for their unwillingness to theorise moments of class struggle outside the large factories, and perhaps also for seeing the wage as the privileged locus of struggle; however their *autonomia* successors could be equally criticized for their problematic abandonment of the ‘mass worker’.

Wright’s book focuses on the concept of class composition, workerism’s most distinctive contribution. Class composition was important as an attempt to express how the working class is an active subject, and thus takes us beyond the poverty of objectivist Marxism which portrayed the working class as passive and dependent. The concept grew from the experience of autonomous struggle when the working class was on the offensive, but it has come to seem less adequate when relied upon in periods of crisis and retreat. To what extent was there a political recomposition of the class with the decline of the mass worker? Was the ‘socialized worker’ made concrete by the self-reduction struggles of the 1970s and the student and unemployed movements of 1977? Certainly a multiplicity of struggles erupted on the social level. But did the struggles merge, did the new subjectivities forged in struggle coalesce? Class recomposition would entail the formation of an increasingly self-conscious proletarian movement. The dispersal of workers (*operaio disseminato*), and the displacement of struggle to the wider social terrain, because of the fluidity of situations and multiplicity of moments of struggle, make it harder for a self-conscious movement to emerge. But some in the area of autonomy point to the very same factors as having the potential for rapid transmission of struggles to all sectors of the class. But, while the refusal of work and the liberation of needs manifested themselves in many different ways in the struggles of the ‘70s (proletarian youth circles, riots, ‘free shopping’ or reappropriations, squatting, organized ‘self-reduction’ of rent, utility bills and transport fares etc.), they did not develop into the political movement around the wage (redefined as a guaranteed social income) that Negri theorized – let alone into any coherent class movement capable of overturning capitalist social relations.

If this review article has devoted so much space to the problems of workerism and *autonomia* it is only because of the historic importance of this current. Today, ideas such as the non-neutrality of machinery and factory organization, the focus on immediate struggles and needs (rather than a

separate 'politics'), and the anti-capitalist nature of struggles outside (as well as within) the workplace are characteristic of many radical circles, not all of which would call themselves Marxist. The workerists were among the first to theorize these issues. The extent to which their arguments have been echoed by radicals down the years (as well as co-opted and distorted by recuperators) is an index of their articulation of the negation of the capital relation.

# The Arcane of Reproductive Production

## Introduction

One of the main contentions at the core of Autonomist Marxism is that all human activity in either the sphere of production or in circulation and reproduction is potentially productive, that is, can contribute to the valorisation of capital. The work of reproduction, which is the work done on ourselves and on our families to reproduce ourselves, reproduces our labour power, i.e. our capacity to work for capital – in this sense, Autonomist Marxist theorists argue that the work of reproduction is production for capital. Leopoldina Fortunati's *The Arcane of Reproduction*, published in Italy in 1981 and in the US in 1995,<sup>1</sup> seems to be the most sophisticated contribution to this theme so far. While reproductive labour may cover anything from playing video games, attending courses, going to a gym, watching television, looking for a job, etc., in her pamphlet Fortunati deals with culturally specific female activities outside the sphere of production: housework and prostitution.<sup>2</sup>

Fortunati comes from a tradition of Marxist feminism connected to the Autonomist area. One can trace a study of the connection between female work and capital to 70s' Italy for example in Mariarosa Dalla Costa. In her seminal work *Women and the Subversion of the Community*, written in 1971, Dalla Costa 'affirms... [that] the family under capitalism is... a centre essentially of social production'; and that housework is not just private work done for a husband and children.<sup>3</sup> Housework is then an important social activity on which capitalist production thrives. However, while Dalla Costa says that activities done within reproduction are 'if not immediately, then ultimately profitable to the expansion... of the rule of capital', Fortunati attempts the theoretical leap of demonstrating that housework does produce value within a 'Marxian' approach and tries to express this value-creation mathematically.<sup>4</sup> This is brave indeed, as Marx's analysis of capital would appear to show that this is not the case – thus in order to achieve her aim Fortunati has to revise Marx's categories – or, in her words, 'combine them with feminist criticism' (p. 10) so that they can become suitable tools for this aim.

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<sup>1</sup> Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction*, New York, Autonomedia, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Today, when both husband and wife are supposed to work, the wife often works as well as doing most of the housework at home. For the sake of non-'complexity', we assume here that the housewife is a 'pure housewife' and that the family is formed by husband and wife, unless stated, since this does not alter the nature of our issue (value and reproduction).

<sup>3</sup> Selma James's introduction in Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Bristol, Falling Wall Press, 1972. All emphasis in all the quotes are ours.

<sup>4</sup> It is noticeable that, however, in the course of her pamphlet, Fortunati's challenge is carried out with a certain caution. Here and there Fortunati seems to admit that the work of reproduction is only a precondition for future value production: 'the surplus value produced within the process of reproduction posits itself as a precondition... of the surplus value produced within the process of reproduction' (p. 102). And she seems to admit that value is actually created by the labour actually expended in production by the worker husband: '[reproduction] work transforms itself into capital only if the labour power that contains the housework surplus value is consumed productively within the process of production' (p. 103).

Fortunati's claim that reproduction produces value is a challenge to the Marxist 'orthodoxy' that agrees that the work of reproduction is a precondition of a future creation of value and serves to keep the cost of labour power low, but does not actually create value itself. In this 'orthodox' view the work of reproduction is just concrete labour, not abstract labour. Since it is only concrete and not abstract labour, this labour does not add any fresh value but preserves the values of the means of subsistence consumed by the family as the value of labour power. This value manifests itself as the exchange value of labour power.

Fortunati's main arguments against this view are centered on her concept of labour power, which is the specific product of the woman's work as a housewife or prostitute: in fact, Fortunati claims that labour power is, without other specifications, 'a commodity like all others', which is 'contained within' the person of the husband. It is true that when we hire ourselves to the capitalist, our submission takes the form of a sale, the sale of labour power. But, as we will argue in detail later, it is also true that producing and selling labour power is not like producing and selling other commodities, and this difference embodies the essence of our condition as proletariat and dispossessed. With her assumption of labour power as 'a commodity like all others' Fortunati eliminates this important difference on the one hand, and on the other hand she is able to conclude straight away that labour power must contain the value corresponding to the abstract labour time expended in its production like 'all other commodities' do.<sup>5</sup>

If according to this deduction housework produces value, how can Fortunati explain the fact that no value appears as a result of housework?<sup>6</sup> This is because, she says, in capitalism the individual has been 'divested of all value', devalued, i.e. denied the property of being a carrier of value as a person. This is a devaluation in terms of monetary value: 'while a slave or serf, i.e. as the property of the master or the feudal lord, the individual has a certain value... the individual has no value' today (p. 10). If the individual cannot 'carry' the value produced by his wife, this value does not appear in the exchange between labour power and capital, and slips through the worker straight into the hands of the capitalist, without any recognition for the housework done.<sup>7</sup> And only when the husband's labour power is in the hands of the capitalist, when the worker actually works, does this value manifest itself as value created during production. Housework according to this theory is then part of the aggregate labour in society that valorises capital, but since the 'individual' is 'devalued', its contribution to capital is not recognised.

In the same way as Fortunati claims that reproduction really creates value, 'but appears otherwise', she asserts that the real status of the housewife is that of a waged worker, but 'appears otherwise'. In fact, Fortunati says, the direct relation between the wife and the husband hides

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<sup>5</sup> 'It is [the whole family] that constitute the necessary nucleus for the production and reproduction of labour power. This is because the value of labour power, like that of any other commodity, is determined by the time necessary to produce and reproduce it. Hence the total work supplied by the work subjects in this nucleus constitutes the necessary work time for its reproduction.' (p. 19) Or on page 23: 'Given that [labour power] is a commodity, its reproduction must therefore be subject to the general laws governing commodity production, which presupposes an exchange of commodities.' Or on page 158: 'Reproduction functions as another process of commodity production. As such it is a process complete in itself and, like the others, one in which work is divided into necessary and surplus labour' (p. 158). The fact that housework produces value, or is an expenditure of abstract labour time, is in these sentences the 'logical consequence' of the initial assumption that labour power is 'a commodity like all others'.

<sup>6</sup> Or in her words, housework 'appears' as 'the creation of non-value' (p.10).

<sup>7</sup> 'When selling their labour power on the capitalist market, the individuals cannot offer it as the product of their work of reproduction, as value, because they themselves... [have no] value.' (29, p.11).

a real relation of wage-work exchange between the wife and capital, which is mediated by the husband as the woman's work 'supervisor'.<sup>8</sup>

Although, as we will see below, Fortunati's arguments seem to diverge from other theoretical Autonomist approaches, it has encountered some appreciation within the Autonomist area. Dalla Costa mentions it for example; and Harry Cleaver has it in the reading list for his 'Autonomist Marxism' course.<sup>9</sup> Outside the area of *Autonomia*, her pamphlet has been praised by AK distribution as 'an excellent book worth reading very carefully and a good example of immanent critique of Marx's work'.<sup>10</sup> Surely no reader can miss Fortunati's in being able to deal with 'complexities': in her pamphlet the words 'complex' and 'complexity' appear at least 26 times.<sup>11</sup> Her 'dense' style, noticed by AK distribution, which for example calls having sex a 'work of sexual reproduction of the male worker' is consistent with this fascination with 'complexity'. No doubt this has inspired awe and respect in her readers.

One reason for the present critique is first of all because the disparity between the male and female condition in capitalist society is a real problem. If our realisation as individuals having 'value' in bourgeois society is only through our roles as buyers and sellers of commodities (or specifically as sellers of labour power and earners of a wage), bearing and rearing children is an obstacle to this realisation. Although part of the toll of being parents can be shared, bearing the child cannot – and, whatever her class, the woman is discriminated against with respect to the male in capitalism. A study of the problem connected to female work is then interesting for its potential criticism of bourgeois relations of exchange – specifically of the fragmentation of society into bourgeois individuals who recognise each other only as buyers and sellers of commodities.

Fortunati's work is the product of her involvement with the 'Wages for Housework' movement in Italy in the 1970s. This movement produced plenty of radical theory close to *Autonomia* (such as Dalla Costa's work) and received attention and respect from US Autonomist Marxism, especially Harry Cleaver.<sup>12</sup> However in the present critique we have chosen to deal only with the particular theoretical development by Leopoldina Fortunati and not with the wider issue of Wages for Housework – a treatment that would have to take on the rather cult-like behaviour of the movement espousing this demand.

In fact, besides the interesting issues related to women's condition in our society, the principal focus for this critique of Fortunati's work is the specific issue of reproduction as 'productive work', which Fortunati shares with the broader area of Autonomist Marxism. In particular, we want to address the Autonomist elaboration of the concept of value in the present mode of production. In this discussion we will stress not only the similarities among various authors, but also

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<sup>8</sup> Less crude than Fortunati, years before, Mariarosa Dalla Costa appreciated the importance of internalisation of the housewife role in the housewife, an internalisation that has material roots in her real social relations within society and can be broken down only through the material involvement in the struggle. It is a fact that the ones who really check the quality of housework are the woman's female friends and relatives, not the husband!

<sup>9</sup> Cleaver: [www.eco.utexas.edu/Cleaver/387LautonomistMarxism.html](http://www.eco.utexas.edu/Cleaver/387LautonomistMarxism.html) (2002). Dalla Costa: [www.commoner.org.uk](http://www.commoner.org.uk) (written after 1996).

<sup>10</sup> [www.book-info.com](http://www.book-info.com)

<sup>11</sup> .pp. 8; 9; 14 (three times); 15 (twice); 20; 22; 33; 34; 41; 47; 59; 55; 57 (three times); 91; 108 (three times); 109 (twice); 128 (twice, one of which is 'extremely complex').

<sup>12</sup> Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically, Anti/Theses*, AK Press, 2000, p. 84. About Cleaver's allegiance to the issues and the spirit of Wages for Housework see also his reply to our 'From Operismo to Autonomist Marxism', *Aufheben* #11, [www.eco.utexas.edu](http://www.eco.utexas.edu), p. 54.

their, sometimes important, differences in their theoretical positions. We will discuss in particular the following three points:

1. the importance, within Autonomist Marxism, of demonstrating, at every cost, even with the aid of ‘formulas’, that the work of reproduction is productive and a creator of value
2. the Autonomist concept of the work of reproduction as work which is, as Fortunati would put it, ‘capitalistically organised’; i.e., indirectly controlled by capital and having the character of waged work.
3. the concept of capital as imposition of work, discipline and repression, and the parallel conception of the working class as antagonism against capital.

In discussing these points, we will make parallels and reference to some of the main authors who write, or wrote, within Autonomia or Autonomist Marxism, and in particular Harry Cleaver (*Reading Capital Politically*<sup>13</sup>), Massimo De Angelis (*Beyond the Technological and the Social Paradigms: A Political Reading of Abstract Labour as the Substance of Value*<sup>14</sup>), and Antonio Negri (*Pipeline, Lettere da Rebibbia*<sup>15</sup>) and Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (*Empire*<sup>16</sup>). We will make clear the difference between these authors, who on the one side share some basic tenets of the Autonomist tradition, but on the other side may diverge on fundamental points and in their understanding of capitalism.

In the following sections we will analyse the details of Fortunati’s own treatment of reproduction as productive work and her initial assumptions. For simplicity’s sake we only deal with Fortunati’s approach to housework, and avoid the issue of prostitution.<sup>17</sup>

## 1. The quest for value

No Marxist would deny that housework and reproductive work are functional and necessary for the whole process of capital’s self-valorisation. What makes Fortunati’s book new or challenging is that it aims to convince the reader that housework is a real expenditure of abstract labour time, and a real creator of value, and that this can be quantified.

In fact, the argument that work done outside production is productive is a recurrent focus in Autonomist theory. In *Reading Capital Politically*, Cleaver reminded the reader that abstract labour and abstract labour time ‘must be grasped in the totality of capital’ (p. 118) and that in the ‘total social mass’ of abstract labour and value produced in capitalism there is ‘a direct or indirect contribution’ from anybody who is coerced into any form of work, either waged or unwaged, including housework (pp. 122–123). Although any coerced activity can be functional to the valorisation of capital, this does not mean that it is abstract labour and produces value. In saying that, this contribution can be ‘indirect’, Cleaver leaves the question ambiguously open.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See previous footnote.

<sup>14</sup> *Capital and Class* 57, Autumn 1995, pp.107–134.

<sup>15</sup> As quoted in Anonimo Milanese, *Due Note su Toni Negri*, Renato Varani Editore, Milan, 1985, our translation.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, London, 2000]

<sup>17</sup> We do not deal with prostitution for simplicity’s sake, but it is important here to stress that Fortunati’s assimilation of housework and prostitution is not a straightforward task and requires a whole article of critique in itself.

<sup>18</sup> Unlike De Angelis and Fortunati, Cleaver prefers to remain ambiguous on this crucial point. In another part



However, this suggestion was later taken over and explicitly developed by his student Massimo De Angelis. In his article mentioned above, De Angelis attempted a logical ‘demonstration’ that any alienated, coerced and boundless work amounts to an expenditure of abstract labour and thus creates value for capital.

Why is it so important to argue for the creation of value outside the sphere of production? The reason expressly given by Fortunati and, for example, De Angelis is similar: this is somehow essential to explain the struggles that may develop outside the sphere of production as working class struggles. As De Angelis puts it, the recognition of a productive role of all proletarians is important for a theory that can explain and give ‘an appropriate interpretative framework’ to the struggles of the non-waged as well as the waged, as struggles against capital (p. 122). The categories of productive, unproductive, value, abstract labour, seem then to be essential in the political (or moral?) evaluation of the role and antagonism offered by sections of the proletariat.<sup>19</sup> Traditional Marxists would think that it is rather odd to use the categories that describe the dynamic of capital as analytical tools to interpret the class struggle or as indicators of class antagonism. Capital, value, use value, the falling rate of profit, the laws of the market, etc. are for them constitutive of an objective reality that conditions the class struggle, but are independent of our struggles and subjectivity. Yet Marx had explained in *Capital* that these ‘things’, real constraints on our lives, are an expression of a social relation, which appears to us in a mystified form, as independent of us. A merit of Autonomist theory was to try to overcome this objectivistic understanding by emphasizing the subjective dynamics of capitalism.

However, by criticising the purely objectivistic and economicistic understanding of capitalism, they oppose to this reading one which is purely subjectivistic: class struggle as a confrontation between two opposing and Autonomous consciousnesses, capital and the proletariat.<sup>20</sup> In this reading capital and its objective categories become mere objectified phantoms of a purely subjective reality. Thus for example, De Angelis warns the reader that when he mentions ‘the law of value’ he actually means the ‘imposition of work and working class resistance in and against capital’ (p. 119). For Cleaver, ‘use value’, beyond being the physical body of the commodity (which is the ‘economicistic’ phantom), has to be understood primarily as a combination of qualities subjectively recognised in the commodity by the two subjects in struggle, the working class and capital. This way Marx’s *Capital* becomes a coded manuscript that has to be deciphered by looking at the subjective class-struggle ‘meanings’ of the categories employed in it; which is precisely what Cleaver attempted to do in *Reading Capital Politically*.

Perhaps this one-to-one-relation of subjective and objective categories can explain the Autonomist obsession for the most improbable quest after that of the philosopher’s stone. If abstract labour is the expression of a relation of antagonism between the dispossessed and the bourgeoisie, then pointing at the value produced by sectors of the proletariat becomes essential to understand their antagonism with capital and their struggles. Indeed, how can you explain the

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of his book, he just suggests that the work outside production ‘counts as surplus value’ in the social factory. (p. 84) This is not the same as saying that this work creates value, because a work that reduces the cost for the capitalist even without creating value can be accounted as higher surplus value for the capitalist.

<sup>19</sup> This can be seen as a reaction to the equally moralistic approach within the old workers’ movement and especially within Stalinism which celebrated and prioritised the importance of productive workers as ‘real’ workers against the parasitism or lack or relevance of unproductive labour. An extreme of this was the Stakhanovist glorification of work in Russia.

<sup>20</sup> For a similar critique of Autonomist Marxist subjectivism see our review article on *Midnight Oil*, *Aufheben* #3, Summer 1994]

antagonism of sections of the proletariat who do not create value, if the expenditure of abstract value, thus the production of value, is your litmus paper for detecting class antagonism? In this perspective, recognising all the proletariat as 'productive' becomes indispensable; conversely, a categorisation of work as productive or unproductive becomes a 'politically dangerous' thing to do.<sup>21</sup> The liberating realisation that the objective reality of value and its law is ultimately related to our subjectivity, antagonism and struggle, is then turned into a theoretical riddle. In *The Arcane of Reproduction* Fortunati simply applies this Autonomist approach to understanding and evaluating class struggle as an abstract rule to the case of female work and gives her own peculiar contribution to this theoretical riddle, as we will see later.

There is an important point that one has to stress here. The theoretical problem faced by Fortunati, Cleaver and De Angelis arises from their attempt to salvage Marx's concept of value together with a subjectivistic concept of 'value' as expression of political power and class struggle. This is different from the position of Antonio Negri, who in the '70s started to theorise value as a purely subjective political force, 'the command of capital'. Unlike Fortunati and the others, Negri explicitly distances himself from the Marxian conception of value. He justifies this move by claiming that there has been an historical change: in the '70s, he says, value and its law were effectively suppressed and replaced by a political, direct, command by capital.<sup>22</sup> In his recent work *Empire*, Negri reiterates his view that today we live in a 'postmodern' world in which capital is no longer 'able to reduce value to measure' or to make a 'distinction between productive, reproductive and unproductive labour' — a world where value is not anymore the result of an expenditure of abstract labour, but only the expression of 'production and reproduction of social life' and of the power of the system, of *Empire* (p. 402). This 'value' is obviously 'produced' by anybody who contributes to a general 'reproduction of social life'. There is nothing to 'demonstrate' in this case, no 'formulas' to calculate, no complexities to disentangle. By distancing himself from Marx and adopting a non-Marxian, postmodernist discourse, Negri has indeed made his life easier than his Autonomist-still-Marxian colleagues.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the theoretical problems that we have just seen, is there something true in the Autonomist insight that all work, waged or not, is productive? And, above all, does Fortunati share this insight? This is what we will see in the next section.

## 2. The subsumption of society by capital and class antagonism

As we have seen in Section 1, the arcane of the Autonomist interest in demonstrating that the work of reproduction, or any work done outside the sphere of production, is productive work, lies in a reading of Marxist categories, which makes the categories of value, abstract labour, etc. have 'meanings' in terms of subjective categories: the imposition of work by capital and the resistance

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<sup>21</sup> In *Reading Capital Politically*, page 118, Cleaver says that such a categorisation would involve a political categorization of workers into 'real' workers and others.

<sup>22</sup> For Negri, the detaching of the dollar from gold in the years 1971–3 was the beginning of a new world dominated directly by a law of command. This change, as Negri says in *Pipelines, Lettere da Rebibbia*, (p. 132) consists in the fact that: 'the dollar is now the ghost of [Nixon's] will, the whimsical and hard reality of [his] power'. This change, Negri says, indicated a new phase of accumulation at a world level where 'the vetero-Marxist law of value is over; now the "law of command" rules... The subjection of value to the dollar, of life to the American diktat... [means that] the economic crisis now are dictated by command'.

<sup>23</sup> Pity that this postmodern world looks too much like capitalism to justify the abandonment of Marx's theory!

to work by the working class. The way value and its laws can immediately mean a class relation of antagonism is explained by De Angelis. Abstract labour, the creation of value, being tantamount to imposed, boundless and alienated labour, is the 'form' of work in capitalism. For De Angelis then any waged or unwaged work, insofar as it is alienated, boundless and coerced, is abstract labour and consequently a creation of value. And since antagonism and resistance necessarily come out of the coercive and alienated nature of this work, then antagonism is one with the expenditure of abstract labour and the creation of value in capitalism, and it can manifest itself among the waged as well as the unwaged proletariat.

It is true that a good deal of antagonism to capital is experienced outside the sphere of production: there are plenty of examples of struggles of the unemployed, students, etc. It is also true that antagonism is experienced within a society where capital effectively subsumes many of the activities that are done outside the workplace, so that not only are these activities functional to capital, but they also acquire an imposed, boundless and alienated character. The whole of society may then well be seen as an extended factory where direct or self-imposed discipline, haste, boredom, misery and sweat are the subjective aspects that necessarily complement the motion of self-valorisation of capital.<sup>24</sup> To understand and explain the relation of antagonism outside the sphere of production in relation to the way capital subsumes unwaged work in this sphere is important and desirable; however, the question is: is it necessary for this understanding to assume that there must be creation of value outside the sphere of production?

Let us consider first the relation between antagonism and the subsumption of labour by capital within production. Productive labour has a double nature, as work that is aimed to make something or have some specific effect (concrete labour), and as the creation of value (abstract labour). This double nature of labour is the fundamental character of labour in the capitalist mode of production. Since the capitalist's aim of production is the valorisation of his capital, for him production is principally an extraction of abstract labour, a creation of value. This aim, and the movement of value, as Marx explains in *Capital*, implies the subsumption of the concrete practice of labour, the despotic organisation and command in production, the fragmentation of its tasks, its rationalisation, etc. The capitalist subsumption of labour in its concrete aspect implies, from the point of view of the worker, boredom, exhaustion, misery, pain, — the character of alienation and coercion of work then implies as a necessary consequence the worker's reaction against it.<sup>25</sup>

The concrete activities (concrete labour) that are done outside the sphere of production can be subsumed and shaped by capital too. The fundamental mechanism for the subsumption of activities outside the sphere of production is their commodification. For example, since a further education course can only be run with money, it is more likely to attract finance if it shows to be 'useful', i.e. to make people more 'useful' to capital (or to a sponsor). This influences the nature, aim and quality of the courses and tends to relate them to the needs of capitalist production in general (or the needs of their sponsors). Capital also shapes the form of the course besides its

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<sup>24</sup> Likewise, Harry Cleaver maintains that society today is 'one great social factory' where 'all activities would contribute to the expanded reproduction of the system'. And where even leisure is shaped by capital so that what we may do for our own recreation serves to reproduce us as workers for capital, i.e. as labour power (pp. 122–123). Similarly, for De Angelis today 'capitalist work... can be imposed in a variety of different forms including, but not limited to, the wage form' (p. 122).

<sup>25</sup> Abstract labour is the other aspect of labour and it has also a role in class antagonism, as it manifests itself as the wealth and power of our employer and in capital (the world of money), alien and hostile to us; and it is related to the exertion of concrete labour by concretising itself as the capital that imposes it [but it is not the same as the concrete labour, the labour that we experience as boredom and pain].

content, since the need to pay for hiring staff, renting premises, etc. will impose pace, deadlines, organisation, which will make the college more like a workplace. The concrete subsumption of the course is then likely to imply haste, boredom, and antagonism in the experience of the student. This antagonism can be explained without necessarily assuming that the work of these students is a creation of value.

The family is shaped by capital, too. The individualisation brought about by bourgeois relations of exchange means that it is the value we own as individuals, not our role in a social structure (family or extended family), that is necessary for the satisfaction of our needs and our social recognition. The family wage, paid by the employer to the male chief family income earner, becomes the economic basis for a patriarchal despotism which is intolerable within bourgeois relations — and the direct relations of the family then become real obstacles to individual freedom.<sup>26</sup> If on the one hand the stability of the family is useful for the running of capitalism, on the other hand, the same relations brought about by capital itself imply antagonism to the family as a direct social relation. This antagonism is explained without having to demonstrate that these family relations are hidden waged-work relations.

Housework is shaped by capital, too. Once time is measured in terms of the money it is worth as hourly wage, every hour spent in the kitchen acquires the character of a... negative hourly wage, which is as real for the woman insofar as her possibility of earning a wage outside home is real for her. Confusing the two different facts of earning a wage and producing value, Fortunati manages to analyse the phenomenon described above as the creation of a negative value, a 'non-value', i.e. a value that capital does not reward.<sup>27</sup> What is interpreted by Fortunati as the creation of non-value is in fact something substantially different. It is the result of the fact that capital imposes the form of waged work on non-waged activities — in this case housework — through the 'natural' need to earn a wage and own money as individuals. The imposition of capitalist temporality extends itself from the immediate production process to the rest of non-productive activity.<sup>28</sup> Thus the character of housework is made to conform with that of any waged work, either productive or unproductive.

Let us look at the concrete aspects of this imposition. The time attracted by waged work outside home will impose quality, form, pace, to housework, shaping it concretely. The more capital subsumes housework, the more it will require the purchase of appliances (washing machines, food processors...) in order to free time for productive work; the more the kitchen will look like a science-fiction 'factory'; the more the work in it will have the pace of a workplace; the more boring, unskilled, and alien the work in the kitchen will become — just the evening chore of turning the microwave on and heat up some pre-made food. Again, it is the concrete labour of housework that is shaped by capital, and this will imply coercion, boredom, and misery.

Thus capitalism can affect any concrete labour in society, and generate antagonism also where no value is actually created.<sup>29</sup> If we consider the interrelation of abstract labour, concrete labour,

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<sup>26</sup> Likewise, Negri in *Empire* criticises the family wage as it allows capital to control the wife through the husband as a mediator (p. 403).

<sup>27</sup> For the great confusion made by Fortunati in this subject see the Conclusions.

<sup>28</sup> For an interesting discussion on capitalist temporality see Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>29</sup> It is important to notice that, in order to demonstrate that activities or work outside production create value, De Angelis looks at their concrete aspects (that cause pain and boredom). Fortunati likewise often looks at concrete aspects of housework and/or prostitution in order to argue their role in value creation [for example, she assimilates housework and prostitution because of the fact that they share the concrete sexual act; or she looks at concrete

value and its laws, with antagonism (i.e. objectivity and subjectivity) we can have a 'theoretical framework' to explain the various struggles of the dispossessed without any need whatsoever to demonstrate that every proletarian must produce value. Although Autonomia had the great merit of having highlighted the reality of the subsumption of society and its relation to class antagonism, this relation is not so straightforward as an equation antagonism = abstract labour (value).

Let us now consider the difference between the above Autonomist approach and that attempted in *The Arcane of Reproduction*. To the students in movement, someone like De Angelis would say: 'It should be clear for us theorists something that is true in your real experience: the fact that you are in movement against capital because, although you are unwaged, you are subjected to capitalist work, and to the boredom and pain it implies'. The students feel the real effects of a real alienated 'capitalist work'; they do not need De Angelis to tell them that they do alienated capitalistic work. The students really feel antagonistic, because of their real experience of alienation; they do not need De Angelis to reveal anything to them in order to give them a space and aim for struggle. Only, De Angelis tells the Marxian world that they ought to describe the students' work as it is really experienced by the students and as it is really shaped by capital: i.e. as a waged work, if they want to understand the roots of the students' class antagonism. Whatever its theoretical problems and incongruities are, this analysis still has a moment of truth in the understanding of capitalism as class struggle.

But Fortunati does not say this! In the case of housework she claims: capital has contrived to 'camouflage' the woman's work as a non-waged, non-productive, non-factory-like work 'to reduce the space for struggle against it' (p. 110; see also p. 108).<sup>30</sup> To the housewife, Leopoldina Fortunati would say: 'you cannot find the space for your struggle against capital because capital has duped you into believing in appearances'. But Leopoldina Fortunati is there to reveal the 'reality' behind these 'appearances' and removes the ideological hindrances on class antagonism.

One of the strengths of Autonomist Marxism is the way it links an everyday experience of antagonism (boredom, hatred of work, conflict with our bosses, etc.) with a theory of how capitalism functions. Autonomist Marxism generally has intuitive appeal – it seems to capture and explain how we experience the world and why we fight back. By contrast, Fortunati's account creates a sharp divergence between the world of experience ('illusion') and the real world of capital and its needs (which only the intellectual like Fortunati can reveal). This is only exacerbated by her excessive use of jargon and avoidance of 'everyday' language in relation to Marxian theory.

### **3. The dialectic of capital as despotism and bourgeois freedom**

In the previous section we acknowledged the importance of the Autonomist argument that human activity in society can be subsumed by capital, and that this subsumption entails antagonism. We appreciated that this understanding is a moment of truth in the understanding of capitalism. Yet we have also seen that this does not necessarily imply that attending a vocational

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activities of the housewife in her 'working day'. Is however looking at the concrete aspect of work in order to deduce its aspect as abstract labour a deeper insight in Marxist theory, or a theoretical mistake? In order to understand whether a work creates value, which is an abstraction, a manifestation of our social relations, should we not abstract from its concreteness and consider its role in a mechanism that mediates our social relations?

<sup>30</sup> And she adds that if the real nature of the system of reproduction as a factory were made explicit the entire system of reproduction would fall into a crisis (p. 114).

course, hoovering, making love, sleeping, smiling at a parent, etc. are productive labour for capital and create value.<sup>31</sup> In this section we will see that there are in fact differences between these activities and those done within a wage-work relation, and that a view of bourgeois society as simply a social factory misses out a dialectic understanding of capital. Indeed, when the conception of society as a 'social factory' was used as a polemical device, it had some poignancy; but its overliteral use as a theoretical model for capitalism is too drastic and reductive.

There are in fact important differences between waged work and reproduction 'work', in the way the 'command' is given to us and how it relates to class antagonism. In the workplace, we are subjected to explicitly imposed orders, and we obey them consciously. Also, what we do is never 'for ourselves', but it is done for the sake of our employer's business. The subsumption of our activity and of our aims, as well as the subsumption of the result of our activity and aim, is a real subsumption.

Outside the workplace we are 'free' to choose what to do, and how to do it. And we do what we do 'for ourselves'. However, this freedom hides an indirect command of capital: in a world where 'what I as a man cannot do, i.e. what all my individual powers cannot do, I can do with the help of money' every need becomes necessarily subordinated to the need to play along with the market and its laws.<sup>32</sup> Even leisure is conditioned by what we can afford, both in terms of money, and time, since time is money. If we are in a position to spend time and resources in leisure and/or education, we may tend to spend more time in leisure and/or courses that are useful to improve or maintain our capacity to earn a wage. The mind exhaustion implied by alienated labour is likely to dictate the mindless and alienated quality of leisure — after a day's work our brain cannot sustain more than a boring and non-involving night in front of the TV, for example. All this, is really 'enjoyed' 'for ourselves', and we do it with our free will, but it implies our subjection to the law of value.

This command is indirect in the case of the family: it is for the sake of an economic income that both husband and wife act of their own free will. Of his free will, the husband will sign a contract with an employer and will submit himself to the despotism of production for most of his active day. In the same way, of her free will, the wife will try her best to manage their home so that the husband will be able to go and earn the money they need to live.<sup>33</sup>

The internalisation implied by commodity fetishism means that activity or work outside the sphere of production is a special 'work' in a special 'factory', where the 'worker' is the 'foreman' of himself.<sup>34</sup> In this special factory the command of capital is the opposite of the despotism, or-

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<sup>31</sup> 'Smiling at parents' is the most utterly ridiculous example of 'work' done for capital within the family as a 'labour-power-factory'. In Fortunati's words: 'even a newly born child reproduces its parents at a non-material level... when it smiles for example... producing a large quantity of use-value for its parents.' (p. 128).

<sup>32</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, in *Early Writings*, London: Penguin Books, 1975 p. 378]

<sup>33</sup> Housework keeps the cost of labour power low, especially if the housewife is encouraged to employ 'home economic' means to get the most (commodities) out of the family income. The employment of 'home economics' is understood by Harry Cleaver as work, or discipline, imposed on women by capital in order to increase the surplus rate of profit (Cleaver, *op. cit.*, pp. 122–3). But this interpretation neglects the fact that the housewife sees the need for saving money as something that she freely does 'in her own interest'. Indeed, in bourgeois society what is experienced as free will is something paradoxical, because we really do experience this freedom, but this same freedom is one with the capital domination of our life through the market. Calling this mechanism a 'blackmail of the market', or the imposition of a coerced work, as De Angelis and Cleaver do, does not help to demystify the 'mystery' behind the commodity form and value, their apparent naturalness.

<sup>34</sup> Commodity fetishism is not an illusion or an ideological mystification but something having a material reality: 'To the producers... the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear

ganisation and discipline of any other factory: it is a command based on freedom. This situation implies contradictions. Paradoxically enough, the command which I impose on myself is indispensable for my submission to the explicit despotism of capital in the workplace — how would the capitalist keep me in the workplace, if I did not see my job as in my own interest? My unfreedom, my forced labour, my painful experience of being despotically commanded within production is then one side of the same coin of my bourgeois freedom outside production. A theory that sees the working class only as a chain gang forced to work under a despotic command misses that other face of capital, our domination that is one with the naturalisation of the economy, of the necessity to exchange as an obvious and inevitable condition of life — the ‘arcane’ behind the fact that we reproduce capital with our ‘free’ actions and ‘free’ choices.<sup>35</sup>

To summarise: even if the Autonomists argue correctly that capital subsumes all society within or outside production, this does not mean that all activities are the same, and that society is a mega factory. This view is not useful, since it does not explain the differences. It is really more useful to consider the two dialectical aspects of capital, as despotism-of-production/freedom-of-exchange, and consider them in their interrelation.<sup>36</sup>

In the next section we show how this undialectic approach to capital can lead to politically dangerous consequences and consider Leopoldina Fortunati’s case.

#### **4. Consequences of the undialectical conception of capital as ‘just imposition of work’**

We have seen that the Autonomist understanding of capital as ‘imposition of work’ stresses only one aspect of capital, that of discipline, organisation, despotism. This means that the other aspect of capital, the freedom to exchange and own your own value in the sphere of circulation is not spelled out.

This undialectic approach allows for two possible theoretical understandings. One, clearly followed by Cleaver and De Angelis, is that of incorporating the latter aspect of capital in the first, even if they are opposite. In order to force two opposite dialectic aspects into one ‘imposition of work’, the concepts that describe this imposition (work, command, foreman, etc.) must become extremely abstract — as this is the only way to give the same name to opposite situations! For example, if we abstract enough the concept of ‘foreman’, we may argue with De Angelis that the market is the ‘foreman’ of the freelance lorry driver, in the same way as a foreman is for the

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as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material relations between persons and social relations between things’ (Marx, *Capital*, London: Penguin Classics 1990, pp. 165–166] ) About this important point see for example Geoffrey Pilling, *Marx’s Capital*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, pp. 169–173]

<sup>35</sup> An extreme case of an unwaged ‘work’ subsumed by capital is the way the so-called ‘Anti-Social Behaviour Orders’ (ASBOs) are enforced by the UK State against youngsters who graffiti or roam in the gardens of their neighbours and knock on their doors. Enforcing these orders, which means sending a child to jail, would be economically impossible for the UK State. The State cannot afford to pay the police to monitor twelve year olds hassling their neighbours: the only way the ASBOs are enforced is through the collaboration of neighbours, who then ‘work’ for the State as guards and police for free. They do this to protect their private property. Sure there is a blackmail behind their unwaged work: the imposition of the commodity form makes everybody dependent on the little private property they own, and this divides the class and fragments the proletariat into individuals, enemies of each other and loyal to the bourgeois order. But (unfortunately) this blackmail is subjectively felt as a ‘natural’ condition, not as coercion, and it would not induce antagonism in ‘alienated workers’, who are ‘coerced’ in this ‘boundless’ job.

<sup>36</sup> These two opposite aspects of capitalism are discussed by Marx in *Capital* (op. cit., pp. 470–480).

blue-collar worker. This is true, but in such an abstract way that our theory becomes as useful as Hegel's notorious black night where all cows are black: if value is produced anyhow; if anything is productive work; if antagonism is anywhere; if anybody who is under the pressure of a foreman even when he is not because the market can be called a foreman; what does all this clarify or explain besides being only a moralistic statement that we are all 'dominated' by capital? However, this approach still maintains a criticism of capitalism as a whole and a revolutionary attitude towards bourgeois relations.

But there is a second understanding that is possible once the opposed aspects of capital are not both spelled out: one that takes only one side of the dialectic, and considers capital just in its aspect of despotism, of 'imposition of work/ coercion/ discipline'. The other side of capital, bourgeois freedom, whose experience is rooted in the freedom to exchange, choose, consume, etc., is simply perceived as a force that potentially opposes the despotism of capital and which is potentially liberatory.

Negri and Hardt seem to have adopted such a vision of capitalism as simply the imposition of a 'disciplinary regime' over both the spheres of production and reproduction.<sup>37</sup> In *Empire* they describe the present class struggle as the antagonism between the so called 'multitude', a multicultural mass of individuals, who want to be free to 'flow', and a despotic power (*Empire*, or 'all the powers of the old world') which tries to impose 'disciplinary' local conditions on the proletariat (pp. 212, 213, and 400). They admit that this 'free flow' is forced on 'many' people by 'dire circumstances' and that its effect 'is hardly liberatory' in itself (p. 253). Nevertheless for them it is the liberal spirit and the abstract desire for freedom that this 'free flow' represents or suggests that what counts: mobility 'always expresses... a search for liberation... the search for freedom...' (p.212; p. 252). Thus for Negri and Hardt migration is 'a powerful form of class struggle' (p. 213).

Yes, people want to flow. And the governments try to regulate their flow. Thus flowing seems to be something inherently subversive. But people want to flow where they think they can sell their labour power dearer or, simply and desperately, find any possibility of income even at the price of selling their labour power cheaper.<sup>38</sup> With the analysis of De Angelis or Cleaver previously discussed in mind, we would rather understand this flow of the unwaged as imposition of work outside production, and not as something subversive in itself.

The freedom of the labour market underlying the workers' mobility is in fact a contradictory face of capital, the other face being exploitation, xenophobic harassment, state control, the destruction of traditional peasant production in many areas of the world by the market etc. The same contradictions that arise from the dynamics of capital and from the freedom of the market

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<sup>37</sup> For example on p. 248 they say that the history of the modern era ('modernity') is basically substantiated by 'imposition of discipline' [a concept that is theoretically not well defined, but emotionally attractive to the intellectual (liberal) reader. Money is a tool to impose discipline too: the monetary mechanisms, they complain on page 346, 'are the primary means to control the market'. Should we be really morally outraged along with Negri and Hardt that the market is controlled by a despotic mechanism, or is it more intelligent to consider how the whole system of power in capitalism is rooted in free relations of exchange?

<sup>38</sup> While Negri and Hardt make a distinction between the 'freedom' of this flow and the market, this distinction is based on the fact that, unlike the free flow, the market is 'dominated by capital' and 'integrated' into the logic of its 'imperialist command' (p. 363). But, as we explain in the main text, it is the ideally pure freedom of the market (the same freedom that is behind the 'free flow') that what substantiates the opposite of freedom, the despotic side of capital [thus the distinction made by Negri and Hardt hides their uncritical attitude towards bourgeois freedom and bourgeois values which we discuss in the main text.



are thus material preconditions for the constitution of movements of self-organisation and solidarity among the dispossessed. So it is not so much the present blind, random, individualistically spontaneous freedom-to-flow-for-the-sake-of-an-income that has to be celebrated as a 'powerful' example of class struggle. Rather we have to celebrate the opposite: the rediscovery of a human reality of direct relations that comes out not from the flow in itself but from the struggles of the migrants.<sup>39</sup>

Coherently with their uncritical view, the political action of the 'multitude' for Negri and Hardt must pivot around the demand for the recognition of civil rights within a system of uncriticised bourgeois freedom. The main demand that should unite the 'multitude' against capital is in fact that of the recognition of full citizenship (p. 400) and guaranteed income (p. 403). Crucially, for Negri the moral entitlement to citizenship and guaranteed income lies in the fact that each of us 'produces' and contributes with waged or unwaged 'work' to the power of capital.

A similar direction is taken by Fortunati. On p. 24 she explains that bourgeois freedom is illusory. And she always uses apostrophes around the words 'free' and 'freedom'. We agree with this, do we? We agree because we know that our bourgeois freedom is one with bourgeois relations mediated by exchange, thus with our fragmentation and with the objectification of our social relations as value and capital and the consequent power of capital over us... Well, forget it. This is not the issue for Leopoldina Fortunati.

In fact, for Fortunati exchange is apparently an existential, universal and ahistorical condition of humanity since the pre-capitalist past: the relation between people in the past was in fact a form of exchange, if not of money for commodities, of 'work for work' (e.g. p. 27); and value was the fundamental measure in human relations and a measure of human priorities in every form of society, since as she said, in the past we 'had value' insofar we were slaves, thus exchange value. Value as measure of worthiness was a universal and ahistorical feature of humanity! Also, Fortunati calls all interpersonal relations 'exchanges' and claims that 'equal opportunities for exchange' 'seem to offer potentially more equal opportunities' (which appear as something desirable). But, she adds, this freedom of exchange is obstructed and fettered by capital as production. Let us look at this in detail.

For Fortunati it is capital-as-production that shapes the form of the family and obstructs the free relation of exchange among individuals — and it is this (not exchange!) that is the very reason for the fragmentation of individuals within capitalism:

It is this reduction of interpersonal relationships to relations of production (i.e. the family) that underlies the growing isolation of individuals within capitalism. The individual becomes isolated not only from outside society but also from other family members with whom he/she has a relation based on production and not on the individual him/herself. (p. 25)

Capitalist production, which is said to be one with the male-woman relationship in the family, negatively affects other 'exchanges', like those between gays, and make their potential for liberation, for an 'escape', difficult or in vain:

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<sup>39</sup> Negri and Hardt admit that their so celebrated celebrated mass mobility is 'still... a spontaneous level of class struggle' (p. 213–214); however, they cannot think of a future struggle in which this magic spontaneity is abandoned and where we will gain direct and conscious control over the world and ourselves. The only way for them of thinking of an organised struggle that still preserves the spontaneity of the masses is that of theorising the necessity of 'a force'

The development of various alternative exchanges (lesbian, gay male, communal, etc.) seems to offer potentially more equal opportunities for exchange, but at the social level the male/female relationship is so influential that in practice it is difficult to modify or escape from it, to create a more equal relationship between those exchanging (p. 34).

Freedom of choice and exchange, which is the good thing that capitalism offers to ‘each individual’, is illusory only because the family as a nucleus of capitalistic production binds the individuals and limits our ‘real opportunity for individual relationships’ – i.e., limits the perfected bourgeois freedom based on exchange among individuals:

Thus while capitalism... offers each individual great freedom of choice with whom to exchange within the relations of reproduction, it is illusory, because [due to family relations] this ‘freedom’ is matched by minimal real opportunity for individual relations (p. 25).<sup>40</sup>

For Fortunati then, ‘capital’ as production is an evil entity that faces us – facing capital’s and the family’s despotism, we, as individuals, strive to develop ‘alternative exchanges’ and look for ‘opportunities’ for exchange. Capital wants to control our ‘free’ movements, choices and exchanges in order to compel us to work within authoritarian relations and one of the ways to do this is through the family. This is why ‘freedom’ in our system is illusory! And this is why she puts quote marks round the word!

We may agree on the one hand that the individual freedom offered by capitalism, which is liberatory from the constraints of the past, is the carrot of this system whose stick is production – and none of us would sacrifice our bourgeois freedom to go back to a suffocating Medieval social relation. But on the other hand if we want to make a coherent criticism of capital as production, we cannot and must not avoid considering its aspect of bourgeois freedom, the freedom of exchange, as an integral part of capital and of its power over us. It is wrong to separate the two aspects and oppose production to bourgeois freedom, or assume exchange as an ahistorical condition of life.

Fortunati’s stress on equal opportunity for women and lack of equality between men and women is ambiguous too, since her arguments seem to pivot on the recognition of us as ‘value’ in a moral sense in relation to our role as value or non-value-creating for capital.<sup>41</sup> Although admitting that everybody, both men and women, are exploited in capitalism, Fortunati complains that ‘under capitalism men and women are not exploited equally’ (p. 39), and that the housewife

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capable of drawing from the ‘destructive capacities and desires’ of the multitude and organising the struggle. This in a sense is the theorisation of a separation that we want to overcome in a revolutionary movement and it is for us as exciting as... Leninism.

<sup>40</sup> In Fortunati’s jargon, ‘freedom to whom to exchange’ implies sexual freedom, but this is related to an economic concept of exchange. So what Fortunati really means here is: ‘the form of the family does not allow us to swap partners freely as soon as we find a potential for a more profitable exchange’. By saying this Fortunati equates marriage or sexual partnership with a simple economic transaction, a job contract, not dissimilar in this from bourgeois philosophers, such as Kant! (See for example pp. 57–67) Thus the idea of sexual liberation is here one with the idea of a perfectly liberal economic market for human relations. Notice also that Fortunati’s jargon (‘equal relationship’, ‘real opportunity’, ‘freedom with whom to exchange’) can be easily shared by an American Express top manager.

<sup>41</sup> Marx says that ‘the more value [the worker] creates, the more worthless he becomes’ (Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, op. cit., p. 325), but he means that in capitalism the dispossessed are worth nothing when a

is not a 'value' within capitalism: 'unlike the male worker... [the housewife] is posited as non-value; she cannot obtain money for her work, she receives no wage in exchange... she cannot hold money...' (p. 37) And that, within the family, the housewife and her husband 'enter into relation... without equal rights, therefore not equal in the eyes of the law.' (p. 39).<sup>42</sup>

The one-sided vision of capitalism as production, as opposed to the potential real opportunity for equality and freedom of exchange, has consequences when it comes to analysing 'class struggle', as a 'refusal of (any) work', a refusal to have anything to do with capital as production and despotism, but still within capitalism as far as exchange and consumption of commodities are concerned. In fact for Fortunati a major demand against capital is that housewives should 'be allowed to consume' (p. 76) — so major that, in Fortunati's perception, such a demand 'would free everyone, not just women, from the iron laws of the production of surplus value' (p. 76). While production is capital, consumption is something against production and against capital! Proletarian shopping, as the reclaiming of our 'right to consume' without paying is revolutionary indeed — but only within a movement that has consciously put the same concept of bourgeois exchange into the dustbin of history, not one that uncritically retains it!

In Fortunati's undialectic vision, capital becomes a subject that imposes production and repression on us, who are free from capital if we 'refuse' this discipline, if we step 'outside production'. Capital totally incorporates us insofar as we are labour power and work for it, or we are totally Autonomous from it if we refuse its discipline. Within a view that focuses on the aspect of production and neglects the contradiction of capital as despotism and freedom of exchange, there is a risk of developing an uncritical attitude to what is 'outside' production and imposition of discipline. This also appears to be true for Negri. In Pipeline Lettere da Rebibbia Negri praises the rebellious attitude of those who in the '70s avoided a job in industry to find a niche in petty bourgeois semi-legal activity; and of those who got a second job outside their main job in industry. Negri called this a 'reinvention of daily life' (p. 32).<sup>43</sup> Consistent with this, in Empire Negri celebrates 'dropping outs' and refusals of work done 'in every way possible' (p. 274), without any criticism of context, aim, meanings or outcomes of these dropping-outs.

Fortunati too praises examples of 'refusal of work' without any critical insight. On page 146 she says that 'the fall in the birth rate is in part a direct expression of the refusal of the female

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question of choice or priority is considered, not that, in the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist modes of production he has lost some (monetary) value! Rather, precisely in the fact that in capitalism value becomes everything and we become nothing (unless we are worth some exchange value, or better, unless we have exchange value in our pockets) Marx sees the ontological inversion of capital to humans. By complete contrast, Fortunati uncritically accepts the bourgeois concept of a human value which is embodied and expressed by exchange value, to the extent to claim that the individual in capitalism has lost the (money) value he was worth when he was a slave [because, at least then he had value by being a commodity! This (mad) idea assumes that commodity relations are the only imaginable human relations and that (exchange) value is ahistorically pivotal in human life. By assuming this Fortunati does the same 'Robinsonade' that Marx criticised in the classical political economists which amounts to a covert assumption of the naturalness of the present social relations.

<sup>42</sup> Before saying this, she quotes Marx, who speaks about the formal equality of the worker and the capitalist in front of the law in the sphere of circulation, but it escapes from Fortunati's understanding that Marx wants to highlight the paradox of bourgeois equality and freedom, not to make an apology of it.

<sup>43</sup> A 'Milanian Anonymous' ultra left pamphlet criticises Negri's assumption of working class 'Autonomy' by considering uncritically the 'immediate subjectivity... of the individual as immediately given' within the conditions imposed in capitalism. Thus as they say for Negri 'Autonomy' and 'self-valorisation' of the individual are considered within the limits of what exists, 'for his "free" submission to the capitalist society'. (Anonimo Milanese, op. cit. pp. 64–65, our translation).

housewife to take on the extra housework that children require'. A refusal of having children can have many meanings including being part of an anti-capitalist struggle, but it can also be the result of the naturalisation of bourgeois relations of exchange, and of the domination of value over our lives: millions of women have refused to have children in order to become full-time wage slaves.<sup>44</sup> What is interesting is actually to consider how this fact is contradictory for capital, and how these contradictions act within it.

The most noticeable example of Fortunati's compartmentalised vision of 'refusal of work' as struggle-against-capital-by-default is the following: for her the wave of abandonment of children that was caused by the employment of women in large scale industry is as an example of 'women's' indiscipline' and their 'refusal... to take on the extra housework that children bring' (p. 171). Against Marx who called this phenomenon an 'unnatural estrangement between mother and child' (p. 172) she launches a feminist attack, since is it not egalitarian to attribute parental affection to women as 'natural': 'here', she says, 'Marx himself is blinded by capitalist ideology' (p. 172). But in her feminist passion, Fortunati does not understand that here Marx speaks about a fundamental feature of capital as alienation: the ontological inversion that makes money everything for the bourgeois individual and the individual as person nothing. When the real need to earn a wage becomes more important for your survival than your own child, capital has completed the ultimate disintegration of society into alien individuals, obstacles to each other's happiness, submitted to capital as wage earners for all our needs and desires.

Against capital as the unity and opposition of despotism and bourgeois freedom, a revolutionary movement can only challenge both production together with the relations of free exchange, private property, and the whole construction of our dispossession. The process of defetishisation of value and capital is the real abolition of a material social relation, of exchange; and thus the real repossession of the control over our lives, 'the complete restoration of man to himself as social — i.e. human — being, a restoration which has become conscious'.<sup>45</sup> In the struggle direct social relations will necessarily abolish the mediation of social relations through market relations. Only within direct social relations will value be abolished and the real individual, who is himself because of who he is and what he does with the others, and not because of what he has in his pockets, will be confirmed. Only within direct social relations what the individual works towards, i.e. the whole of his conscious activity, will be one with his result. And this is real freedom, because if we desire or dislike something we are really able to consciously work towards achieving it or changing it, since nothing will rule over us despite us and behind our backs.<sup>46</sup>

## 5. The nature of labour power

The above leads us now straight into the core of Fortunati's work: her original 'demonstration' that housework produces value. In fact, it is not a demonstration, but simply, the declamation of

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<sup>44</sup> Against the trend for women flooding on to the labour market any appeal to traditional values and moralism cannot work on its own. This is why the right-wing party Forza Nuova has to take into consideration the reality of commodity fetishism and propose a wage for housework in order to counter-balance the attractiveness of a proper wage. Their political manifesto says: 'Proposals at the legislative level: ... the demographic growth must be encouraged with subsidies for every child and with further subsidies for the families with more children... female housework must be paid with a family cheque, to discourage work outside home.' ([www.tmcrow.org](http://www.tmcrow.org), our translation).

<sup>45</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, op. cit. p. 348, punctuation slightly changed.

<sup>46</sup> This does not mean that one should not recognise liberal struggles (as well as struggles in the workplaces lim-

a 'truth' based on an initial assumption that labour power is 'a commodity like any other' (p. 19). If this is the case, labour power must contain value, as the crystallisation of the abstract labour expended by its producer. Thus the labour of the housewife, the producer of the labour power of the chief wage-earner of the family, must be abstract value and must create value.

There is a general tendency in Autonomist theory to gloss over the nature of labour power as a special commodity different from others. For example in *Reading Capital Politically* Cleaver treats labour power in the same way as other commodities, (food and energy) without any specification. In fact, after having discussed labour power, he says: 'let us now turn to food as a commodity and apply the same approach' (p. 101). Surely, this does not mean that Cleaver does not know that there are important differences between food and labour power as commodities – it means only that he neglects the relevance of these differences for a 'political reading' of *Capital*.

Fortunati is surely more 'complex' than Cleaver. By maintaining that, as far as its content in value is concerned, labour power is like all other commodities, she admits that it is nevertheless a special commodity, but only because:

Its use value is produced and consumed separately from its exchange value; its use value is produced within the process of reproduction and consumed within the process of production; its exchange value is produced within the process of production and consumed within that of reproduction (pp. 78–79).

But this 'complexity' does not touch upon the real reason why labour power is a special commodity, and it is precisely in the fact that it cannot contain value as the crystallisation of abstract labour! Let us see why.

In order to exist, capital needs a precondition: the material dispossession of the producers from the means of production. What does this dispossession mean? That I do not have the means to produce what I need. Because our relations are mediated by the market, the way in which our dispossession manifests in our society is precisely the fact that as proletariat we cannot produce value by ourselves, a fact that appears to Fortunati intriguingly contradictory.

Dispossession of the means of production is a specific feature of wage-work relations. In previous modes of production, a shaman or a hunter was one with his herbs or weapons. There was no such a thing as a shaman without her herbs or a hunter without his arrows 'looking for employment' because a shaman or a hunter were not under waged-work relations. In capitalism, where the wage-work relation is the base of production, the unity of man and his activity is split into: labour power on the one side and capital (the result of human activity turned against the human) on the other. In contrast to the shaman, a baker without an oven cannot make cakes. The baker has the labour power, the faculty of making cakes, but if the oven is the private property of someone else, the baker's faculty is suspended in the air. It is useless – unless it is reunited with the oven. But this reunion can be possible only if the capitalist, owner of the oven, hires the baker, and only through this reunion can value be produced. The value that the baker then subsequently produces will belong to the capitalist, the owner of the means of production, as his capital.

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ited to higher wages) as being expressions of the contradictions of capitalism and containing potentials for development beyond the conditions that cradled them; but one needs to understand both the contradictions that give rise to these struggles and the inner contradictions of these struggles.

This dispossession is even more striking if we think that our same skills are shaped in order to be useful within a capitalist process, and find no reason of existing outside it. Bakery is still an example of a traditional craft, whose skills have been defined within a non-capitalistic context. But if we think, for example, of the skills of working with a computerised spreadsheet, we can understand how tragically our skills are not only useless but even unimaginable without capital.

In a society based on exchange, the fact that our dispossession obliges us to hire ourselves to a capitalist for a wage takes the form of commodity exchange, of a purchase and sale of labour power. This is why labour power is not a commodity like a cake, but just the way our dispossession and our exploitation by the capitalist appears, and the expression of the ontological inversion that makes capital enrichment, knowledge, science, creativity and us the opposite of all this: nothing without capital.<sup>47</sup>

This is why saying to the proletariat, as Fortunati does, ‘All right mate, you cannot create value but considering everything, is not the result of your reproduction a commodity and a value? Is not your labour power a commodity like any other?’ means just taking the piss out of our real conditions. The very existence of labour power, of a ‘capacity for producing’ helplessly separated from the possibility of its realisation as production, is one with the very fact that we cannot produce anymore by and for ourselves, but we can produce value only as appendages of capital. It is one with our experience of alienation both in production, in our relation with our products, and in any other activity shaped by capital.

If we want to scream the truth, we have to scream that we are dispossessed, that we cannot create value with our reproduction, and that labour power is not a commodity like any other. These are aspects of the same truth: of our condition as proletariat! The idea that we produce labour power in the same way as the independent baker produces cakes to sell is a petty-bourgeois delusion, and not a contribution to revolutionary theory at all.

## 6. Invisible value

Thus Fortunati starts with a mistake, the assumption that labour power is ‘a commodity like any other’, that it must consequently carry some value created by the housewife. Starting from an initial mistake, it is no wonder that a theory is bound to be contradicted by facts: Fortunati’s theory clashes with the fact that the exchange value of labour power does not reflect any housework-created value at all. But for Fortunati, this is not because there must be something wrong in her assumptions, but because of a hidden peculiarity of labour power, that it can contain invisible value.

In fact, for Fortunati, labour power is such that its value and exchange value are related to totally different mechanisms, this giving value the possibility of having invisible contributions that are not reflected in exchange value. While the exchange value of labour power accounts only for the value of the means of subsistence consumed by the worker and his family, the value of labour power can have a contribution on top of this, which represents the abstract labour of housework.<sup>48</sup> This extra ‘value’ on the top has no manifestation as exchange value and no

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<sup>47</sup> See Karl Marx Capital, Chapters 14 and 15, for the ontological inversion of man and capital realised first with rationalisation in manufacture and later perfected with large-scale industry.

<sup>48</sup> ‘The magnitude of value [of labour power] is greater than the sum of values of the commodities used to produce it... i.e. its exchange value’ (p.84).

representation in terms of money: it is value in an invisible state during the exchange between the worker and the capitalist, i.e. invisible on the labour market.<sup>49</sup>

This is an important theoretical challenge, which needs to be supported by solid arguments. But the only argument Fortunati brings about is that Marx said that exchange value and value are different concepts. However, she seems to be oblivious that in the same quote Marx says that these values are related, exchange value being the manifestation of value (pp. 82–3).<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, the quote by Marx says: ‘With the transformation of the magnitude of value into the price this necessary relation appears as the exchange-ratio between a single commodity and the money commodity which exists outside it... However... the possibility... of a quantitative incongruity between price and magnitude of value... is inherent in the price form itself. This is not a defect but, on the contrary, it makes this form the adequate one for a mode of production whose laws assert themselves as blindly operating averages between constant irregularities’ (p. 83). For Fortunati this means that Marx would agree with her theory – that price could diverge from value for given, mathematically expressible, lumps of invisible value. But Marx did not say this! Marx simply means that price, a real expression of value (i.e. its ‘appearance’), is realised through the blind working of the market, in which prices necessarily fluctuate around value.

There is a tragic misunderstanding here. Fortunati does not realise that for Marx the word ‘appearance’ means ‘being a real expression of an essence’. Grossly misunderstanding this, Fortunati redefines this word in her own way (and uses this interpretation throughout her pamphlet): ‘appearance’ as ‘being an illusion totally unrelated to a hidden reality’. Only with this misunderstanding can she claim that Marx would support her theory and agree that the price of labour power can be an illusion which hides the reality of an invisible value.

While for Marx essence and appearance have a relation, appearance being part of the same reality as essence, in Fortunati’s conspiratorial understanding of capitalism the concept of appearance is banalised into the concept of a simple lie, a curtain that covers a totally different reality, a mystification and a deception by nasty capital. This means that the reality behind an appearance (the value of labour power behind its exchange value in this case) cannot be grasped through the study of this appearance. So how can we know the reality of the value of labour power, the reality behind its price? This can be found only by feminine intuition, which can neglect all the lies and ‘appearances’ of this man-made capitalist world.

### **The reality of ‘invisible value’**

Let us see then how Fortunati proceeds with showing how the ‘reality’ of the invisible value of labour power manifests itself. If this invisible value does not manifest itself in the exchange value of labour power, how and where does it manifest itself then? In the future creation of value.

In fact, according to Fortunati, the invisible value created by the housewife is a ‘value [which] raises the use-value of labour power, use-value being the element which creates value’ (p. 52). What does this mean? In the case of any other commodity than labour power, one would not mix the concept of use value and value of a product (e.g. a cake as a lump of flour, butter, sugar, etc.

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<sup>49</sup> When the worker sells his labour power to the capitalist, ‘the housework process [which creates this value] passes over to the capitalist leaving no visible trace’. (p. 97)

<sup>50</sup> ‘The fact that the magnitude of the value of labour power is not fully represented by its exchange value is not surprising because the value of a commodity is expressed in an independent manner throughout its representation as exchange value’ (p. 82).

and its value, expressed by its price). But in the case of the use value of labour power one can be tempted to mix value and use value up because of the particular nature of labour power: that of being the capacity to create value for capital. The use value of labour power is the potential creation of value, thus, the Fortunatian syllogism concludes, if something has the capacity to create value, this something must be value itself.<sup>51</sup>

The fact that labour creates value but is not value itself is a fundamental concept to understand capitalism. With the separation of property from labour, labour is posited as ‘not-raw-material, not-instrument-of-labour, not-raw-product... [it is] labour separated from all means and objects of labour, from its entire objectivity. This living labour [exists] as an abstraction from these moments of its actual reality (also, not-value); [as] complete denudation... stripped of all objectivity. [It is] labour as absolute poverty: poverty not as shortage, but as total exclusion of objective wealth. Or also as the existing non-value, and hence purely objective use value... labour not as an object, but as an activity; not as itself value, but as living source of value...’<sup>52</sup>

But for Fortunati if something is able to create value, it is value itself. It is an extra value, whose existence is mystified as non-value by capitalism, and which is created by the housewife. This extra value is real and already existing, in an invisible state, but it needs the work of the husband worker in his workplace to ‘re-transform itself’ into visible value (pp. 95–6).

But if value is the expression of our social relations mediated by things, i.e., mediated by a social relation between our commodities on the market, how can the value of labour power exist and at the same time be invisible on the labour market? And how can the invisible ‘abstract’ labour time of housework be a reality? Fortunati answers: the value of labour power ‘is determined by the time necessary to produce and reproduce it’, because this is ‘like that of any other commodity’ (p.35) Is it? Not at all. The fact that abstract labour time is ‘measured’ by considering labour time is not true for ‘any commodity’ at all! Abstract labour time is not in fact the same thing as the actual labour time, that is the time actually spent doing the work. We can only speak about abstract labour only within a production process which is aimed at exchange, i.e. at the market.<sup>53</sup>

So, how can abstract housework be only defined by the quantity of work produced by the houseworker in the privacy of our homes, as she says on page 35? How can we ‘measure’ the abstract labour time of tidying up the house, vacuum cleaning, having sex, totally different concrete works, without a process of abstraction and comparison that can occur only through the market? No market, no production for a market, no abstract value. Fortunati’s idea that abstract housework time can be measured by timing housework is a misconception of what abstract labour time is.

But at the very root of all these theoretical problems there is something wrong in Fortunati’s basic understanding of the same concept of value. On p. 106, in order to demonstrate that reproduction work is value-producing work, she says that ‘despite being individual labour, [reproduction work] is work in its immediate social form, like the work that produces commodities.’ Wrong. Why is this wrong? Value is the manifestation of the way society rewards my work done

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<sup>51</sup> ‘While the use value of other commodities cannot constitute the measure of their value... in the case of labour power it is its...use-value that constitutes the measure of its value’[she says on p.81]

<sup>52</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, London: Penguin Books, 1993, pp. 295–6]

<sup>53</sup> As Marx found in his analysis of capital, value (and abstract labour as well) is social since it is inseparable from the nature of the commodities and of the nature (aim) of their production: ‘I call this commodity fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities... This fetishism arises from the peculiar character of the labour which produces them.’ (Marx, *Capital*, op. cit., p. 165).



for others, i.e. my contribution to the total labour of society. Importantly, this 'reward' is indirect. Production in capitalism, unlike that in the past, is a private and not immediately social activity, and the social relation among producers is mediated by exchange of the things they produce. Our products, then, engaged in a social relation on the market, acquire the property of possessing value, as something 'stamped upon them'. Thus the same existence of value is fundamentally related to the fact that our work, which produces commodities, is NOT immediately social. If Fortunati has no clue of the mechanism that produces value, what credit can we give to her weirdest statements about invisible value?

### **The real issue hidden by the theory of invisible value**

The Arcane of Reproduction reproduces the arcane of housework by analysing it in a style that allows more than one interpretation. A first superficial reading is bound to appeal to the liberal feminist reader. It speaks explicitly about the inequality of men and women 'in the eyes of the law', or about questions of social power between the proletarian man and woman (p. 39). However, other parts insist that the issue is 'exploitation', that it is a Marxian issue.

But let us consider Fortunati's 'Marxian' arguments about the housewife's 'exploitation'.<sup>54</sup> For Fortunati, this 'exploitation' consists in the fact that the necessary labour time of the housewife 'is calculated only with respect to the male worker's working day' (p. 91). This is a bit ambiguous. What does it mean? In Fortunati's words: 'the necessary labour time supplied by the male worker already contains the [value of]... the means of subsistence of the female housewife too... [thus she] must, with her work, re-earn [it]' (p. 93). That is, if the husband's wage includes the means of the wife's reproduction, this implies that with her housework the wife works again on top of what has already been earned by her husband during his day of work.

The fact that the housewife must re-earn some money with her work, is not the exploitation based on equal and fair exchange of wage for work that Marx discovered. It is rather an 'exploitation' due to the fact that there is something left unpaid, against the sacred bourgeois rules of fair and equal exchange. Exploitation by making people re-earn something, i.e. not paying a full honest wage, not exchanging equivalents, is the bourgeois concept of exploitation that one hears when Nike's sweatshops are under left liberal criticism.

However, if it is true that Fortunati's theory reveals that the housewife has to do a second batch of work for nothing after that done by her husband, this would be an interesting discovery anyway. Nobody has ever noticed this before, and we should now wonder whether Fortunati's theory of invisible value is really fit to expose this bad accountancy of capitalist reward of wages for work. Let us then force ourselves temporarily to adopt Fortunati's theory and check her own claim, by evaluating the necessary labour time involved in the husband's wage.

According to the theory, the housewife does some abstract labour, which materialises in her contribution of value  $lh$  (value from housework); and the husband worker does some abstract labour, which results in his contribution of value  $lw$  (value from work). According to Fortunati's instructions, 'the two valorisation processes must add up' (p.89). This means that, if invisible value  $lh$  is not bound to be invisible forever, it must eventually manifest as a contribution in the total value  $ltot$  (total value) of the product; or, better, in Fortunati's words, 're-transforms itself',

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<sup>54</sup> Which she presents against the accusation of 'double counting' labour in her theory (p. 93).

in the final value created for the capitalist. Thus total value is the sum of the value created by housework and that created by work:

$$l_{\text{tot}} = l_h + l_w.$$

The capitalist, who has never heard of Leopoldina Fortunati, does not know anything about the invisible value  $l_h$ . What he thinks is that he has acquired a quantity of value  $l_{\text{tot}}$  during the day. At the end of the working day, the capitalist gives the wage to his worker. This wage is the money necessary to maintain the worker as worker and his wife as housewife. The capitalist is aware of this necessity, and has to give up part of the value that he gained during the day – let us say for example, one quarter of it. So, the necessary labour time coincides with a quarter of the working day, that is a quarter of  $l_{\text{tot}}$ . But, since we are temporarily Fortunati, we know that ‘in reality’  $l_{\text{tot}}$  is the sum of the two contributions of abstract labour ( $l_h + l_w$ ). Thus, even if the capitalist does not see it, we see that the wage actually paid corresponds to necessary labour time, which is one quarter of the abstract labours of both work and housework:

$$\text{Wage paid} = (1/4) \cdot (l_h + l_w) = \text{necessary labour time.}$$

Now, being Leopoldina Fortunati, I would conclude: ‘The necessary labour time that corresponds to the wage paid to the worker includes the necessary labour time expended by the housewife at home. This means that Leopoldina Fortunati (that is, me) is wrong in claiming that the housewife’s work constitutes a re-earning. Indeed, it is clear from the formulas that the necessary labour time supplied by the housewife does contribute part of the wage, thus her work at home is necessary for this earning and does not amount to a re-earning. It is worth stressing that we have just demonstrated that Fortunati’s own theory contradicts her own claims.

After having enjoyed the above exercise, which showed the inconsistency between Fortunati’s theory and her own claims, let us remember that it was only an exercise, and that we have already argued that housework does not produce value. Is the housewife rewarded or not by capital for her work, then, and if she is in what sense is she? Assuming that the man’s wage covers the reproduction of his whole family, the male worker is paid in consideration of the existence and reproduction of himself as worker, his wife as housewife, and his children as children. In the ‘generosity’ of the capitalist to pay a family wage to the married and father worker, the concrete existence and activity of the housewife is taken into consideration, as well as the concrete existence of the children and their activity. We do not need the elaboration of Fortunati to see that housework is functional to capitalism, and that she, as well as her husband, is paid only for her means of subsistence while capital thrives on their lives.

Although the woman is ‘rewarded’ through her husband’s wage and she is not a waged worker, this ‘reward’ has something in common with the ‘reward’ received by her husband for his work: indeed, both husband and wife receive money for the value of their survival. The condition of the woman may then be discussed in relation to a sound criticism of the wage form. But also in this respect *The Arcane of Reproduction* is disappointing. When the question of the wage form is considered, Fortunati deploys all her skills of complexification and renders the argument (deliberately?) obscure. For example, we read that:

In production, the elements, which are commodities, appear as such, and the process of production is the process of production; workers are labour power, therefore commodities, but they are also the working class; work is waged work; the exchange is

an exchange organised capitalistically; the relation of production is the waged work relation. Thus it is not at this level that capital hides its voracity in the appropriation of value or the violence of exploitation, but at the level of the capital worker relationship, which is in reality a relationship based on the expropriation of surplus value, taking place in an exchange which, while appearing to be one between equals, is in fact an exchange of non-equivalents between non equals (pp. 20–21).

In this ‘complex’ paragraph we learn that it is not at the level of production that capital hides its voracity for value and not in the fact that ‘work is waged work’! But in an ‘exchange of non-equivalents’, in ‘unfair exchange’. The woman is exploited because her husband’s labour power is exchanged without regard for its invisible value so that ‘the capitalist buys [labour power] below cost’ (p. 84).

Despite Fortunati’s Marxian make-up, at the end of the day her arguments pivot around the criticism of a male-centered society where the capitalist and the worker, i.e. the masculine cross-class side of society, share the tacit assumption that the wage is just the merit of the male worker’s day work. The problem is that it is the husband who cashes the cheque, and the woman is not ‘equal to him in front of the law’ and cannot ‘hold money herself’. Talks of ‘struggle’ are eclipsed behind complains about economic and legal inequality.

Fortunati’s liberal ‘reality’ behind her Marxian ‘appearance’ seems to be connected with the main problem of the book, highlighted in Section 4 above. Fortunati cannot go beyond theorising an ‘unfair exchange’ because of her initial assumption, that labour power is ‘a commodity like all others’; because she cannot grasp the nature of labour power as a special commodity whose (fair) exchange implies the (unfair) submission of the worker to despotism and alienation. Because she cannot grasp the important dialectic of bourgeois freedom and equality of exchange with bourgeois despotism and exploitation in production. And she cannot see that ‘exchange value or, more precisely, the money system is in fact the system of equality and freedom’ and exploitation is ‘inherent in it... merely the realisation of equality and freedom, which prove to be inequality and unfreedom’.<sup>55</sup>

Leopoldina’s Mathematical skills (note scanned pictures of formulae from the book are currently missing from this online version)

To finish, let us consider page 98 of *The Arcane of Reproduction*, which must have undoubtedly inspired the deepest awe in its readers. This page contains the ‘calculation’ of... something. But what? This is a good question indeed. Fortunati introduces these formulas by defining a quantity  $p$  as ‘the amount of the surplus value supplied in the processes of production and reproduction’ and a quantity  $P$  as ‘the average surplus value supplied by the single labour power’ (p. 98) but then she presents a ‘formula’ for a mysterious quantity  $P$  that has never been introduced at all. The ‘complexity’ of this formula is already brewing in this mysterious introduction. But let us look at how she proceeds (see p. 98)

Besides the clumsy introduction (is  $P$  equal to  $p$ ?) and the confusing use of unnecessary labeling (why  $n$  instead of  $n$ ? etc.), in these ‘formulae’ there is something more substantial than just a question of sloppiness. What is written on the right of  $P$  does not mean anything in mathematical language. What is the relation between the ‘formulae’ on the right of  $P$ , which are just piled up one on the top of the other? What is the relation between the two ‘formulae’ on the bottom

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<sup>55</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, op. cit. pp. 248–249]

right of P', which seem to be adjacent to each other, with no clear connection? Mathematics is something 'scientifically true', black and white, only because, by its own definition and nature, it talks a language that does not leave the reader anything to guess.

But let us also look at the relation between the two 'formulae' at the bottom right of P'. They are separated by a mysterious empty space. Again, we are obliged to make a guess, while the founding fathers of mathematics turn in their grave.<sup>56</sup> Are perhaps these two formulae multiplied by each other — i.e., is there a missing 'x' sign between them? But this would mean that the mysterious quantity P' would be proportional to the squares of a rate of surplus and the number of workers — which is rather unlikely whatever P' is, and above all if we have guessed right that P' is surplus value. On the other hand, the two 'formulae' cannot be added, subtracted or equated (+, -, =) to each other either! Indeed, the first of the two 'formulae' contains f' which, as Fortunati says, is value; and (a"/a') and n' which are pure numbers: so the first 'formula' is value. The second 'formula' contains only (a"/a') and n', so it is a pure number. Value cannot be added, subtracted or equated to a number.<sup>57</sup> So what is this relation between those two 'formulae'? The only solution of this riddle is: it is an unbelievably bad typo. Probably a whole chunk of formula (= f' x) has been unwittingly missed between the two 'formulae'. But this is not just a typo; it is the disappearance of a whole chunk of logical connections. It turns the whole lot into an evident nonsense, and it should have been spotted by the author.

If Fortunati had avoided 'formulae', not only would she have avoided embarrassment for their mismanagement, but she would also have missed nothing in her arguments. In fact, this use of mathematics is only a rhetorical exercise. Let us consider the logic of this formulaic mess: she claims she wants to 'calculate' the total surplus value supplied to the capitalists by both workers and housewives. In order to do this, she just takes the known expression for the rate of surplus value and feeds her invisible labour quantities into it. This is like claiming to be able to control a magic force M, and then, in order to convince people to believe in its existence, show them the law of Newton (F = ma; the force applied to a body of mass m is equal to its acceleration multiplied by its mass) as:

$$(F + M) = ma$$

The use of a formula here does not add anything to my claim of the existence of the magical force M, and does not tell the readers how to measure it. It also does not affect the acceleration a, if we define F to be such to give the correct acceleration if added to M. In practice, this 'formula' has the only aim of giving my statements some respectful 'mathematical' decoration. Of making my readers say: 'If it is in a formula, it must be true!'

However, formula 1 looks still too readable and it is not intimidating enough. In order to sort this out, I can do a bit of cut-and-paste and here you go:

$$\begin{aligned} &(F+M) (F+M') \times \\ &ma = (2) \\ &+F F' \times(F+M) \end{aligned}$$

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<sup>56</sup> 25,000 Mhz.

<sup>57</sup> The question: 'How many apples do I have if I add one apple to five apples?' makes sense. The question: 'What do I have if I add five apples to five' does not make any sense. In order to add, subtract or equate two quantities, they

This is much more complex, thus more authoritative, and scary enough to deter any criticism of my magic force.<sup>58</sup>

When it comes to ‘mathematical’ demonstrations, going fuzzy seems to be a general feature of the Autonomist tradition. Cleaver in *Reading Capital Politically*, page 123, offers us a brilliant example of the use of mathematics in order to complicate and even contradict, what he says in plain words. Discussing the contribution of the housewife to capital’s profits, Cleaver correctly argues that housework serves to lower the value of labour power, thus increasing the value pocketed by the capitalist as surplus. This is clear, and an interesting point. But then he tries to express this point with the following unfortunate ‘formula’:

How do we read this ‘formula’? The cycle of production of capital, which is the second line, says that at the beginning of a cycle the capitalist invests money (M) to buy some labour power (LP) and some means of production (MP); then the worker produces (P), and the outcome of production is a new commodity C’, which is worth more value and is exchanged for a higher sum of money (M’) than the one initially invested. This cycle repeats. The extra money, cycle by cycle, is pocketed by the capitalist as surplus value.

In correspondence to the cycle of production, there is a cycle of reproduction (first line). Let us read it step by step. At the beginning of the cycle (day 1 of work), the worker sells to the capitalist the labour power LP for a quantity of money M. With this money, the family buys their means of subsistence C(MS). Then the worker’s wife does some housework (P). After the housework is done, the worker finds himself to be in possession of the labour power LP\*. Cleaver states: LP\* is different from LP and it is worth less. This means that the labour power that the worker has after his wife’s work is worth less than the labour power he sold to the capitalist the day before. Fortunately this is not very bad for him because in the next cycle (day 2 of work), he is able to rip off the capitalist, and apparently sell LP\* for the same amount of money M he had received the day before when he sold LP, although LP\* is worth less... Of course, all this is just ludicrous and if Cleaver had left this ‘formula’ out his arguments about housework would have been clearer.

Cleaver’s ‘formula’ also confirms the general and unavoidable curse of housework: that of having always to contribute to capital valorisation in an invisible way – no matter how much one twists mathematics, this value seems to be just unable to appear in numbers, black and white! The second line in the formula, i.e. the cycle of production, confirms that for the capitalist nothing has changed from day 1: on day 2, he buys the same labour power LP as the day before, whatever the amount of work done by the housewife, and he is apparently unaware of LP\*, which does not play any role in the cycle of production.

## Conclusions

As we said in the Introduction, the present critique of *The Arcane of Reproduction* was principally aimed at commenting on a few questions that have been central in the Autonomist tradition:

- Does reproductive work (and in general any work outside the sphere of production) create value?

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must be quantities of something homogeneous.

<sup>58</sup> All we have available to us is the English version of *The Arcane of Reproduction*. We assume that it reflects the original Italian version.

- Is the whole society a large factory where any work or activity not only produce value but are also organised as waged work?
- Can we see class relation in capitalism as the antagonism between capital, i.e. a subject that merely wants to impose (work) discipline, and the working class?

In Section 1 we explored the reasons behind the Autonomist argument that work outside the sphere of production creates value. We showed that this ‘quest’ for value is consistent with the Autonomist subjectivist reading of Marx’s categories, e.g. value and abstract labour: if value and abstract labour have immediate meanings in terms of subjective antagonism with capital, they may be extended to explain the struggles of the unwaged: the unemployed, students, etc.

Starting from Fortunati’s claim that the family is a hidden factory organised ‘capitalistically’, in Section 2 we explored the Autonomist thesis that all waged and unwaged work is organised by capital as in an extended factory. We acknowledged that this theorization has a moment of truth – it is true that capital tends to impose the discipline of waged work onto unwaged activity. It is true that this can explain the antagonism of the unwaged. It is also true that any disruption of reproduction or circulation is a disruption of the workings of capital as a whole – thus struggles outside the workplace can be effective against capital. However, this does not necessarily mean, nor requires as a precondition, that unwaged work must create value.

In Section 3 we discussed the way in which capital imposes ‘discipline’ on unwaged activity. We considered the dialectical interplay of capital’s despotism within the workplace and bourgeois exchange, which regulates the division of labour and defines the horizons for individual choice and possibility in society. We stressed that bourgeois freedom and equality and capital’s despotism are two sides of the same coin.

In Section 4 we argued that *The Arcane of Reproduction* lacks this dialectical understanding. We quoted a few sentences, among many, which suggest that freedom, equality (and Bentham) are illusory in capitalism only because they are constrained by despotism and distorted by unequal exchange – an old Proudhonian idea. There is no clear attempt to explore the role of bourgeois freedom of exchange and value in capital’s rule – instead, the centrality of exchange and value in human relations is uncritically assumed as natural and ahistorical. We found a similar one-sidedness in Negri and Hardt. In *Empire* the authors dream about ‘republicanism’, and claim that ‘a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism’ is possible on the basis of the already existing wealth of individual freedom and productive creativity.<sup>59</sup> And they denounce capital’s imposition of discipline and control over this freedom and creativity. All this means is to theorise only one possible freedom or creativity: the only ones defined within the bourgeois relations as given.<sup>60</sup>

Section 5 went to the core of Fortunati’s own theory in *The Arcane of Reproduction*, i.e. that labour power is ‘a commodity like all others’ thus it must contain value as the crystallisation of abstract labour of housework. We disagreed and argued that in wage-work relations labour power is sold as a commodity, but it is a special commodity, different from all others – this

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<sup>59</sup> Negri and Hardt, *Empire*, op. cit. p. 294] They quote Spinoza to support this bourgeois dream of an ideally free civil society.

<sup>60</sup> This does not mean to dismiss struggles that may start in order to defend rights of freedom and equality, as well as struggles that may start in order to demand a higher wage[but we cannot be but disappointed by ‘revolutionary’ or ‘anti-capitalist’ theories that cannot criticise the present social relations.

difference exposes the inequality inherent in the wage-work relation. We argued that conceptualising labour power as 'a commodity like all others' and thinking that we all produce value means to conceptualise society as being made up of independent producers: producers of cakes, producers of labour power... and we felt that this betrayed a petty bourgeois delusion. In general, we noticed a common tendency in Autonomist Marxism to consider within the same theoretical framework labour power and other commodities (e.g. energy and food); or a tendency to conflate the despotism of the foreman on the waged worker with the pressure of the market on the independent producer.<sup>61</sup>

In Section 6 we discussed the nature of value and abstract labour and showed that Fortunati's understanding of these concepts is fundamentally flawed. In general, one may be tempted to widen Marx's original concept of value in order to embrace both waged and unwaged work (students, housewives...), or both productive and unproductive work (financial, advertising industry...), within the same 'theoretical framework'. However, it is questionable that 'labeling' everything that happens under the sun of capital as 'production of value' is a useful way of explaining how capital works and dominates.<sup>62</sup>

In fact, the Autonomist attempt to 'valorise' all activity tends to mix up a moral conception of 'valorisation' with an economic one. The claim of a social reward which society supposedly 'owes' the unwaged because of some alleged role in 'producing value' is part of a tradition of struggles of the unemployed and housewives of the '70s which confronted their States and ended up demanding social support from them. This tradition has survived in some theorists who belonged or still belong to the Autonomist tradition.<sup>63</sup> As we discussed earlier, in *Empire* the claim that unwaged work creates value is explicitly aimed at justifying moralistically the demand for a 'reward', a 'citizen's wage', for the unwaged.

The *Arcane of Reproduction* contributes to this tendency and theorises that housewives are denied recognition of social and economic status within the present social relations as producers of 'value'. She cannot imagine any reality beyond that offered by bourgeois relations and cannot think or claim anything beyond this restricted horizon. This is why she claims that demanding that the housewife be 'allowed to consume' or praising parents' practice in giving pocket money to children is 'very anti-capitalist'!<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> This does not mean to dismiss threat, stress and potential antagonism that industrial capital competition implies for the petty bourgeoisie.

<sup>62</sup> 'This formalism... imagines that it has comprehended and expressed the nature and life of a form when it has endowed it with some determination of the schema as a predicate. The predicate may be subjectivity or objectivity, or say, magnetism, electricity... contraction and expansion, east or west, [value/non value creation], and the like... In this sort of circle of reciprocity one never learns what the thing itself is... In such a procedure, sometimes determinations of sense are picked up from everyday intuition [or political-theoretical jargon], and they are supposed of course to mean something different from what they say; something that is in itself meaningful...' [Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Preface, Oxford Paperbacks, p. 29, our adjustments in square brackets].

<sup>63</sup> For example, De Angelis, who theorises that any coerced, waged or unwaged work creates value, is also a keen supporter of the demand 'that all of us receive a guaranteed income which is sufficient to meet basic needs' and which 'pays the invisible work of students' and other low waged and unwaged proletarians so that everybody 'have less pressure and more time to think for themselves and imagine different ways of being' ([www.eco.utexas.edu](http://www.eco.utexas.edu)). The idea of sharing the world with capitalism while creating bubbles of 'different ways of being', which is the theme of the conference *Life Despite Capitalism*, (London School of Economics, 16–17 October 2004) is in De Angelis's quote above expressed as 'imagining different ways of being' [Aufheben cannot but agree with this. Indeed, we think that only when capitalism is subverted and new social relations are established we will be able to create a different way of being that is not...imaginary!!

<sup>64</sup> A striking ambiguity is Fortunati's claim that the children's demand for economic support from their parents

As it was discussed throughout this article, some authors within the Autonomist Marxist tradition still retain a criticism of the commodity form, e.g. De Angelis and Cleaver. While it was important to consider that Fortunati shares themes and jargon with these authors, it was also necessary to stress their differences.<sup>65</sup>

Only a few words about Fortunati's style and methodology. Fortunati's 'dense' style is one of the main reasons for our disappointment as readers. A text intended to present a new theory should have the quality of rigour, a quality that this pamphlet does not have. What can we make of her theory if we read one thing on one page and the opposite on the next? In fact we showed that Fortunati's convoluted style actually hides contradictions and the lack of conceptual clarity in her content.

If readers are not intimidated enough by Fortunati's style, they will surely be by her methodology. Fortunati's analysis starts with an axiom, a 'truth', which the reader has to accept without arguments or justifications for it: 'labour power is a commodity like all others, contained within the person of the worker'. This 'truth' and its 'logical' consequences contradict facts and previous theories, but this does not mean that there is something wrong — only that those facts are 'apparent' and those theories are 'misconceived' — she says with an authoritative tone which does not admit reply.<sup>66</sup> The result of this methodology is a 'new theory' which needs plenty of suspended disbelief because it is at odds with reality, theories, logic, common sense, or concrete experience. This methodology explains the... arcane of all the 'complexities' that Fortunati seems to find in her subject matter page by page.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, even very simple facts become 'extremely

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in the form of pocket money is 'a very anti-capitalist idea' because 'the children earn [this money] solely in virtue of the fact that they exist as individuals and not because they are active as labour powers' (pp. 141–2). In fact, children will get money from their parents not because they are free individuals, but because they are elements of the direct relationship of the family, which is not a relation among free individuals. Free individuals are so free to let each other freely starve, unless they exchange[and this does not apply to the children in a family. While on the one hand Fortunati complains all the time about the illiberal relation of the family for obstructing our perfected 'freedom to exchange with whom we want', it is precisely the form of the family that grants a right to the children to extract money out of the pockets of their parents with nothing in exchange! If this is anti-capitalist, it is in virtue of the clash between capitalism and an archaic form of social relationship, in the same sense that the Christian concept of giving charity to the undeserving poor is... very anti-capitalist too indeed. On the other hand, the form of parental support as pocket money, unlike that in form of directly providing the child what he needs, is a very capitalist form which the archaic relation of parents and children assumes in capitalism! Indeed, modern parents feel the importance of teaching their children 'the value of money' by giving them money, not use values. This obliges the children to think about budgeting and to take up jobs outside home if they go above budget beyond their parents' economic possibilities[which is the necessary training to accept the conditions of life imposed by the commodity form, including the curse of being in waged work for the rest of their life, as the natural and only possible way of living.

<sup>65</sup> There are also differences between Fortunati and Dalla Costa. In *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*, Dalla Costa sees the demand of wages for housework as a useful way to build up a struggle[but the real aim of housewives' struggle, she says correctly, is to develop new social relations, to challenge the present ones, which substantiate the housewives' self-identification with their roles, and their isolation. Fortunati, instead, merely limits herself to demand better economic and social status for women in terms of a bourgeois definition of status: more money, more consumption, a reduction of housework hours, and a wage for the houseworker (See also Poldi Fortunati, 'The Housewife', in *All Work and No Pay, Women, Housework, and the Wages Due*, (1974) Ed. Wendy Edmond and Suzie Fleming, London: Power of Woman Collective and Falling Wall Press, pp.13–19).

<sup>66</sup> For example, she denounces 'errors' (p.73); 'misunderstandings' (pp. 73, 80, 81); 'lack of clarity' (p. 91); 'misconceptions' (p. 59); 'blindness' (p. 91); 'misplaced assumptions' (p. 59); 'general confusion' and 'erroneous theories' (p. 116), etc. in all the history of Marxist thought previous to Fortunati.

<sup>67</sup> Fortunati also posits the 'existence' of a social relation of wage-work for the housewife, which 'appears otherwise' too, because it is mystified by the mediation of the husband, who acts as an 'agent' of capital. Again, the existence of this invisible wage-work relation is declared and sustained although it clashes with facts: every feature of



complex' if they are analysed through a theory that is at odds with reality and which has rejected theories previously devised to explain reality straightforwardly.

So then, does housework create value, or not? We have seen in the previous sections that the answer is: no. Housework does not produce commodities, and the labour involved in it cannot be abstracted and measured as abstract labour, as a contribution to value. But we have also seen the value supposedly created by housework cannot be pinned down anywhere.

In the TV comedy *The Fast Show* which was popular in UK at the end of the '90s one of the sketches was a studio interview, where a journalist invited an explorer to talk about a discovery he had made, of a monster in the wild. But, question by question, the explorer reveals that he did not see the monster because it was invisible; that the monster made a terrifying silence; and that it did not leave traces because it hovered about. At this point the journalist gets up in anger and chases the explorer out of the studio. Fortunati's invisible value, which does not manifest itself on the market, which floats in the air, and that needs to be created again by the husband worker during the process of production while it had allegedly already been created by his wife in the process of reproduction, has exactly the same qualities of the *Fast Show's* monster: i.e., if it is really there or not, if you swear about its existence or not, it does not make any difference in the world.

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family relations which does not fit with wage-work relations or productive work is declared to be a 'specific' feature of this particular wage relation, or of this particular production. See for example p. 105; p. 129; p. 139; or p. 157]

# Keep on Smiling – Questions on Immaterial Labour

## Introduction: a colourful necklace

Toni Negri and Michael Hardt's recent works, *Empire*<sup>1</sup> and *Multitude*,<sup>2</sup> have earned these authors great popularity in the Anglo-Saxon world. Negri is known in Italy for belonging to *autonomia operaia* in the '70s and for being on the receiving end of political persecution by the Italian state at the end of that decade. His earlier work (above all *Marx Beyond Marx*)<sup>3</sup> was a valid contribution to the understanding of the nature of capitalism and influenced many among us who sought an answer to Marxist objectivism and a theory of history based on class struggle.

However, Negri's earlier work circulated among a restricted public, via obscure publishers. The new Toni Negri for the 'new' era emerges in 2000 with *Empire*. A tome written with literature professor Michael's Hardt, *Empire* was warmly welcomed even by the bourgeois press.<sup>4</sup>

Negri's popularity is to be found above all in the fact that his new work addresses important questions, opened by the end of the cycle of struggles of the '70s. In particular: can we still speak about communism, the revolution, classes, in a world where the conditions for working class struggle seem to have been dismantled?

The new Negri proclaims the advent of a new, postmodern, phase of capitalism, in which orthodox Marxism no longer applies; and which needs a new theory: theirs. As Negri and Hardt say:

Social reality changes... then the old theories are no longer adequate. We need new theories for the new reality... Capitalist production and capitalist society has changed... (*Multitude*, p. 140)

Negri and Hardt's work to find a new theory for the 'new' world proceeds alongside other academics, such as Paolo Virno or Maurizio Lazzarato. Their effort contributed to the development of new concepts such as that of 'immaterial labour' and the 'multitude'.

An important reason for Negri and Hardt's popularity is that their work seems to integrate the most fashionable theories of the last twenty years: postmodernism, theories of post-Fordism, weightless economy, etc. — but it is also a theory that presents itself as revolutionary and anti-capitalist.

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<sup>1</sup> Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, London, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Multitude*, The Penguin Press, New York, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> *Marx Beyond Marx*, Autonomedia, London, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> For example, *The New York Times*, as socialist Alex Callinicos, embittered by Negri's attacks on traditional Marxism, reminds to us in 'Toni Negri in perspective', *International Socialism Journal*, Autumn 2001, [www.isj1text.ble.org.uk](http://www.isj1text.ble.org.uk)

Another important reason for Negri and Hardt's success is that their theory is able to cover an enormous number of popular and urgent issues: globalisation, the retreat of traditional class struggle, aspects of capitalist restructuring, the emergence of new social movements, the Zapatistas or the anti-GM peasant struggles in India.

We may perhaps be surprised that one book (or two: *Multitude* appears mainly to clarify Empire's arguments<sup>5</sup>) can contain all this. But Negri and Hardt have a secret: they employ a new, postmodern style suitable, as Maria Turchetto comments, 'for zapping' rather than for a systematic reading.<sup>6</sup> Thanks to this style Negri and Hardt can swiftly touch upon a broad range of loosely interrelated issues, often in passing, often addressing the immediately obvious and the immediately agreeable. And indeed, for example, *Autonomy & Solidarity* notices that Negri and Hardt's attractiveness is in the unquestionable positivity of their 'demands for true democracy, freedom from poverty and an end to the war'.<sup>7</sup>

Although it has generated innumerable criticisms and comments, Negri and Hardt's theory of everything escapes a comprehensive critique simply because of this fractal nature.<sup>8</sup> We, too, are obliged to focus, of course. But we choose an issue that seems to be the backbone of their whole construction: the concept of immaterial labour/production.

In *Empire* Negri and Hardt claim they contributed to an international theoretical effort of definition and understanding of the concept of immaterial labour, the new labour for the 'new' era.<sup>9</sup> Initially conceived as labour based on the use of thought and knowledge, immaterial labour was later enriched by Negri and Hardt with the aspect of 'manipulation of affects'. And it was redefined in terms of its aims rather than the nature of its material activity in order to dodge obvious objections (any labour, let alone 'affective' labour like care, always involves physical activity, etc.).

By *Empire* then, the newest definition of immaterial labour was: labour whose aim is to produce immaterial goods (*Multitude*, p. 334). As Negri and Hardt explain in *Multitude*:

The labour involved in all immaterial production, we should emphasise, remains material... what is immaterial is its product. (*Multitude*, p. 111)

So defined, immaterial labour has two main aspects:

- a) it is 'manipulation of symbols' (i.e. IT work, production of knowledge, problem-solving, etc.) and/or
- b) it is 'manipulation of affects' (production of emotions, well-being, smiles, etc.).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In fact *Multitude* seem to have been written with the aim to patch up the disastrous effect of the war in Iraq on their theory. Or to answer to a number of criticisms from the left: for example, to endorse not a revolution but decentralised micro-struggles.

<sup>6</sup> 'L' Impero Colpisce Ancora',

<sup>7</sup> [auto\\_sol.tao.ca](http://auto_sol.tao.ca). This review also praises their 'critical rethinking' of basic political concepts such as democracy, sovereignty, representation.

<sup>8</sup> Among many articles on Negri and Hardt: Ugo Rossi, 'The Counter-Empire to Come', *Science & Society*, Vol. 69, no. 2, April 2005, pp. 191-217; Maria Turchetto, 'L'Impero'; Paul Thompson 'Foundation and Empire: A Critique of Negri and Hardt', *Capital and Class* 86, Summer 2005, pp. 73-95. <http://www.intermarx.com/interventi/impero.html>.

<sup>9</sup> In *Empire*, p. 29, they mention the work of 'Italian radicals' and quote the philosopher Virno as a reference. An important review of Negri's pre-Empire work is Nick Witheford's 'Autonomist Marxism and the Information Society', *Capital and Class* 52, pp. 85-125.

<sup>10</sup> Negri and Hardt stress that these two aspects are normally entangled. Elsewhere immaterial production is

Despite this stress, in the course of their work Negri and Hardt freely use both the definitions considered above: immaterial labour as the creation of immaterial products and as any labour implying 'immaterial' practices (e.g. post-Fordism and computerisation).

If this conceptual freedom may confuse us, it is only because we still think of production in a traditional way: as production of commodities. A more open mind like theirs, which sees production as anything done in society, can easily conceive the communication between staff in a car factory as a product in its own rights. Thus post-Fordist production can be seen as immaterial production alongside services and IT.

In fact, under the 'hegemony' of immaterial production, all production, including material production, tends to become more immaterial – living in a world where immaterial production is central, we increasingly tend to produce all goods for their images and meanings rather than their material functionality.

Not only all production, but, Negri and Hardt repeat many times, society as a whole is shaped by immaterial production. Immaterial production defines the way we see the world and the way we act in the world – in Hardt's words, it has 'anthropological implications'.<sup>11</sup> As we read in *Multitude*, immaterial production shapes society in its image. It makes society more informationalised, intelligent, affective:

Our claim... is that immaterial labour has become hegemonic in qualitative terms and has imposed a tendency on other forms of labour and society itself... Just as in [the times of the 'hegemony' of industrial production] society itself had to industrialise itself, today 'society has to informationalise, become intelligent, become affective. (*Multitude*, p. 109)

Daring more, Negri and Hardt argue that not only does immaterial production influence society, but it actually produces it. This is true, they say, because this new production mainly aims at the production of communication and affects. Daily, tons of communication and affects are created by services, by selling 'with a smile', by the advertising industry, and via the Internet – not to speak about all the communication encouraged by Toyotism. Taking this production of communications and affects as a production of 'social relations and social life' in its entirety, Negri and Hardt call immaterial production a 'biopolitical production', i.e. a production of life:<sup>12</sup>

It might be better to understand [immaterial labour] as 'biopolitical labour', that is labour which creates not only material goods but also relationships and ultimately social life itself. (*Multitude*, p. 111)

As we will see later in detail, immaterial production defines a 'new' form of capitalist exploitation by the new global capitalist regime, Empire. But it also makes a revolution against this regime possible. How? Immaterial production, being based on the powers of our thoughts and hearts, is

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described as three-fold, regrouping their aspects differently. See, for example, Michael's Hardt's 'Affective Labour', *Makeworlds*, Friday 26 /12/2003, [www.makeworlds.org0](http://www.makeworlds.org0)

<sup>11</sup> Michael Hardt, 'Affective Labour'.

<sup>12</sup> The term 'biopolitical' is borrowed from Foucault, but, as Maria Turchetto (*L'Impero*) shows, it is subverted from its original sense.

already potentially autonomous from the capitalist they say. Only a little step then separates us from taking this production over from the parasitic capitalist and self-manage it.

We can appreciate then how immaterial production sustains Negri and Hardt's arguments and their political project. And, as we shall see below, it allows Negri and Hardt to construct a broad, universal theory that can present itself as radical. This is the reason why we will focus on immaterial production in this article. If we want to critique a multicoloured necklace it is not good enough to speak about the necklace as a whole and miss the beads — but it is not good enough too, to focus on one bead. What we try to do is to have a go at the string.

In this article we will argue that under the appearance of a revolutionary theory, Negri and Hardt's work hides a subtle apology for capital and constitutes an inverted version of the traditional Marxism that it was set to oppose.

In Section 1 we see how the concept of immaterial labour substantiates all the most interesting aspects of Negri and Hardt's theory and keeps apparently contradictory or incompatible elements of it together in an elegant unity.

In Section 2 we explore Negri and Hardt's idea of history as class struggle, specifically, the historical emergence of immaterial production.

In Section 3 we comment on Negri and Hardt's argument that immaterial production is inherently autonomous from the control of the capitalist, thus potentially free from capital and amenable to self-management.

In Section 4 we consider the origin of class antagonism in the case of immaterial production of ideas and knowledge.

In Section 5 we consider the issue of class antagonism in the case of immaterial production of affections and communication.

## **1 Immaterial labour and a new theory for the 'new era'**

In this section we show that the concept of immaterial labour, or better, immaterial production, is the pivotal element for Negri and Hardt's analysis and for their popularity. On the one hand it allows them to subsume the bourgeois theories which, in the '80s, challenged traditional Marxism. But on the other hand it allows them to subsume these theories into a revolutionary, subjective, anti-capitalist theory. And it seems to offer an explanation for the new movements which sounds reasonable (and flattering) to the participants.

### **1.1 Immaterial labour and the millennial theories**

As we anticipated in the Introduction, immaterial labour plays a fundamental role in a central quality of Negri and Hardt's theory: its intellectual universality. Specifically, both *Empire* and *Multitude*, as well as Negri's pre-*Empire* work, successfully appropriate a large range of theories of the present among the most fashionable of the '80s and early '90s.<sup>13</sup> As we will see, it is precisely the concept of immaterial production that enables this appropriation without making the result appear obviously eclectic.

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<sup>13</sup> In fact Negri and Hardt scan the whole history of bourgeois thought since Spinoza and (very!) freely appropriate concepts and observations of others.

In particular, Negri and Hardt adopt ‘truths’ from ‘millennial’ views of the present world which, in different ways and for different reasons say that we live in a ‘new era’: a post-industrial, post-modern, post-Fordist, society. Let us make a short list of such theories:

#### **A) TOYOTISM AND POST-FORDISM**

A widespread millennial theory is that we live in a ‘new’ era dominated by the transition from industrial/Fordist, production to post-industrial/post-Fordist production — with Toyotism as the champion of a new vision (‘paradigm’) of production.

This idea was theorised by the French Regulation School as early as the 1970s.<sup>14</sup> By the end of the ‘80s such ideas were widespread in the intellectual world, having perhaps lost rigour but gained inter-cultural, multidisciplinary breadth. It was widely acknowledged that the ‘new’ paradigm of post-Fordist production dictated a new view of life as ‘open networks’ and had buried linear or structured views of seeing the world, connected to industrial production.

The western business world was intrigued by Toyotism in the ‘80s and early ‘90s. Toyota’s methods such as ‘just-in-time’ (zero-stock) production and team work, together with plenty of ideological fripperies about ‘integrating’ the working class and winning their hearts and minds, were introduced in a number of factories e.g. Rover at Longbridge, UK, or FIAT at Melfi, Italy in the early ‘90s.<sup>15</sup>

However, this interest is in decline, if it has ever been that important at all.<sup>16</sup> For example, FIAT’s recent trends are to speed up conveyor belt work. Their notorious harsh method TMC2 has triggered recent fierce struggles in all their plants included Melfi!<sup>17</sup> Although time moves on for the business, it does not for Negri and Hardt, who still consider Toyotism as ‘hegemonic’ in production — even when everybody else has given up the idea.

#### **B) INFORMATION SOCIETY THEORIES AND KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY THEORIES**

Championed by academics (or popularisers) such as Brzezinski, Toffler and Ohmae ‘information society theories’ claim that the ‘new’ hi-tech production has led to a ‘new’ post-capitalist society.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, academics and/or popularisers such as Robert Reich insist that we live in a ‘new era’ where knowledge and analytical labour is central in a new weightless, advanced economy. These changes have abolished the contradictions of capitalism, exposed the Marxist concept of value as meaningless, and/or abolished the division of western society into classes.<sup>19</sup>

#### **C) MILLENNIAL SHIFT TO SERVICE WORK**

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<sup>14</sup> For the Regulation School (Aglietta, Coriat, etc.), Fordism and post-Fordism were periods of socio-political equilibrium reached around the two forms of productions. This is more sophisticated than just focusing on the simple material process of production. For a critique of these ideas see, Ferruccio Gambino, ‘A Critique of the Fordism of the Regulation School’,

[www.wildcat-www.de/28/z28e\\_gam.htm](http://www.wildcat-www.de/28/z28e_gam.htm).

<sup>15</sup> See Valeria Pugliano, ‘Restructuring of Work and Union Representation’, *Capital and Class* 76, Spring 2002, pp. 29–63.

<sup>16</sup> As Gambino finds out, there is numerical evidence that, between the end of the ‘80s and the end of the ‘90s in France, post-Fordist production did not displace conveyer-belt practices of work at all (Gambino A Critique).

<sup>17</sup> If some aspects of Toyotism could be still in use, they are within a system which is essentially a conveyor belt system. For the struggles in Melfi see, e.g.

[www.marxismo.net/pomigliano.html](http://www.marxismo.net/pomigliano.html).

<sup>18</sup> These ideas went up and down in popularity according to the state of health of capitalism. For example, it was popular at the end of the ‘60s and ‘70s with Brzezinski, Bell and others (Witheford, op. cit. pp. 86–8). See our review of Witheford’s *CyberMarx* in this issue.

<sup>19</sup> It has to be added that after the deflation of the dot.com boom such theories have lost most of their puff.

Extrapolations of some trends in production have long led to the claim that we live in a ‘new era’ where production has moved to the service sector, taking the lead from industrial production and changed the paradigms of production. In this ‘new’ era where service is central, it is argued, Marx’s analysis of labour and value cannot be applied anymore — a view which we find in Rifkin, for example.<sup>20</sup>

#### **D) POSTMODERNISM**

Postmodernism suggest we live in a ‘new’ society characterised by a number of overlapping aspects, all of which imply that what has been said about capitalism is outdated. One aspect of the post-modern society is the fragmentation of identity and, crucially, the end of a working class identity. Another aspect, which we find for example in the work of Jean Baudrillard, is that since today production is centred on the symbolic meanings of commodities, the Marxist concept of ‘use values’, thus all Marxist analysis, is outdated.<sup>21</sup>

#### **E) NEGRI AND HARDT’S SUMMARY OF BOURGEOIS THOUGHT**

Let us seen now how the concept of immaterial production allows Negri and Hardt to appropriate all the diverse theorisations or observations above in what appears one, elegant, unified theory.

First and most importantly, immaterial production is appropriately defined to include all the different activities (from IT to services) considered above.

Second, immaterial production appears to explain Baudrillard’s observation that goods are increasingly produced and bought for their symbolic meanings. Indeed, as we said earlier, under the ‘hegemony’ of immaterial production the production of material goods is increasingly the production of images, ideas or affects.<sup>22</sup>

Third, under the ‘hegemony’ of immaterial production, which stresses ‘communication’ and ‘cooperation’, all material production tends to adopt post-Fordist methods of production such as, er... Toyotism. In fact Toyotism involves lots of communication, co-operation, use of ‘synergy’ etc. — at least if we believe in the Japanese-management-inspired business plans of the late ‘80s.

Last but not least, the hegemony of immaterial production on society explains the postmodernist observation concerning the present fragmentation of workers’ identity. The new organisation of immaterial production in fact defines a new way, in general, that we interrelate in society: as networks of free ‘singularities’. The party, and other such rigid structures made sense only within a paradigm of industrial production, and now are rejected. Negri and Hardt stick to the ideology of postmodernism, by celebrating the isolation of recent struggles, and suggest that their failure to spread could mean that they were ‘immediately subversive in themselves’ (Empire, p. 58). For Negri and Hardt, a new cycle of struggle will not be characterised by an

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<sup>20</sup> See George Caffentzis, ‘The End of Work or the Renaissance of Slavery? A Critique of Rifkin and Negri’, [korotonomedia.net/otonomi/caffentzis.html](http://korotonomedia.net/otonomi/caffentzis.html).

The concept of service is in fact miscellaneous. It only means: anything except production of material products. Service includes also the financial sector, which diverts surplus value produced in mainly material production elsewhere (see our review of CyberMarx in this issue).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, *For a Political Economy of the Sign*, Telos Press, 1981. Baudrillard’s argument conflates use value with the utility of an object. In fact for Marx ‘the form of use value is the form of the commodity’s body itself’ (‘The Value-Form’ in *Debates in Value Theory*, Ed. Simon Mohun, The MacMillan Press Ltd, 1994).

<sup>22</sup> This aspect is central in Maurizio Lazzarato’s concept of immaterial labour. See, for example, ‘General Intellect, Towards an Inquiry into Immaterial Labour’, [www.emery.archive.mcmill.com](http://www.emery.archive.mcmill.com)

extension of struggles, but by a constellation of individual struggles, which will be flexibly and loosely connected in networks (Empire, p.58).<sup>23</sup>

Thus 'immaterial labour' has elegantly embraced, explained and surpassed all the above theories and observations in one Unified Theory.<sup>24</sup>

Negri and Hardt's appropriation of such postmodernist and post-Fordist bourgeois theories, no doubt earns them respect in the academic world. Indeed in the '80s and early '90s, grim times of retreat of class struggle, the balance of academic prestige tilted on the side of bourgeois, triumphant theories. It was the right time to proclaim the end of the working class and the end of history; to sneer at 'paleo-Marxism';<sup>25</sup> and propose individualistic, postmodern, post-industrial, 'new' theories for the 'new' world. Unlike the Marxists that tried to refute their theories, Negri and Hardt rather appropriate them. In doing this they do not side with the loser, with the paleo-Marxist – they side with the intellectual winners who have history on their side.

## 1.2 Immaterial labour, and the contradictions of capital

While on the one hand Negri and Hardt take onboard the bourgeois celebrations of the end of history and class struggle, on the other they are able to incorporate these views in a theory which still speaks about class struggle and still sees capital as a contradiction.<sup>26</sup> This again is made possible by the concept of immaterial production.

In fact for Negri and Hardt immaterial production is itself a contradiction for capital, precisely because of its immaterial nature. Unlike material activity, Negri and Hardt suggest, the production of communication, ideas or affects escape capital's control and make labour increasingly autonomous from capital. Capital is thus trapped in a dilemma: on the one hand it needs to encourage heart and mind activities, on the other its control is undermined by them.

'Immaterial production' creates also another contradiction: it undermines private property.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, repeat Negri and Hardt ad nauseam, immaterial products, which are products of thought, are necessarily created in common as commons – 'no one thinks alone', they insist, and add: no production of ideas can exist without a socially shared world of ideas, shared languages and culture (Multitude, p. 147).

Facing this threatening form of production, capital, it is argued, has to strive to re-establish private property by appropriating, enclosing, controlling, what it is currently produced 'in common' (Multitude, pp. 149; 113). In trying to interfere and restrain the freedom of 'common' production, however, capital hinders its productivity. Capital then is trapped in a contradiction: that between the socialisation of the forces of (immaterial) production and the logic of private property.

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<sup>23</sup> Negri thus appeals to those, among whom us, who object to the traditional working class organisation based on the party. However, it is not good enough to embrace postmodernist enthusiasm for fragmentation and isolation and delude ourselves that this is subversive.

<sup>24</sup> Of course, their theory is presented as superior to postmodernism and all the other theories they appropriate! See, for instance, how they discuss postmodernism in Empire p. 142–3.

<sup>25</sup> Term of insult given to Marxism by postmodern author Jean Baudrillard in his work.

<sup>26</sup> Withford, 'Autonomist Marxism', pp. 85–6; 88; 96–7 values Negri for his apparent capacity to supersede the bourgeois theories.

<sup>27</sup> An important contradiction which we do not deal with here is that 'immaterial' production affects the substance of value since immaterial products can be duplicated[for Negri and Hardt this makes private property and the imposition of wage work increasingly untenable (Multitude p. 311).



### 1.3 Immaterial labour and subjectivity

The concept of immaterial production serves Negri and Hardt to have the cake of adopting bourgeois objectivistic theories and to eat them in a subjectivistic custard.

The post-Fordist and information theories which are taken onboard by Negri and Hardt are in fact essentially doctrines of autonomous technology or autonomous forms of production where technology or methods of production are the prime mover of history and capable of shaping subjectivity and society as a whole.<sup>28</sup> We can appreciate how attached Negri and Hardt are to these theories when we read, for example, that the present 'paradigm' of production 'dictates'... 'our ways of understanding the world and acting in it' (Multitude, p. 142). Or that: 'postmodernisation or informationalisation today marks a new way of becoming human' (Empire, p. 289).

On the other hand, while toying with such objectivistic ideas, Negri needs to give them a radical twist, in order to make his theory exciting and to be true to his revolutionary past. But how can Negri realise this twist? Thanks, we say, to the concept of immaterial production.

In fact, first of all, immaterial production is itself the product of subjectivity and class struggle. In fact it was born in the '60s and '70s, as the class's subjective, autonomous, experimentation with 'new ways of producing'. Capital was forced to move into immaterial production to dominate a new labour power that had redefined itself, autonomously, as creative, communicative and affective (Empire, p. 276).

Second, once established as dominant production, in its ongoing practice immaterial production has a subjective, autonomous, drive. It is immaterial, it is the result of our thoughts, thus the result of our subjectivities and it is then inherently autonomous from capital. With immaterial production labour manifests its autonomy from capital, which Autonomia has always seen hidden behind capitalist production. As Witheford notices:

[For] Autonomist Marxism ... the worker is the active subject of production, the well-spring of the skills, innovation and co-operation on which capital must draw... Capital needs labour but labour does not need capital. Labour... can dispense with the wage relation... it is potentially autonomous. (Witheford, 'Autonomist Marxism', p. 89)

Immaterial labour hence produces a 'new' condition in which subjectivity has a central role as a prime mover of capital's innovations, today.

Having proclaimed that production is today driven by our autonomous subjectivity, Negri and Hardt can claim without appearing objectivistic that the paradigm of immaterial production shapes our subjectivity in turn. What's wrong in saying that our subjectivity is determined by something, if we have discovered that, ultimately, this something was created by our subjectivity itself?

Lastly, class struggle against capital is led by subjectivity too. We are shaped by production, but, Negri and Hardt add in a generosity of overdetermination, 'workers' subjectivity is also created in the antagonism of the experience of exploitation' (Multitude, pp. 151, our italic).

Exploitation? Did they not say that today immaterial labour is done 'in common, autonomously from capital? Negri is clear indeed: in the 'new' era of immaterial production we can no longer

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<sup>28</sup> Witheford, 'Autonomist Marxism', p. 88.

speak of the real subsumption of labour. Today we are all free, independent craftsmen, all producing with our own means of production: our brain. If now, Negri says, ‘we have all the tools we need to work in our heads... [then] capitalism today needs to make free men work – free men who have their own means, their own tools’.<sup>29</sup>

But Negri and Hardt cannot deny the undeniable. Exploitation and capitalist control still exist – only, they explain to the increasingly confused reader, in a new form. Capital today superimposes and appropriates what we produce ‘in common’, as free and independent producers. As Negri says:

Capital must... superimpose itself on the autonomous capability of manufacturing knowledge... This is the form which expropriation takes in advanced capitalism (Toni Negri, *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the Twenty First Century*, Polity, Cambridge, 1989, p. 116)

In this conception, we are petty producers – or if we prefer, autonomous peasants – while capital only acts as a predator, an aristocrat who comes to the village and appropriates a part (‘or all’) of what we have produced.<sup>30</sup> This new form of exploitation is the cause of antagonism, a subjective spring of struggle.

#### **1.4 Immaterial labour and viability of revolution – self-management**

And what about the future communist world? Also here the concept of immaterial production plays an important role. Thanks to immaterial production, revolution becomes something feasible and rational.

How? Negri and Hardt explain: unlike previous production, the rationale and means necessary for immaterial production are increasingly inherent in labour practice itself – this means that immaterial production is already under our control and the capitalist already parasitical. Revolution as self-management is only the next feasible and rational step (Multitude, p. 336).

Beyond production our new society as a whole is also increasingly amenable to political self-management, thanks to immaterial production. This happens because, in Negri and Hardt’s view, immaterial production is also production of life, biopolitical production. Their logic is straightforward: if immaterial production is increasingly autonomous from capital, society as a whole is too, because production is one with production of life and society. This, Negri and Hardt tell us, happens now, under our unbelieving eyes!<sup>31</sup> Indeed today,

The balance has tipped such that the ruled now [sic] tend to be the exclusive producers of social organisation... the rulers become even more parasitical the ruled become increasingly autonomous, capable of forming society on their own... (Multitude, p. 336)<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Toni Negri, interview with Mark Leonard, ‘The Left should Love Globalisation’ *New Statesman*, 28 May 2001, [www.findarticles.com](http://www.findarticles.com).

<sup>30</sup> ‘There is a distinct... neo-feudal flavour in today’s privatisations’, Negri and Hardt state in *Multitude* (p. 186).

<sup>31</sup> ‘The biopolitical social organisation begins to appear absolutely immanent... the various elements present in society are able collaboratively to organise society themselves (p. 337).

<sup>32</sup> Or, on p. 339: ‘Just as the multitude produces in common... it can produce... the political organisation of society’

In this optimistic view, the revolution will be the liberation, reached at a political level, of already developing immaterial forces of production and social relations from the parasitic control of already redundant capitalist rulers. This kind of revolution appears rational and viable, being based on something already present.

### **1.5 Immaterial labour and a reassuring new world**

Revolutionary theories are normally rather scary – but this one is reassuring, thanks to immaterial production.

It is a theory which speaks about a future that is imaginable, thus acceptable: the revolution will not require radical subversions, jumps in the dark, too much imagination or other such uncomfortable things. In this view the future will simply be the completion of the present, based on already existing conditions created by immaterial production now.<sup>33</sup>

Crucially we are reassured that the future will be democratic and egalitarian. The present undemocracy and inequality are effects of a distortion – of the fact that capital overlaps and channels our production, creating despotism and spurious selectivity on our capacities, thus inequality of rewards.<sup>34</sup> But this is not, they insist, inherent in immaterial production in itself. Indeed, the relations currently created by immaterial production are ‘civil processes of democratic exchange’, democratic in nature (Multitude, p. 311) and confer on us ‘equal opportunity of struggle’ – and thus the equal opportunity to negotiate power in the future society.

The most attractive aspect of Negri and Hardt’s theory is that ‘immaterial labour has the quality to be about unquestionably positive things: democracy first, but also creativity, affections, communication, and so on. Communism as the self management of the present will be based on all these unquestionably good things. Who would not like the idea of communism if this means lots of good things?’

### **1.6 Immaterial labour, and the new movements**

The concept of immaterial labour also serves Negri and Hardt to appeal to those from the advanced western countries involved in current anti-capitalist protests, the movements for global ‘social justice’, etc.

In the present times of defeat and weakness, the demonstrations in Genoa and Seattle, the anti-war movement, and many large or small radical activities are indeed a demonstration of power, but they do not, because they cannot, challenge our daily work relations and reproduction as an immediate target.

This audience wants to hear about the end of capitalism, but through democratic values and practices which are the only values and practices that seem conceivable in our conditions. As we have seen already, Negri and Hardt can satisfy them with their stress on ‘ideal’ democracy.

This audience want a theory which explains their struggles, which are not struggles for bread and butter. Negri and Hardt fit the bill. In a ‘new era’ which focuses on immaterial rather than material goods, it is no surprise that the new struggles are not about bread and butter issues any-

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(p. 339).

<sup>33</sup> See Multitude, p. 354, sentence cited later. The shortcomings of revolutionary utopia is ‘solved’ by Negri and Hardt by proposing a future which is based on what we have now! These two views are in fact two sides of the same coin the one as bad as the others.

<sup>34</sup> As Witheford in ‘Autonomist Marxism’ explains, pp. 110–1.

more, but over the control of ‘communicational resources’; over ‘the communal appropriation of computer and media networks, over the freeing of educational and research resources...’. (Witthford, ‘Autonomist Marxsim’, p. 110) Or we can always see any present struggle as an expression of ‘biopolitical’ production of communication and affects, if we want to.

In Negri and Hardt’s theory these ‘new struggles’ have then a centrality in history, they are part of the very revolution which leads us to communism. For a protester who is told by the Marxist that what he does is historically epiphenomenal, Negri and Hardt’s theory is the best doctrine around. What can be more exciting to be told: ‘Well done, you are in the driving seat of History’?

## **2. The origin of immaterial labour as class struggle**

In this section we comment on one of the central issues in Negri and Hardt, that immaterial production is itself the result of the struggles of the ‘60s and ‘70s, when the class experimented with ‘new productivity’, and autonomously redefined itself as creative, flexible, communicative labour power. We agree that the emergence of what Negri and Hardt call immaterial production should be analysed as class struggle, but we argue that immaterial production is an aspect of the domination of capital over labour, though contradictory and unstable. We then question Negri and Hardt’s vision of immaterial production as having inherent anti-capitalist aspects in itself and their view of a communist future based on its self-management.

### **2.1 Immaterial labour as the result of subjectivity and class struggle – myth and reality**

How did immaterial labour come about? According to Empire, during the struggles in the ‘60s and ‘70s against large scale industry, the working class produced its ‘paradigm’. The mass worker was so strong that they could fold its arms and stop capital exploiting them. Many proletarians, still students, refused to enter the factory. This free people, Negri and Hardt say, embraced Bohemian life, artistic activity and psychedelic production in LSD (which is, we admit, immaterial per excellence).

Thus, Negri and Hardt conclude, the class redefined itself, autonomously, as creative, communicative, flexible labour power, forcing capital to adopt immaterial production in order to exploit it. This marks the birth of immaterial production according to Negri and Hardt: capital had to abandon the large scale factory, its linear production, its inflexible working day and its mechanistic logic and employ open networks and flexi-time and give space to creativity. Since then immaterial production becomes ‘hegemonic’.

Negri and Hardt’s theory is unproblematically subjective, exciting and revolutionary. It tells us that there is something inherently positive in the present hegemonic production, and that this is the result of our autonomous vitality. Do we agree with this exciting history of immaterial production as class struggle? We agree, of course, with the principle that history is the history of class struggle, and that the dynamics of capital are aspect of this struggle, but we are sceptical about the specific way in which Empire seems to apply this principle.

Let us then consider the emergence of immaterial production more closely, and see how this articulates with class struggle. What we will see will no doubt inspire less feel-good effects to

our readers than Toni Negri's inspiring, rose tinted optimism. But, as we will discuss later, the reality of capital as a contradiction is not that we feel good in it but that we inescapably feel bad.

## **2.2 A class struggle analysis of the origin of immaterial labour as the creation of ideas and knowledge**

Let us consider first the aspect of immaterial production as the creation of ideas and knowledge.

Against traditional Marxism, which saw history as driven by the development of the forces of production, Autonomia, with Mario Tronti in particular, re-proposed in the '70s that history is a history of class struggle and that the objectivity of capital is a result of this struggle.<sup>35</sup> The laws of capital hide the continual necessity to undermine working class resistance, its entrenchment in their existing skills. This is why capital needs to continually innovate and rationalise production, in order to deskil labour and weaken the working class. This is class struggle which appears, post facto, crystallised in the objective laws of capital or in the objective rationale of innovation, progress and development of capitalist production. However, this objectification is the result of a continuous process of impositions and rebellions, which obliges capital into compromises and makes it vulnerable to further struggles.

The emergence of immaterial production as the production of ideas and knowledge can be explained as part of this process. Since the beginning of capitalism, this continuous battle has led to the need to separate mental from manual labour. With Wedgwood's pottery manufacture, we have an important example of how craft work was separated from its elements of autonomy and creativity. Making pots became a painting-by-numbers activity, while design emerged as an alien ruler, a tool for the subsumption of the worker's labour.

While in the transition to capitalism the capitalist Wedgwood has a role of master craftsman, later the capitalists farmed out his creative role to independent or waged designers, specialists, engineers and managers. We have now the new figure of a creative professional worker, unthinkable in the past.

Increasingly, the place where ideas and organisational frameworks were devised was separated off. This eventually gave rise to what Negri and Hardt call immaterial production: the production of designs, IT systems, etc. as 'commodities' in their own rights. These are sold to other capitalists for the second stage of production: execution.

With the commodification of immaterial products we have the beginning of a trend to rationalise immaterial production itself. This is the next stage of class struggle: increasingly, we see the multiplication of figures such as the engineer who just calculates elasticity factors within a project on which he has no control. Increasingly, being a qualified designer may not mean to have a highly paid, secure and creative job.

As we will see later, the dynamic which separates creative from executive labour involves antagonism. Thus this process starts and ends with class struggle.

## **2.3 A class struggle analysis of the ideology of weightless design**

The bourgeois ideology of the 'new' era of immaterial production is the celebration of the production of weightless goods as today's main or fundamental product.

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<sup>35</sup> See Witheford, 'Autonomist Marxism', p. 89.

It is possible to make sense of this ideology. In a world where ideas and execution are separated and the latter deskilled, the bourgeois economist correctly considers the production of ideas and design as the most valuable and costly part of all production. In turn, the bourgeois ideologue can generalise this interest and conclude that what is ‘mainly’ produced today is ideas and design.

In fact if we consider the material reproduction of society as a whole, we can be satisfied that our reproduction cannot happen only through the production of pure ideas. We do not eat, drive or wear ideas. Pure ideation can exist as such only because there is a stage of pure execution somewhere else. Thus behind the partial truth of the bourgeois (and the Marxian simpleton) we discover a more concrete, important, truth: what is mainly produced and reproduced today is not ideas and knowledge, but a specific division of labour.

That Negri and Hardt uncritically adopt the postmodern and bourgeois fetishism of weightless production means quite a lot: their inability to see the existence of immaterial production as a class relation.

## **2.4 An answer to traditional Marxism – and to Negri and Hardt**

Negri and Hardt’s incapacity to understand the emergence of immaterial production as the imposition of a specific division of labour leads them to see immaterial production as something natural, and potentially autonomous from capital. To them we raise the same objection that Italian workerists raised to traditional Marxists. Against a vision of production as neutral and potentially good for self-management, Raniero Panzieri warned that this conception hid an uncritical acceptance of capitalism. Of socialist background, Panzieri accepted self-management as a reasonable step in the revolution, but he gave a warning: communism needs a rethinking of society which necessarily leads to a rupture with its processes of production.<sup>36</sup>

Of course, Negri and Hardt would say: history moves and things change. Immaterial production is different from the industrial production of traditional Marxist times. We may not argue (here) with this ‘truth’, but this does not change what we have said. Rather, it makes what we said more compelling. If our ‘new’ times are characterised by immaterial production then the new revolution for the ‘new’ times will have to imply a rupture, precisely, from immaterial production!<sup>37</sup>

## **2.5 A class struggle analysis of the origin of immaterial labour as the creation of communication and affects**

We have so far focused on the emergence of immaterial production as the creation of knowledge and ideas.

But it is also possible to account for the emergence of post-Fordist methods of production in terms of class struggle. In the face of the strength of the mass workers centred in the large scale

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<sup>36</sup> Raniero Panzieri, ‘The Capitalist Use of Machinery: Marx Versus the Objectivists’, [www.reocities.com](http://www.reocities.com).

Wanting a rupture does not mean to be Luddite. In our daily struggle we are bound to twist and use capital’s resources and exploit its contradictions. For example, deskilling the typographers has allowed the thickest of us to be a poster designer for our political campaigns.

<sup>37</sup> Our idea of revolution is that of supersession: This is not a banal abolition of the present but a qualitative subversion that can only be realised from within and against the present. The abolition of immaterial production for us is not the abolition of creativity but the reintegration of the unity of aims and execution in the production of our life.

industry in the '70s, restructuring meant to fragment industrial production. Team work was a way to separate the workers within the same industry and disintegrate their solidarity. Outsourcing, moving production abroad, re-divided labour on a world scale. This process, too, separated the workers not only physically but more importantly in terms of their interests, employment contracts and working conditions.

It is possible to account for the recent shift of capital into the service sector as class struggle, too. We can see how the restructuring at the end of the '70s indeed led to a substantial shift of capital into service, where workers were still unorganised and thus more compliant.

Again, our account of the origin of immaterial is miles away from Negri and Hardt, from the fairytale that immaterial production emerged in response to our autonomous redefinition as 'flexible' and immaterial.

## 2.6 Technological determinism or autonomous subjectivity?

Negri and Hardt's rather peculiar account of the emergence of immaterial production is based on a peculiar axiom: that history is moved by an autonomous will, the will of the autonomous class. This assumption, which traces its intellectual authority to one of the founding fathers of bourgeois philosophy (Spinoza), has already been shown to be undialectical.<sup>38</sup>

Allegations of being non-dialectical should not be taken as a banal insult. Being non-dialectical would not be too bad in itself, if this did not create serious problems in Negri and Hardt's theorisation.

Indeed, a view of history as pure will and subjectivity is bound to smash its head against its non-dialectical counterpart: a view of history as pure objectivity — the bourgeois idea that we are 'shaped' by the paradigms of production. To the non-dialectical mind this second aspect of reality appears as compelling as the first, and still cannot find a place in their theorisation except as a juxtaposition. *Empire* and *Multitude* confuse the reader with contradictory assertions which are presented without any serious effort to resolve their contradictions. Do we create history as autonomous subjects? Or are our thoughts and actions dictated by the paradigms of production — then is history determined at every paradigmatical moment?<sup>39</sup>

The clash of one truth and its anti-truth and the consequent explosive annihilation of the whole theoretical construction is however, safely and cleverly prevented by keeping these 'truths' separated in time and space. Thus, Negri and Hardt say: today, in the mundane present, we are shaped by production in our hearts, minds and actions (this will please our academic colleagues in the literature department); yesterday, during the mythical '68, we lived a moment of absolute freedom to redefine ourselves outside existing paradigms (this will please Nick Witheford).

Negri and Hardt's method of juxtaposition, however, is not good enough to convince the experienced and knowledgeable readers who have associated talks about paradigms of production and technology with bourgeois and conservative literature.

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<sup>38</sup> For the non-dialectical approach in Negri and Hardt see, John Holloway, 'Going in the Wrong Direction, or Mephistopheles, Not Saint Francis of Assisi', [www.slash.autonomeia.org](http://www.slash.autonomeia.org).

Despite the reservations we have about John Holloway's thought (see our review article in *Aufheben*, # 11, 2003, pp. 53–56), we think his critique of Negri is sound, clearly expressed, and very close to our criticism.

<sup>39</sup> Some readers like Maria Turchetto (*L'Impero*) blamed an alleged 'dialectic' in Negri and Hardt for the apparent contradictions in their theorisation. In fact these contradictions are due to an undialectical juxtaposition.

To convince us that there is a revolutionary logic in saying that we are shaped by paradigms of production, Negri and Hardt manipulate our sense of respect for our elders and invoke the authority of old Marx himself. For Marx too, they say, ‘of course [sic] everything starts with production’ (Multitude, p. 143). For him too, they say, ‘production makes a subject for the object’ (Multitude, p. 109). This no doubt will defuse most objections.

Since we in Aufheben are not confused by any sense of respect for our elders, we bothered to check on old Marx. We found simply that Negri and Hardt had cut quotes out of their context and twisted their original meanings!

In fact for Marx everything starts with ‘the real individuals and their intercourses’.<sup>40</sup> Marx’s Capital does not start from modern industry to explain society but it starts from our relations of exchange to explain modern industry.<sup>41</sup>

Marx himself would agree, of course, that all starts with production; but only if we intend production as something concrete, embedded in a social relation: as production of commodities for the market. As such, production is the reproduction of our social relations as market relations and as such it reproduces us as proletariat. However, this is miles away from what Negri and Hardt simplistically meant.

By dismissing (and rewriting) Marx’s theory of labour, sadly, Negri and Hardt dismiss a theory that can effectively oppose technological determinism as well as understand its aspects of truth. This theory sees the real individual in their social relation with others as the concrete reality behind both the apparent objectivity of production and our continual challenge to this objectivity. This view, importantly, does not need any desperate separations of mythical past and mundane present, because it sees history as a continuous process and a continuous struggle.

### **3. Immaterial labour and capital as objectification**

In this section we comment on Negri and Hardt’s thesis that immaterial production is ripe for self-management since this ‘new’ production is inherently independent from the individual capitalist. We argue that the apparent objectivity and autonomy of immaterial labour from the capitalist is only evidence that immaterial production is an aspect of capital. We argue that Negri and Hardt’s uncritical naturalisation of the present production system derives from their lack of understanding of capital as an objectified social relation. We will see that this problem is mirrored by a parallel, opposite one: Negri and Hardt’s lack of critical understanding (and celebration) of capital as the product of bourgeois subjectivity.

#### **3.1. Production as inherent in the practices of labour**

Negri and Hardt tell us that there is something interestingly new in immaterial production that material production did not have — something that can really change our future and allow us to create a communist world based on the self-management of the present production.

Indeed, we read, immaterial production has disposed of external means of production and of the despotic direction of the capitalist. By its nature, immaterial production is in fact increasingly inherent in the same practice of labour:

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<sup>40</sup> Karl Marx, ‘The German Ideology’ in *Early Writings*, Ed. Lucio Colletti, Pelican, London 1975.

<sup>41</sup> Marx never held a material theory of labour, which started from material aspects of production or the products,



The central forms of productive co-operation are no longer created by the capitalist as part of the project to organise labour but rather emerge from the productive energies of labour itself. (Multitude, p. 113)<sup>42</sup>

In immaterial production, continue Negri and Hardt, the capitalist is increasingly redundant as the organiser of production and the one responsible for innovation:<sup>43</sup>

[While in the past] the capitalist calls workers to the factory... directing them to collaborate and communicate in production and giving them the means to do so, in the paradigm of immaterial production, in contrast, labour itself tends to produce the means of interaction, communication and co-operation for production (Multitude, p. 147).

Is there an element of truth in Negri and Hardt's claim that today labour itself produces the means for production? That production becomes increasingly inherent in the process of labour itself and autonomous from the capitalist? The answer is: yes, but this has always been true!

It is true in fact that in capitalism labour itself produces the means for other labour and production. In capitalism, more than any other previous form of production, nobody can produce without using the result of other people's labour. The figure of the autonomous craftsman who uses his own self-created tools is unthinkable today. This is what traditional Marxism used to call the 'socialisation of labour'.

Also, it is true that in capitalism the logic of production is increasingly inherent in the practices of labour. This was not obvious in previous modes of production, where labour was deployed because of some human need (often the need of the ruling class) – only in capitalism do we have this peculiar fact: labour is demanded and necessitated by previous labour, production stimulates production, invention demands invention, according to a logic of expansion and development that goes beyond the will and control of the individual human being.

Crucially, it is important to stress, this logic goes beyond our own will and control. For example, our call centre labour is commanded by phones ringing and a computer programme that tell us what to say. This is the result of previous work. The labour of an IT worker is normally demanded by a gigantic project which asks for work done in a certain way and with a certain pace. This is the result of past IT work. Labour in a traditional factory is demanded by a machine. This was, too, the result of someone else's past labour. A worker in a post-Fordist team works according to organisational systems which were devised by the thinking work of other people.

All our work in capitalism is given a logic, a pace, a necessity, by the result of other people's work. It does not matter how immaterial or material this latter labour was. What matters for us is that it is dead labour: previous labour, alienated from us, which has turned to be our ruler: capital.

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but a social theory of labour. His 'materialism' was a theory that saw society as a material starting point, in opposition to idealism which started from ideas.

<sup>42</sup> See also: 'Such new forms of labour... present new possibilities for economic self-management, since the mechanisms of cooperation necessary for production are contained in the labour itself.' (Multitude, p. 336)

<sup>43</sup> Also: 'We can see numerous instances in which unitary control is not necessary for innovation and that on the contrary innovation requires common resources, open access... [e.g.] in the sectors that have most recently emerged as central to the global economy, such as information knowledge and communication' (Multitude, p. 337)

Negri and Hardt seem to know what dead labour is for Marx. They say that Marx would call Empire a regime of accumulated dead labour. (Empire, p. 62) However, they insist that labour, if immaterial and 'biopolitical', has a special, fresh, everlasting vitality. Living labour is, they say, 'the ability to engage the world actively and create social relations'. And they add that living labour is a 'fundamental human faculty', an input of the human being, not something pertinent to capital as such.<sup>44</sup>

More mundanely, and less poetically, living labour is labour which is presently done for capital, for dead labour.<sup>45</sup> Living labour cannot be naturalised as an a-historical 'fundamental human faculty' as Negri and Hardt say, for the simple reason that living labour and dead labour are two faces of the same reality: capitalist alienation. In communism there will be no reason to speak of dead labour, thus there will be no reason to speak of living labour either.<sup>46</sup>

Negri and Hardt's incapacity to understand capital as objectification of our (living) labour implies their incapacity to understand capital as objectification tout court.

### 3.2 It's capital: this is why it does not need the capitalist

The objectification of capital is a real objectification for all humans, including the capitalist.

This is why the capitalist is not the initiator of a technical innovation: in front of capital with its inherent laws of self-expansion, the capitalist has no choice. He has to follow hard necessity and innovate in the rush for competition when others innovate. Or he goes bankrupt.

We can also see how the capitalist is 'redundant' not only as initiator but as organiser of the labour process. The more production is advanced the more the organisation of labour becomes integrated in complex organisational system – production is better run by 'objective' mechanisms, laws or business principles which reflect more closely the laws of capital. The capitalist as an individual, with his whims and idiosyncrasies, can even be disruptive for his own capital.

Toyota's system is presented in Empire as an example of the new immaterial production that can dispense with the capitalist and which 'seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism' (Empire, p. 294).

The lure of Toyotism is that it presents itself to the post-Fordist simpleton as a gigantic automated feedback system from demand to production. In its original idea, Toyotism is similar to a fast-food shop: customer A demands a piece of work from worker B. Worker B writes down an order for the materials he needs to serve A on a tag (called 'kanban') and passes the tag to worker C upstream. In turn, worker B becomes the 'customer' of worker C and commands worker D, etc.<sup>47</sup> Hence Toyotism may seem to be a system of production free from centralised command.

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<sup>44</sup> 'Living labour, the form-giving fire of our creative capacities. Living labour is the fundamental human faculty: the ability to engage the world actively and create social life. Living labour can be corralled by capital and pared down to the labour power that is bought and sold and that produces commodities and capital, but living labour always exceeds that' (Multitude, p. 146). Marx said this, they claim. Believe them.

<sup>45</sup> See, John Holloway 'Time to Revolt[Reflections on Empire]', Dissonance, Issue 1, [www.messmedia.net](http://www.messmedia.net): 'Living doing is subjected to past done. Living doing is subjected to the things made by past doing, things which stand on their own and deny all doing'.

<sup>46</sup> We object that 'labour' is not a 'human faculty' ['labour power' is. The conflation of labour power with labour in Negri is not due to imprecision, but is ideological. In a new mode of production that needs only our brain as a tool, the faculty of labouring can be immediately conflated with the deployment of labour.

<sup>47</sup> For a description of Toyotism and a (really) rational consideration of the contradictory authoritarian and liberal aspects in it see, Andrew Sayer, 'New Developments in Manufacturing: The Just-in-Time System, Capital and Class, 30, Winter 1986, pp. 43–72.

In fact subtly, Negri and Hardt<sup>48</sup> do not say that Toyotism has no authoritarian aspects. Only, the alienating aspects of Toyotism are contingent, due to capital's control, while the good aspects of Toyotism are inherent in this 'new' immaterial form of production.

We cannot share such excitement. We see Toyotism, first of all, as an effective way to produce more closely in response to market demand.<sup>49</sup> What makes it different from Fordism and so special for the liberal heart is that it simply perfects the liberal dream of 'customer sovereignty' within a perfected market society.

Having observed that Toyotism is a production system devised for satisfying the market, we cannot simplistically think that the liberal aspects of Toyotism (the apparent autonomy given to the workers) are inherent while the illiberal ones (the overall control) are contingent. The demand of the market is something alien from the individual worker's desires, needs or aspirations: Toyotism is necessarily a system aimed to rein the workers' will and activity towards an alien aim – only, it is devised in a different way than Fordism.<sup>50</sup> On closer inspection, in fact, it is not difficult to see that Toyota's workers are free to do or suggest only what is already harmonising with the strategies of production – and crucially its overall system is devised to be structurally inaccessible to changes from the bottom.

Any further illusion of the inherent liberalism in Toyotism is exposed by its development: its increasing computerisation, which allows the Toyota managers to dispose of the kanban system and plan production in detail.

Thus Toyotism inevitably mirrors the nature of capital itself. As such, that it has a liberal face and a despotic face does not surprise us at all: capital has indeed a democratic face and an authoritarian face, each necessary to the other. None of these two faces is a distortion of the other, and none can be 'rescued' from the other.

The democratic face of capital, which we find mirrored in the democratic face of Toyotism, is nothing else than our submission to impersonal forces, to the market. It is our individual freedom to be slaves under the intangible despotism of the customer's sovereignty.

Negri and Hardt's inability to see how capital dominates us through impersonal forces prevents them, paradoxically, from seeing that immaterial production needs the capitalist in order to stay in existence. Let us look closely at this point.

### **3.3 It's capital: this is why it needs the capitalist**

A production system that demands labour from us because of its own rationale cannot be nothing else but our old enemy: capital as value valorising itself through the exploitation of labour. As we have seen in Section 2, capital's self-valorisation implies for capital the need to

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<sup>48</sup> As well as other fetishists of Toyotism like Maurizio Lazzarato ('General Intellect...').

<sup>49</sup> Negri and Hardt admit that they are aware of caveats by the Frankfurt School (Habermas), that a transmission of 'market data' is somehow impoverished. However, they add, the service sector presents a richer model of productive communication, in that this production aims to produce more immaterial products. And in a footnote they suggest that Habermas's ideas are surpassed and critiqued (Empire, p. 290).

<sup>50</sup> In their account of the struggle in Fiat Melfi, Mouvement Communiste explain how Toyotism was introduced to improve exploitation and impose massacring shifts within a conveyor-belt production. In order to introduce this system without resistance Fiat employed in Melfi mainly young people with no experience of organised struggle from a region which had a very high unemployment level. However this failed to stop increasing resignations and resistance. ('Fiat Melfi: La Classe Ouvrière d'Italie Contre-Attaque', La Lettre de Mouvement Communiste, 13, May 2004, BP 1666, Centre Monnaie 1000, Bruxelles 1, Belgique).

overcome workers' resistance and the striving to subsume, rationalise, deskill and command labour. The existence of immaterial production itself, we have seen, is one with this striving.

In Section 4 we will see in detail that this same process implies, for the worker, daily pain and boredom, thus daily resistance. The consequence of this is that capital necessitates a 'capitalist' class. Or, better, capital needs a class of people who materially gain from the daily alienation of others and are ready to exert violence in order to keep the others under capital's command.<sup>51</sup>

In their view present (immaterial) production increasingly does not need the capitalist and thus does not need force exerted on us, Negri and Hardt seem only to echo the bourgeois delusions of the '80s, which sought the integration of the working class in production as possible and non-contradictory.

This ideology was applied in Europe through experiments with Toyotism and other post-Fordist methods in the early '90s. These methods tried to encourage workers to take individual responsibility in improving the quality of production and identify themselves with the business.

But they all inevitably failed. An interesting example of this failure was that of the Rover factory in Longbridge. With the project Rover Tomorrow, work was initially organised in teams, with leaders elected among the team. The imaginable result was that the workers never respected the commands of their team leaders, so that the leaders had to be appointed by the company as someone above them (Pugliano, 'Restructuring of Work', pp. 38–9). The workers' disrespect for peers with a leadership role was not just something cultural: it is in the contradictory nature of capital that we cannot identify ourselves with capital without contradictions.

But why does Negri and Hardt's talk about the increasing possibility of self-management seem to make sense? When we speak about 'immaterial labour', normally our mind goes to certain administrative, creative or professional jobs where there is a real experience of identification and self-direction. Self-management was realisable and desirable, for example, for the highly skilled workers at Lucas Aerospace in the UK and at Toshiba-Amplex in Japan, who went on a strike to demand autonomous control of production from their managers (Witthof, 'Autonomist Marxism', pp. 103–4).

Can we speak about autonomy of production in this case? Not at all. In fact, the existence of autonomy in certain privileged activities does not mean that this activity is autonomous from capital but the other way round: that the professional or creative workers identify so much with the aims and interests of their business that they can become the managers of it themselves, in the same way as a petty bourgeois is the manager of his own business.

Negri and Hardt's idea that we can all become the managers of ourselves, that we can take the present system of production over and self-manage it, is then a petty bourgeois delusion that does not acknowledge the imposition of capital's command only because it is used to internalise it.

### **3.4 Subjectivity and the invisible hand of... immaterial labour**

We have seen that a doubt arises, that Negri and Hardt cannot see that the apparent objectivity of the present production system, rather than being evidence of its autonomy from the capitalist, is instead evidence of its nature as capital. Negri and Hardt's incapacity to grasp objectivity in

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<sup>51</sup> In general capital needs a class who has an interest in imposing its rule on the others. See, 'What was the USSR?' in *Aufheben* # 6–9, 1997–2000]

capitalism makes us suspicious about their insight in the other, opposite, concept: subjectivity. Let us then focus on their idea of subjectivity and collective consciousness.

We have said that for Negri and Hardt immaterial production potentially escapes capital, being the result of our individual subjectivities: thoughts, decisions, desires and ‘democratic exchanges’.<sup>52</sup> The multitude, which is our collective consciousness, is the ultimate result of this same dynamic — of innumerable individual interactions which take place within the present immaterial production. Negri and Hardt’s theory is hence both the theorisation and the celebration of a ‘new’ world which is ultimately shaped in its collective consciousness, and driven in its productivity, by subjectivity itself.

Subjectivity for Negri and Hardt is then nothing else than the ensemble of each individual’s desires and thoughts. In fact, it is unquestionable that desires and thoughts come out of free subjects. But this is, precisely, where Negri and Hardt have caught reality totally wrong. Capital is, and has always been, the result of innumerable, perfectly free, democratic exchanges, decisions, desires and thoughts of individual subjectivities! The fact that capital is created by the will and actions of individuals however does not make it less objective and less powerful — instead, its power lies in our individual freedom of choice and exchange itself.

Negri and Hardt do not speak of a new world at all. The Multitude, a by-product<sup>53</sup> of immaterial production seems, in fact to be, merely, socially-shared bourgeois consciousness: the socially-shared belief that the only way to produce and reproduce ourselves is through acts of ‘democratic exchange’ and the only way to see ourselves is as free individuals<sup>54</sup> engaged in such exchange. This collective consciousness is only an aspect of the same process that creates the objectivity of capital! This collective consciousness is objectified as capital itself, since it emerges as an unconscious result of innumerable exchanges and activities, in the same way as the invisible hand of Adam Smith emerges from innumerable exchanges based on individual greed.<sup>55</sup>

Negri and Hardt’s naturalisation of bourgeois relations is so uncritical that they even see their preservation as a ‘creative’ aspect of struggles which are not able to go beyond them! In Multitude, Negri and Hardt hail recent struggles which are, they say, ‘positive and creative’. Why? Because, for example, as we read with dismay in Argentina people invented new forms of money (Multitude, p. 216).

Again, Negri and Hardt’s problem is their ideological rejection of dialectics. In the dialectic of capital, subjectivity and objectivity play opposite but interrelated parts. An undialectical approach that takes ‘subjectivity’ as something positive on its own is bound to misunderstand both subjectivity and objectivity. It is bound to confusingly celebrate capital as bourgeois subjectivity (not recognising that capital is the product of individual free subjects). And it is also bound to confusingly celebrate present production as autonomous from capital (not recognising that we are ruled by objectified and impersonal forces).

Such an approach is also bound to encourage passivity. Seeing Empire (capital) as something that develops in separation from us and ‘opens up spaces for struggle’ by itself, Negri preaches to

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<sup>52</sup> Negri and Hardt celebrate the ideal freedom of democratic exchange. If there is something wrong in our real exchanges and communications, they argue, this is due to an undue overlap of capital’s control: ‘exchanges and communications dominated by capital are integrated into its logic’ (Empire, p. 363).

<sup>53</sup> Sorry: bio-product?

<sup>54</sup> Sorry: singularities?

<sup>55</sup> To get rid of the objectivity of capital it is not good enough to give a different name (potenza) to our potentially autonomous power and another name (potere) to the power of capital, as if they really existed side by side and if it

us not to resist 'globalisation' and vote 'yes' for the neoliberal European Constitution in France.<sup>56</sup> In fact the 'space for struggle' is created by capital's development and its dialectical counterpart: our resistance to it — such as the struggles against gas privatisation in Bolivia and the riots in Argentina.

To conclude, considering Negri and Hardt's inability to see the relation between objectivity and subjectivity in capitalism, we cannot be too surprised then when we see them move along a conceptual parabola: start from shouted, crass subjectivism and dive head down into a crass objectivism, a neo-traditional-Marxist fetishisation of the present immaterial forces of production.<sup>57</sup> And, to close the parabola into an ellipse, they teach us that our subjectivity is, after all, the result of the paradigm of immaterial production itself — something objective.<sup>58</sup>

## 4. Immaterial labour and the mind of capital

We now consider the subjective side of immaterial production i.e. how immaterial production is related to class antagonism and the necessity of the revolution. Negri and Hardt say that antagonism emerges from our resistance against capital's efforts to tamper with our potentially autonomous deployment of creativity and to enclose what we produce in common. To this view we oppose that antagonism arises from the unacceptability of a division of labour that imposes our daily deprivation of creativity, and we explain why immaterial production is part of it.

### 4.1 The contradictions of immaterial production as the contradictions of capital

Negri and Hardt's theory has the interesting aspect of speaking about subjectivity. Against bourgeois objectivism it tells us that the development of capital and its contradictions are the result of antagonism, of subjectivity. As we have seen in Section 1, for Negri and Hardt antagonism is triggered by capital's attempt at imposing its command and control over immaterial production, which is increasingly done in common and which produces commons.

We wholeheartedly agree that history is moved by class struggle, and that class struggle is triggered by antagonism. However, we cannot find ourselves at ease with Negri and Hardt's explanation. We have seen that the immaterial production of ideas and knowledge is an aspect of capital's power to subsume our labour — that is, an aspect of the power of the bourgeoisie over the working class. What we want to explore now is the subjective side of this subsumption, i.e. how antagonism arises.

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were only a matter of becoming aware of our existing power!

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Roberto Sarti, 'Toni Negri Against the Empire... For a Capitalist Europe!', Interactivist Info Exchange, May 30, 2005 [info.interactivist.net/?sid=05/05/31/0447208&mode=nested&tid=4analysis/05/05/31/044720\]shtml?tid=4](http://info.interactivist.net/?sid=05/05/31/0447208&mode=nested&tid=4analysis/05/05/31/044720]shtml?tid=4).

<sup>57</sup> Negri and Hardt resurrect a theory which pivots on potentially free and powerful subjective 'will' from one of the first founders of bourgeois thought: Spinoza.

<sup>58</sup> While Negri and Hardt conflate the object into the subject ('all is due to subjectivity'), Theorie Communiste, (we surely do not need to remind our readers of them), as Negri's negative mirror image, end up conflating the subject into the object ('all is due to the relations of capital and labour'), and appear to assert the same millennial gospel but for completely opposite reasons: due to forces that are beyond our individual consciousness and will, we now live in a 'new' era when the revolution is possible. For a critique of such theories which claim that our collective subjectivity is somehow 'forced' towards a certain historical direction (the revolution) by capital itself see, Gilles Dauvé, 'To Work

## 4.2 The ontological inversion

Marx's *Capital* is an account, chapter by chapter, of how capital as value valorising itself implies the deprivation of labour from its organisational, creative, knowledgeable sides.<sup>59</sup> Paradoxically, capital is produced by us but in this production we become its appendage; it acquires our human powers and we lose them, becoming subjects of its power. This inversion of powers, of who is the subject of the production of human activity and who is the object, who is the ruler and the ruled, has been called the 'ontological inversion'.

The solution of this inversion only lies in a real subversion of the present system of production. It is not a question of re-interpreting reality. It is not a question of observing that since value is actually created by the working class then the working class must be a productive and creative subject. It is not a question of simply observing that 'capital needs labour but labour does not need capital', so we must be somehow the initiators of production and innovation – even if we are not really aware of it. In fact capital is real alienation and real power. Although capital needs labour, this is labour done in an historically specific form; a labour that is really subsumed and really deprived of knowledge, initiative and creativity. We will see that forgetting this important point is forgetting the very dynamics that makes the subversion of capitalism a possible reality.

## 4.3 Who shares the mind of capital?

As capital does not go to the market with its own legs but it needs the capitalist to circulate, capital is incapable of thinking, designing, organising, as well: it needs man for this. This, at the beginning, was the capitalist himself: Wedgwood for example.

But Wedgwood's creativity is the creativity of capital. This creativity is free insofar it has introjected the needs of capital, the objective constraints of the market and its laws. Indeed, what is thinkable is what is objectively realisable within a landscape of undeniable, objective constraints: the finances available, the reality of market demand, the availability (in terms of cost!) of means, materials, labourers; the reasonability (in terms of cost!) of the design itself; the state of competition, etc.

This is an aspect of bourgeois 'alienation': the need to adhere to an 'objective' reality external to the individual. Bourgeois alienation may be experienced as a burden, but all bourgeois stop whinging in front of the wealth and social power this alienation also means for them.

With the development of capitalism, the capitalist farmed out creative and organisational work to special categories of privileged workers: managers and professionals, who worked within their productive project or as independent professionals.

Today the state finances a large part of scientific research and the development of knowledge. Modern science could only develop through the influx of state funds because the capital needed for the expansion of modern scientific research would be too big for any reasonable capitalist venture. Also IT developed thanks to generous US state finance.<sup>60</sup> Within these fields, the socialisation of labour, one aspect of capitalist production, was encouraged, while the fetters of private

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or not to Work? Is That the Question?', <http://troploin0.free.fr/biblio/lovlabuk/>

<sup>59</sup> Capitalist subsumption of labour has consequences for society as a whole, inside and outside the workplace, so that many activities which are done outside production are reshaped according to the pace and character of productive labour. For a discussion of how housework is affected by capitalist production, see 'The Arcane of Productive Reproduction' in *Aufheben* # 13, 2005, pp. 20–36.

<sup>60</sup> In the context of the military Star Wars project. See our article on China in this issue.

property were overridden by public finance. Sadly, this is not the norm but the exception that confirms a fundamental norm in capitalism.

The professionals, the top designer, the researcher share the effects of formal alienation with Wedgwood. They have to face competition. In a world based on exchange they have to produce for strangers who do not share a project or common interests with them.<sup>61</sup> But they normally feel fulfilled by their practice. They can see their work as creative and, as far as they identify themselves with the 'objective' requirements of their profession, autonomous. They can praise the present world as a world of 'creativity' and 'intelligence' because they do contribute to the creativity and intelligence of capital.

However, unlike the bourgeois, for the waged creative and professional workers their privileged position in society is not due to the power of their own capital at all: they are unable to live without selling their (very dear) labour power to capital, or without a wage or grant from the state. The recent retreat of social democracy has implied a retreat of the state from financing academia and the sciences. Squeezed by the lack of financial perspective, some of the intelligentsia have moved to radical anti-capitalism. This is indeed a 'new' era, when precisely the 'new' gospel by radical academics Negri and Hardt can sell lots of books.

For the unprivileged, large mass of donkey workers who do not create but execute, there is another story.

#### **4.4 The subjective side of real subsumption**

The (either material or immaterial!) donkey worker who works under the command of blueprints, organisational IT frameworks, designs, etc. does not share the mind of capital or any creative 'pleasure' from it. In the ontological inversion, the information and knowledge of capital means the opposite for the worker.

There is a good example from recent news. By June this year transport and delivery workers in warehouses across Britain had started complaining of having to wear computers on their wrists, arms and fingers which instructed them in their daily work. As GMB spokesman Paul Campbell said: 'We are having reports of people walking out of their jobs after a few days work, in some cases just a few hours. They are all saying that they don't like the job because they have no input. They just follow a computer's instruction.'<sup>62</sup> Informationalisation has not made delivery more intelligent or autonomous, but more brain-numbing and controlled.

As clever computerised systems are sold as gadgets for personal consumption, society at large tends to become less intelligent too! Try a trip in a car which has the new-fangled satellite-driven pilot in it, and experience the feel of divesting yourself of your geographical and orientation skills!.

This ontological inversion is one with a subjective experience of boredom and pain.<sup>63</sup> Morris denounced the new pain created by the expropriation of creativity and autonomy from craft work with manufacture, i.e. the beginning of capitalist production. Since the dawn of capitalism

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<sup>61</sup> For the alienation of the university professor, see Harry Cleaver 'From Operaismo to Autonomist Marxism: A Response: [www.eco.utexas.edu/AufhebenResponse2.pdf](http://www.eco.utexas.edu/AufhebenResponse2.pdf).

<sup>62</sup> David Hencke, 'Firms Tag Workers to Improve Efficiency', *The Guardian*, June 7, 2005.

<sup>63</sup> We deliberately used Autonomist De Angelis's words 'boredom and pain' that he uses to describe the effects of real subsumption in 'Beyond the Technological and the Social Paradigms', *Capital and Class* 57, Autumn 1995, pp. 107-134.



many people experienced hatred of design. For example, the typographer Koch, whose ideas were close to Morris's, fantasised about, and experimented with, a 'design-less typography' as an unconscious reaction to the sufferance of the present. In the 'new' era of immaterial production, this same pain has compelled many British transport workers to leave their job after just a few hours of computer-commanded work!

#### **4.5 Hatred as contradiction of capital**

With Autonomia and Mario Tronti in particular, the concrete experience of labour under subsumption was seen as the trigger of antagonism. For Tronti the labour which is commanded and made meaningless by real subsumption implies the disaffection of the worker from their daily activity: it implies hatred. This process was associated by Tronti with the fact that labour under capitalism is abstract labour, the source of value – capital as self-valorising capital needs then to rationalise and deskill concrete labour against our resistance in order to extract surplus value.<sup>64</sup>

Hatred is then the subjective aspect of the objective existence of capital as self-valorising value – and of a real subsumption which has to be reimposed continually and is continually challenged because it is incompatible with a fulfilling life. Hatred is the inherent unacceptability of the present system of production and the present division of labour. Hatred is the feel-bad factor in our optimistic view of capital as an unsolvable contradiction.

#### **4.6 Negri and Hardt's conception of immaterial labour as 'abstract labour' and the contradictions of capital**

Negri and Hardt cannot deny the undeniable. For example, in *Empire* they cannot deny that IT is a means to control and deskill labour in the new service sector.<sup>65</sup> The deskilling based on IT, they add, turns all concrete labours into 'abstract labour', a homogenised jelly of manipulations of symbols (*Empire*, p. 292). Are we perhaps unfair to Negri and Hardt, if they seem to repeat word by word what we have just said?

No. In fact, if we carry on reading, we find a twist. Through the practice of computer work, they continue, all labour becomes an undifferentiated jelly of the same activity: an abstract 'manipulation of [computer] symbols'. This, they conclude, is the concept of 'abstract labour'.

Although Negri and Hardt seem to consider deskilling and real subsumption, they focus their attention on the material aspects of labour, the bare manipulation of symbols. The social context of this manipulation (for whom, why, under what plans, etc.) becomes inessential. If we all press computer keys when we work, immaterial labour becomes the same jelly of abstract activity, i.e. the same for Professor Negri as it is for everybody else. The theory of immaterial labour then becomes universal and dismisses the distinction about who shares the mind of capital and who executes.

Hatred, which hardly applies to the top designer or for Professor Negri, has no place in this theory. If hatred has no place here, the contradiction of capital as its unacceptability has no place

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<sup>64</sup> See Mario Tronti, 'Social Capital', [www.reocities.com/cordobakaf](http://www.reocities.com/cordobakaf) Following this initial suggestion, other Autonomist Marxist authors, such as Massimo De Angelis, later adopted the concept of 'abstract labour' for the concrete 'boring and painful' experience of labour under real subsumption (in De Angelis, 'Beyond the Technological'). Although we do not agree with such use of the concept of 'abstract labour', we agree with the Autonomist understanding of the basis for antagonism.

<sup>65</sup> See also Witheford, 'Autonomist Marxism', p. 92.

either. Where is then the main contradiction of capital for Negri and Hardt? It arises, they explain, not from the inherent unacceptability of the present production, but from its inherent positivity. Antagonism arises, they explain, from our will to develop the present system of production and franchise it from the capitalist.

This is indeed a theory which does not see the need for a rupture, which is a rupture with a convenient division of labour. No surprise that for Negri and his followers a struggle for ‘the subversive reintegration of execution and conception’ is exemplified by the struggles of IT workers for the right of self-management of their very skilled labour (Witthford, ‘Autonomist Marxism’, p. 104). No surprise that for Negri and Hardt what counts for our anti-capitalist struggles is not a subversion of the present division of labour but the banal question of who controls the results of labour (information, the GM code, ‘communicational resources’, etc.) as it is divided now!

#### 4.7 An outdated theory?

Negri and Hardt will say, no doubt, that all that we have said so far, in our analysis of antagonism and hatred based on the real subsumption of labour is outdated. Today, they will say, immaterial production has broken out with labour confined in the workplace and is done in the street, within unspecified ‘communities’, by anti-capitalist protesters, even tribes on small islands in the Pacific Ocean, by consumers who collectively help create the meanings of their commodity world, etc.<sup>66</sup> The list is never-ending.

Today, then, there is no such thing as real subsumption anymore. As we have already said, for Negri and Hardt today society at large organises our communication and co-operation, while capital only overlaps on them and by overlapping it ‘controls, commands and channels our actions’.<sup>67</sup>

Another reason why we are wrong, and Marxism is outdated, Negri and Hardt will say, is because not only is production delocalised, but the product exceeds the commodity. What’s this ‘excess’? As immaterial workers in the service sector, we may make friends in our immaterial job with the customers, above all if we smile a lot: this is an ‘excess’. As migrants, our first language and our links with our relatives are excesses too. As unemployed, our skill in making houses of cards is an excess too. And in general, as workers and poor, we produce lots of excesses in the forms of needs and desires (Multitude, p. 148).<sup>68</sup>

Is this true – and, consequently, is our theory outdated? In fact all the above is true, but has always been true in capitalism and has never denied the dynamics of capital and real subsumption. Capitalist production has always thrived on given social and cultural backgrounds. The very concept of use value has always been rooted in society and its culture.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> However, to patch up the gap between their theory and reality, Negri and Hardt add: ‘the impersonal rule of capital extends throughout society... the places of exploitation, by contrast, are always determinate and concrete.’ (Multitude, p. 100–101) A theory that says one thing and its opposite is the best theory ever.

<sup>67</sup> Negri, *Politics of Subversion*, p. 116 cited in Witthford, ‘Autonomist Marxism’, p. 101. Negri safely adds that capital even ‘anticipates’ our production ‘in common’ (*Politics of Subversion*, p. 116). This genially explains why this ‘production in common’ is never actually observable in reality!

<sup>68</sup> On how productive the ‘poor’ is see also, *Empire*, p. 158. In the concept of ‘excess’ there is a moment of truth for the skilled creative worker. This excess has a value today and can make the difference between who guides and controls a struggle and who does not tomorrow. We cannot see how, instead, the McDonald worker’s skills in showing servile niceness all the time gives to them ‘equal opportunities of struggle’.

<sup>69</sup> Marx mentioned in his times the human (i.e. social) meaning of food in opposition to something that serves

If the above is true, however, Negri and Hardt make a logical leap and claim that this background for capitalist production, today, is production in its own rights, production tout court:

Insofar as life tends to be completely invested by acts of production and reproduction, social life itself becomes a productive machine. (Multitude, p. 148)

In this interpretation of production which incorporates non-production, then all can be production.

We do not need to waste more words on this distortion of reality. Negri and Hardt's logical leap which conflates all activity with production has already been criticised by Caffentzis who stressed that there is a difference between labour, as a specific activity, and any odd activity.<sup>70</sup>

We also do not need to waste more words to convince the reader that real subsumption is still a reality today – everyone can experience it. As Gilles Dauvé says:

Managers know their Marx better than Toni Negri: they keep tracing and measuring productive places and moments to try and rationalise them even more. They even locate and develop “profit centres” within the company. Work is not diffuse. It is separated from the rest (“To Work or Not to Work?”)

Only, what we are concerned with here, is the ideological conclusions of a theory of ‘general intellect’. First of all, this theory seems democratic and egalitarian but hides a sneaking contentment for the present. In a society where all is productive, there is no distinction between the owners of the means of production and the proletariat. There are no classes, only one large class of productive producers, some of goods and some of needs. Second, this theory seems to flatter us about our creative and knowledgeable inputs into society, but hides contentment for a situation where in reality we have no input. We may work 43 hours a week in a call centre, but Negri and Hardt give us a word of consolation: in the information we employ, in the spreadsheet we use, there is a drop of our socially-shared creativity – we are the co-creators of it. What we need is only to become aware of this.

In conclusion, we are confident that the questions we put forward are not outdated! There is no easy escape for Negri and Hardt from these questions into a dream world of happy general intellectual and excessive production.

## **5. Immaterial labour and the heart of capital**

We have focused so far on immaterial production as the production of knowledge and ideas. Another, central, aspect of immaterial production as defined by Negri and Hardt is the production of affects, communication and cooperation. In this section we address Negri and Hardt's view that this production, which is capitalist production, is ‘elevated to the level of human relations’ and criticise their inability to understand the ontological inversion that turns affects and communication into abstract powers of capital and into our disempowerment.

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only to fill the stomach. See, ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844)’ in *Early Writings*, Pelican, London 1975, p. 353.

<sup>70</sup> George Caffentzis, ‘Immeasurable Value? An Essay on Marx's Legacy’, *The Commoner*, 10, p. 97, 1997. And by

## 5.1. 'Immaterial production of communication and affects and subversion

Capital and affects, it seems, do not go along too well.

For Negri and Hardt capital was simply forced to incorporate affects and other subjective powers like communication and cooperation into production (Empire, pp. 275–6). Without the struggles of the '60s and '70s, they say, capital would have been content with conveyor belts and mechanical production. In fact, we are made to believe, by incorporating communication and affects in its production, capital incorporated its own gravediggers: what is subjective and human is inherently subversive and anti-capitalist by nature.

Hardt concedes that, in incorporating affects and human relations in production, capital 'contaminated' them. In his article 'Affective Labour' we read:

In a first moment in the computerisation of industry... one might say that... human relations... have been instrumentalised.<sup>71</sup>

But, this is not the end of the story. Quite the contrary, capitalist production has been humanised in turn, by this subsumption of human faculties:

Through a reciprocal process... production has become communicative, affective, de-instrumentalised and elevated to the level of human relations. ('Affective Labour')

Negri and Hardt seem to propose something refreshing. From the Frankfurt School to Foucault, we have read plenty of pessimistic literature about how we are helplessly de-humanised by mass production or by the whole construction of power. Adorno endlessly moaned that capitalist production creates false ideology through a specific production of mass culture. Foucault, perhaps even more pessimistically, observed that our only subjectivity is inevitably the one created by power.

Negri and Hardt agree with Foucault that present production creates our collective subjectivity and society, and this happens, they add, because present production is the production of affects, affective labour. As Hardt writes:

Affective labour is itself and directly the constitution of communities and collective subjectivities... the processes whereby our labouring practices produce collective subjectivities... society itself. ('Affective Labour')

But, they add, this production is not negative, it is positive. It makes society 'more affective' and 'more communicative'. And, since this is the result of immaterial labour, it is at odds with capital itself, it is human and potentially subversive. Negri and Hardt invert the pessimism of grumpy Foucault and Adorno into a euphoric adherence to the present.

Do we want to share this euphoria? Let us consider deeply the issue of communicative and affective labour, and what it means for us.

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us in Aufheben # 13.

<sup>71</sup> In Makeworlds, [www.makeworlds.org](http://www.makeworlds.org)

## **5.2. Immaterial production of communication and affects and real subsumption**

The first question we ask is what happens to the nature of certain activities which involve primarily communications and affects (e.g. care, communication and entertainment) when they become productive for capital. There is only one answer. The integration of such activities as profit-making activities imply real subsumption and rationalisation.

As Taylor did with material production, new studies now analyse human cooperation in terms of abstract principles, organisational schemes amenable to standardisation and automation. As the machine for manual work the new technology of communication allows for standardisation, rationalisation and control of communication.<sup>72</sup> And, importantly, the imposition of efficiency in cost and time means the imposition of factory pace on affective activities such as hospital care.

## **5.3. Immaterial production of communication and affects and the ontological inversion**

If we now consider the effect of this change for the worker, we will not be surprised to discover that we will find a similar pattern as the one seen in Section 4 for manufacture: de-humanisation.

But is there a difference between the subsumption of craft work and the more recent subsumption of other ‘communicative and affective’ activities? Negri and Hardt seem to point at the fact that these latter have something special in their original, natural immateriality, and that, unlike craft work, their subsumption must have a reverse humanising effect on production.

In fact these arguments seem to contain a basically wrong assumption. Thinking that nursing has something more specially social and human with respect to, for example, pot making and that, consequently, its subsumption implies something new and different for capitalist production, means to fall into an ideological trap. It means to take the established result of capitalist production on human activity as something natural.

In fact pot making, as all human activities including care, was fully social, communicative and affective before its subsumption by capital. It involved imagination and problem solving, a socially-shared conception of aesthetics and utility and a social relation between the creator and the user. Capital took over all these human powers and, truly, ‘for a reciprocal process’ (which we call the ontological inversion!) assumed them as its powers. This ‘reciprocal process’ and humanisation of capital is not, however, a silver lining of real subsumption but a curse for us, since it is one with our real experience of de-humanisation.

Going back to the subsumption of service and communication, we wonder if we are not in the presence of some more of this incorporation and subsumption of human activity and powers.

For example, the activity of ‘spreading information’ was practised in the courtyards and village squares and based on common understanding and experience. Taken over by capital, it becomes the task of helping strangers in exchange for a wage – first from ‘help desks’ in the same town; later, by phone. Eventually, from a distant country. Automation comes next: robots now phone us or answer our phone calls; web sites, i.e. automated interactive systems replace our interaction effectively. Meanwhile the content of information is made increasingly alien to both the ones who receive it and those who convey it.

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<sup>72</sup> In the ‘70s and ‘80s many, following Braverman, focused their analysis of IT as being the new machine (see Nick Witheford, ‘Autonomist Marxism’ and our review of CyberMarx in this issue).

This process increasingly distances the communicators concretely, in ‘affects’ as well as in life and struggle. People from two sides of a desk can still find common grounds of understanding and struggle, for example through sharing social milieus outside alienating customer relations. Brighton Against Benefit Cuts benefited from the wealth of Brighton life: this created friendship and understanding and allowed for the build-up of solidarity among the more militant dole workers and the unemployed in a common struggle against dole privatisation. But the possibility of building solidarity on common grounds is more difficult the more people are delocalised and estranged.<sup>73</sup>

In the sector of entertainment, the manipulation of affects must be able to leave the producer and be consumed by strangers. This transforms collective events of the past (fairs, storytelling etc.) which involved complex interplay of full human relations, into the consumption of commodities.

The experience of affects in care is de-humanised too. For example, the direct relation of the village doctor and his patients, or women neighbours in midwifery roles and new mothers, etc. gets increasingly standardised by privatisation. The nurse who deals with patients in a conveyor-belt system cannot know them personally: his ‘manipulation of affects’ is necessarily depersonalised. A surgery under economic pressure now tends to rotate patients among doctors so that even the flimsy relation between the individual patient and ‘his’ doctor is sacrificed on the altar of economic efficiency. Eventually, hospital consultants will be asked to interact with their patients through TV monitors on wheels.

In front of this systematic denial of communication and socialisation inherent in a profit-making process, and in front of the parallel build-up of ‘communicative’ and ‘affective’ powers of capital, Negri and Hardt do not flinch. It does not matter if our contact is automated or virtual, Hardt says, ‘not for that reason is [it] any less real’ (‘Affective Labour’). It does not matter if it is very difficult today to realise the conditions for communication and solidarity among individuals or groups in struggle: this is communication anyway – only it is a ‘new’ kind of communication, vertical instead of horizontal.<sup>74</sup>

The question that immediately comes to our mind is: in a historical moment when most of us have to keep our heads down in our ‘flexible’ jobs as call centre workers, waiters, carers, bank employees, receptionists, etc., how subversive is it to tell us that the alienated and alienating ‘communication’ and ‘affects’ we produce are nonetheless real?

#### **5.4. Post-Fordism and the ontological inversion**

The clearest example of how Negri and Hardt turn a blind eye to the ontological inversion of communication and affects in immaterial production is their enthusiastic approach to post-Fordist methods of production. Post-Fordism is welcomed by Negri and Hardt as an aspect of immaterial production, being based on exchange of information and cooperation between inter-related work units – thus it demands and stimulates communicativity in the worker.

In fact, as we argued earlier, post-Fordism aimed to fragment the large-scale factory production process. This fragmentation needs a stress on ‘communication’ at a managerial level however,

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<sup>73</sup> The call centre worker is in the front line in a relation between clients and their providers of service, and often take the brunt for this alienating situation. See Amelia Gentleman, ‘Indian Call Staff Quit Over Abuse on the Line’ *The Observer*, 28 May 2005. So much for the... creation of affects.

<sup>74</sup> Paraphrased from *Empire*, p. 55.

since the company finds itself with the need to sow the bits of production back together. Of course the Japanese-oriented business brochures of the '80s made a big fuss about 'communication' and 'synergies'. They had to.

But, as it was more clear to the workers themselves than to Negri and Hardt, the breakdown of production into teams increased managerial-controlled communication to the extent that it reduced the possibility for uncontrolled, antagonistic, communication across the factory.

For example in Longbridge, where as we have said earlier Rover production was restructured, the separation of work into units increased face-to-face 'communication' between the workers and their own team (group) leader while curtailing the mobility of the shop stewards (Pugliano, 'Restructuring of Work', pp. 39–41).<sup>75</sup> Rather than encouraging new alternative, anti-capitalist communications, simply and sadly, this system individualised the workers and encouraged them to look to their leaders for the solutions to their grudges. At the same time it discouraged them to look for collective and antagonistic solutions, even if in the mild form of union disputes. This is another example of ontological inversion, whereby the development and increase of capital's 'communication' is realised through the denial of ours.<sup>76</sup>

### **5.5. Immaterial production of networks of social relations and alternative networks**

Besides the production of communication and affects, the 'networks' of social relations that results as a by-product of 'serving with a smile' cannot but harmonise with capital.

For example, the social niceness produced between hostesses and aeroplane passengers is an ephemeral connection founded on money transaction. The real nature of this relation appears in full when it is broken down during a strike — then the passengers affectively turn against the strikers, having lost their value for money. If we accept that a negative affect is an affect, it is worth while to paraphrase Hardt and say that consumers' resentment is by no means less real. Indeed, social relations of bourgeois exchange are real and imply real oppression and repression.

Networks of social relations alternative to those of 'democratic exchange' can instead emerge in the very moment in which we deny capitalist social relations. This can even be a humble strike or a street protest limited in time and aims. Or it may be something even humbler and more limited. When we steal time from our 'affective' job in our service office and hang about in the corridor with our colleagues, this is the moment in which we build up affections beyond work relations, affections that can be a basis for future solidarity.

Only if we can build up and rely on direct social relations alternative to those of exchange can we concretely dispose of capitalist relations. The more we break away from capital, the more we defetishise its power, the more important these alternative relations become for our survival and victory. The revolution, the final triumph and abolition of the proletariat will only be possible on the basis of social relations consciously built through struggle — surely not on the basis of our smiles to passengers or hamburger eaters.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Pugliano notices that also in the FIAT factory in Melfi the establishment of increased inter-personal communication between workers and their leaders or other persons in key roles in the factory reduced oppositional activity to the minimum (Pugliano, 'Restructuring of Work', p. 47).

<sup>76</sup> As Mouvement Communiste notice in Fiat Melfi, the introduction of Toyotism, with its heavy shifts, destroyed all 'possibilities of any social life outside the factory' for the workers. So much for the creation of social relations...

<sup>77</sup> We notice that the recent BA strike in support of Gate Gourmet workers (a catering outsource of BA) was based

## 5.6. How subversive is immaterial production and what does this actually mean?

Perhaps, again, we have considered the wrong example: i.e. that of a ‘traditional’ strike – or a ‘traditional’ micro-struggle such as hanging-out in the corridor with our colleagues.

In the famous confrontation between Toni Negri and Socialist Workers Party intellectual, Alex Callinicos, at the Paris European Social Forum in 2003, Callinicos criticised Negri for allegedly not including ‘strikers’ in the ‘multitude’ and for having thus abandoned a working class perspective. Negri easily rebuffed these allegations: he never excluded strikers, he said, and he always speaks about the antagonistic class.<sup>78</sup> However, what we read about immaterial labour poses serious doubts about what, precisely, Negri’s view of class struggle is.

Indeed, for a theory which sees immaterial production as anti-capitalist in itself, the real, effective struggle cannot be found in refusing and disrupting immaterial production.<sup>79</sup> The ‘new’ era thus opens up, in this view, possibilities for ‘new’ positive and exciting struggles that create and develop immaterial production. For many of us this idea does not make much sense. But it makes really good sense for the radical academic or the radical top designer. They can consider struggles based on their writing and designing. They can use their skills against capital, and, at the same time improve their CV and ‘self-valorise’ their privileged labour power.<sup>80</sup>

Although Callinicos made the mistake of not acknowledging Negri’s subtleties seriously enough, in his allegations there is a moment of truth. It is true that Negri still speaks about the ‘antagonistic’ class, but he has emptied this concept of meaning. For him class is simply a cultural belonging, a re-groupment created by (any) struggle. When anybody can be ‘the class’, including top designer Oliviero Toscani, the concept of class becomes meaningless. Thus Negri’s world of the multitude becomes in practice a classless society. This is why Negri can find a basis for academic collaboration, with post-modernists who have, more openly (and honestly) just disowned a class perspective.<sup>81</sup>

In the next and last subsection we will show how Negri and Hardt, as new ideologues for the ‘new’ era, manage to present their particularistic theory as universal.

## 5.7. Immaterial production as the apology for the ontological inversion

Like all bourgeois theories, a theory that can only reflect the perspective of a privileged part of society must nevertheless present itself as universal. The easiest way of achieving universality is to speak about unquestionably and universally good things. Like what? Like capital itself.

Capital can be seen as an unquestionably and universally good thing indeed. The secret of the bourgeois apologist of capital is in fact to exploit the ontological inversion. Does capital deny our creativity, affections, communication? Never mind. The other side of this coin is a real

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on ‘networks’ of friendship and family relations created outside work. Importantly, those who showed solidarity with the Gate Gourmet workers were the ‘material’ baggage handlers and not the ‘immaterial’ hostesses and stewards.

<sup>78</sup> For the debate, see e.g., J. Walker, ‘ESF: Another Venue is Possible: Negri vs. Callinicos’, [www.indymedia.org.uk](http://www.indymedia.org.uk).

<sup>79</sup> See our review of *CyberMarx* in this issue for examples of ‘effective’ forms of struggles suggested to us by the Negrian Nick Witheford.

<sup>80</sup> Radical-chic tutors of design encourage young, would-be graphic designers to have a few anti-capitalist ad-busting works in their portfolio.

<sup>81</sup> Lazzarato hails the end of the class system ‘as a model of action and subjectivation’ (Maurizio Lazzarato, ‘What Possibilities for Action Exist Today in the Public Sphere?’, [www.nettime.org](http://www.nettime.org)).



production of the same human powers, but now assumed by capital as its own, and appearing to us as ‘creativity’, ‘affections’ or ‘communication’ of a vaguely defined ‘society’ (or ‘new’ era). The fact that none of them actually belongs to the McDonald’s waiter can be then swiftly dismissed as a contingent disfunction of this unquestionably positive society (or ‘new’ era). When Negri and Hardt talk about ‘creativity’, ‘affections’ or ‘communication’ we cannot avoid thinking of the old bourgeois apology for capital as ‘progress’, ‘culture’ or ‘civilisation’. This old apology is now re-proposed in a ‘new’ Toyotaistic and cybernetic salad dressing.

Mitchell Cohen has already noticed that Negri and Hardt tend to attribute to us the powers and dynamics of capital itself. Commenting on their enthusiasm for the freedom of circulation of migrants, he says, lucidly:

Poor migrants in our globalising world don’t pursue “continuous movement” as an end in itself; they seek places in which to live decent and secure lives. Only capital pursuing profits can live in restless movement. (Well, perhaps cosmopolitan intellectuals can too when they chase conferences and international celebrity. But they also want — and need — the security of tenure).<sup>82</sup>

The broadness and abstractedness of concepts such as ‘communication’ and ‘affects’ has also another interesting function. It serves Negri and Hardt in the creation of a cheap Theory of Everything in One Book that can explain any facts ever observed and incorporate anything ever written. If this seems too easy, however, Negri and Hardt pay a price. The price is the appalling meaningfulness of a theory that can say only something too general or too abstract.<sup>83</sup>

Reading Negri and Hardt, we find lots of abstract truths. Our labour is so communicative and affective today. Of course this is true. All we can possibly do or we could have ever done since we came down from the trees can be categorised as communication or affections! Our production creates social relations. Of course this is true. All production, as an aspect of our social relations, has always implied the reproduction of social relations! Today language is fundamental for production because ‘we could not interact... in our daily lives if languages... were not common’ (Multitude, p. 188). Of course this is true too and has always been. Does all this prove Negri and Hardt’s theory of everything is true, or it is only the case that we are in front of trans-historical banalities?

## **Conclusion: a bad string makes a bad necklace**

### **New old categories for the ‘new’ era**

In the course of this article we have addressed the inadequacy of Negri and Hardt’s concepts of material and immaterial labour for the understanding of capitalism and its contradictions — the string of their fascinating necklace.

Negri and Hardt’s categories of material and immaterial labour replace the old categories of manual and mental labour of traditional Marxist times.<sup>84</sup> The latter were intended to conceptu-

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<sup>82</sup> In ‘An Empire of Cant, Hardt, Negri and Postmodern Political Theory’, Dissonance, Issue 1, [www.messmedia.net](http://www.messmedia.net)

<sup>83</sup> In ‘Alma Venus’ Negri avoids spelling out how he conceives the transition to communism by speaking rather of ‘leaning further beyond the edge of being’. This pure abstractedness is, we suspect, convenient ([www.messmedia.net](http://www.messmedia.net)). Let us notice that all human thought is based on abstractions. Bourgeois thought, however, uses abstract concepts as starting points, to explain reality in separation from its context.

<sup>84</sup> To be fair to traditional Marxism, we should specify that Negri and Hardt seem to have absorbed and re-elaborated vulgar Marxism.

alise the ‘manual’ as a potentially revolutionary agent of class struggle. It is important to notice that the essential distinction between those who create and those who execute within production – thus a distinction in roles and privileges – became conflated with ‘mental’ and ‘manual’ work, i.e. the type of work done.

The increasing investment of capital into what Negri and Hardt call immaterial production and the consequent increasing rationalisation of mental labour has now put this categorisation into question. ‘Mental’ labour now cuts across the lines of privileges and proletarianisation and includes, side by side, the call centre worker and the top designer. Having thus lost its original rationale, it is now a bad category.

Negri and Hardt’s ‘new’ category of ‘immaterial’ labour, however, does not seem to be better than this. Like ‘mental labour’, we have seen that immaterial labour includes, side by side, the call centre worker and the top designer too. Using the wrong category, Negri and Hardt give themselves a hard time in trying to convince us why this category correctly encircles the potentially subversive ‘new subject’: why the migrant, although he does manual work, is immaterial, and why the top designer, who is included in the category, is a revolutionary subject.

The problem of bad categories can be solved either by looking for more appropriate categories – or by making the bad category elastic enough to patch up all its shortcomings. Negri and Hardt choose the second solution. The old concept of mental labour excluded manual labour, thus it was far too rigid. Negri and Hardt define the new concept, immaterial labour, in a more comprehensive way: as any possible human activity – either manual or mental, either done inside or outside the workplace – that produces ideas, communication or affections, either as product or a by-product. With this definition, immaterial labour can include anything. Indeed, what human activity is not an expenditure of thoughts, affects or an act of communication after all? Even the production of nothing can be seen as production of something: needs and desires, which are indeed human forms of affects and communication.

The convenient elasticity<sup>85</sup> of the category of ‘immaterial’ labour allows Negri and Hardt to sneak into and out of the ‘subject’ of immaterial labour the ‘right’/ ‘wrong’ groups according to the current rating of sympathy scored in the liberal-leftist world. Thus black ‘communities’, tribes in the Pacific, housewives, students, Indian farmers fighting against the genetic industry, protesters involved in the anti-capitalist movement, workers in flexible jobs, economic migrants, the radical student and the academic like Negri are all in.<sup>86</sup>

Being amenable to include what is ‘cool’ and exclude what is ‘dated’, the new categories for the ‘new’ era have the power to please and flatter a large range of readers. Their elasticity is good for ‘explaining’ anything as effects or acts of immaterial production.

This is the secret behind the intellectual universality of Negri and Hardt. When anything can be described as the creation of ‘communication’ or ‘affects’; when anything, even the production of nothing at all (sorry: needs), can be considered as ‘production’, we have found the Holy Grail of the theorist, the magic key for the Theory of Everything capable of accommodating everything and in the end explaining nothing.

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<sup>85</sup> Sorry: flexibility?

<sup>86</sup> The most popular social group for the intellectual world is the intellectual world. This is immaterial by default.

## A new fetishism of production for the ‘new’ era

By inheriting the traditional Marxist categorisation, although having turned them into stretchable rubber, Negri and Hardt uncritically inherit assumptions and values which were implicit in their use.

First of all, they inherit the tendency to attribute some form of moral value to the role of ‘producer’ in capitalism. For the traditional Marxist there was a moral value to be a productive manual worker – for Negri and Hardt, turning the scale of moralistic ‘value’ upside down, there is a moral value in being a productive immaterial worker. Negri and Hardt try very hard to convince the reader that tribes of the Pacific islands are productive (of herbal remedies) and that those excluded from the labour market are productive (of needs and desires). For people like us who do not share this same productivist moralism (in either its straight or inverted form) this is just a waste of ink.<sup>87</sup> We noticed that this construction serves, no doubt, an ideological agenda. Behind the appearance to reclaim moral ‘value’ for the dispossessed it feeds us in fact with a petty bourgeois vision of a society of equally worthy ‘producers’: some of valuable pieces of design, some of needs and desires.

Together with uncritical productivism, Negri and Hardt inherit an uncritical fetishism of the productive forces – again, turned upside down. The traditional Marxist trusts the development of (industrial) forces of production as neutral and potentially fit for future self-management; Negri and Hardt trust the development of (immaterial) forces of production as inherently subversive and potentially fit for self-management. But now the machine is substituted by a loose entanglement of networks of social relations.

We have stressed that like traditional Marxism and like much bourgeois thought, Negri and Hardt cannot see our social relations, i.e. capital, behind the apparent objectivity of production. This blindness reaches the climax when they mistake the apparent autonomy of production from the individual human, which is evidence of its nature as capital, as evidence of its autonomy from capital!

In fact Negri and Hardt draw a curtain of simplistic enthusiasm over reality. By addressing immaterial production overlook what the existence of production of pure ideas and communicational frameworks actually implies: the separation of the creative side from the executive side of human activity; real subsumption of labour; the daily boredom and pain lived by the worker who is engaged in activity that has been subsumed. And crucially it is one with the existence of privileged producers of designs, IT frameworks and all the apparatus of control over the labour of others. The fact that members of society who partake of such privileges cannot see this problem is perhaps not a coincidence.

Consistent with their uncritical acceptance of the present, Negri and Hardt do not see the contradictions of capitalism in its inhumanity and unacceptability, in its denial of creativity, intelligence or affections for us, and in our hatred. Instead, for them the main contradiction of capitalism is in the humanity, creativity and affections that immaterial production develops; in the inherent goodness of the present conditions, which we should not resist but enhance.

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<sup>87</sup> In ‘Must Try Harder’ and ‘The Arcane of Productive Reproduction’, *Aufheben* # 13, we similarly criticised as moralistic the autonomist attempts to convince the world that the unwaged produce value.

## **A new paleo-Marxism for the ‘new’ era**

But let us be fair to Negri and Hardt. They do not replicate old Marxism: theirs is a ‘new’ old Marxism for a ‘new’ era. It is a vulgar Marxism turned upside down, which inverts the ‘worthiness’ from the manual worker to the immaterial worker. Coherently with a preference for a ‘new’ category for the revolutionary ‘subject’ which includes the middle class, this doctrine embraces perfect middle-class liberal values: the idealisation of bourgeois democracy, the dream of consumer sovereignty as the best solution for the future, the rejection of the despotism of past working class organisation, and so on.<sup>88</sup>

Despite trying to appear to oppose old Marxism and to be new and exciting, however, Negri and Hardt’s theory smells musty already! Not only because it is based on old fads such as the enthusiasm for Toyotism, already long out of fashion. But also because Negri and Hardt cannot get out of the impasse of traditional Marxism, since they share the same fundamental problems: a lack of understanding of capital as objectification of social relations and the consequent hopeless cul-de-sac of intending revolution as self-management of the present production.

## **Objectivism and subjectivism for the ‘new’ era**

Negri and Hardt’s uncritical acceptance of apparently objectivistic ideas may surprise us, since their books are full of subjectivistic assertions of Autonomist inheritance.

However, in this article we have seen that at a closer inspection Negri and Hardt’s conception of subjectivity is as mistaken and confused as their conception of objectivity. We have argued that the subjectivity that Negri and Hardt celebrate as the ‘multitude’ is merely bourgeois consciousness, the product of our bourgeois relations of exchange. This subjectivity is precisely that which creates capital as an objectivity. Thus Negri and Hardt end up celebrating the coin of capital in both its two faces: the objectivity of immaterial production and the intriguing vitality of bourgeois subjectivity and democratic exchanges.

This shows, we said, a lack of dialectical understanding. This is why under the sheep’s clothes of Negri and Hardt’s shallow subjectivism we discover the wolf of uncritical objectivism, which is, ultimately, bourgeois. We cannot be too surprised then if Negri and Hardt uncritically adhere to post-Fordist technological determinism, and proclaim that the paradigms of immaterial production can shape us down to our marrows. Despite their apparent supersession of those bourgeois theories, Negri and Hardt simply adhere to them and only give them some incoherent and decorative radical twist.

## **The silver linings of capital: optimism and pessimism for the ‘new’ era**

We have seen that Negri and Hardt are able to present their theory as excitingly subjectivistic. ‘We’ created immaterial labour in our autonomous struggle, ‘we’ imposed it on capital. Behind the power of capital we have got our own unofficial but effective power.

Against this view we have presented a history of capitalist development that sees restructuring and class compromises as the re-imposition of the domination of capital on labour. It won’t be of any use for us to deny that we still live in capitalism as Negri and Hardt do.<sup>89</sup> But for us

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<sup>88</sup> And Michael Hardt’s acrobatics to condemn the anarchists’ attacks against Starbucks’ windows in Seattle[as well as his passive acceptance to call these attacks ‘violence’.

<sup>89</sup> ‘I don’t deny, it’s nice to dream, but it is less nice to have hallucinations. Seeing a fallen empire and a triumphing

the reality of capitalism as the present domination is double-sided. The positive side of restructuring is not something that doubles its negative side but it is an aspect of it — it is the increasing unacceptability of capital, now extended more deeply to the globe. That immaterial labour has contradictions inherent in itself is true, but they are not its inherent goodness, but its potential fragility. The new weapons used by capital to subsume us make capital more crucially dependent on our compliance: within the practice of immaterial production, for example, the zero-stock policies or the volatility of smiles and sense-of-humour required in team work are rather vulnerable points. And, with the flight of capital abroad, the working class involved in (any and mainly industrial) production in the globe has increased, increasing the potentials for uncontrollable new cycles of struggle at a global level.

To stress how capitalist production is bad for our health and happiness, to stress that immaterial production is contradictory and bound to be dismantled with the revolution, this is the real answer to pessimism.

Negri and Hardt's striving to find a hidden silver lining in capitalist production is real pessimism instead. Their celebration of unquestionably good things as aspects of the present system of production is in fact the celebration of the human powers that capital has assumed, disempowering and dehumanising us in the ontological inversion. This celebration is an ideological capitulation — which we have equated with bourgeois enthusiasm for 'progress' and 'civilisation'.

### **A 'new' religion for a 'new' era: the doctrine of Negative Reality Inversion<sup>90</sup>**

Once the string of Negri and Hardt's necklace has been cut we can still be fascinated by the single, colourful beads. We have read about a world where we are overwhelmingly and hege- monically surrounded by immaterial production done in common, and escaping subsumption and control. No doubt many assertions in Negri and Hardt's books are exciting and consolatory. So exciting that it is hard to raise our head from their books and look around us.

In fact what is described in Negri and Hardt's work is not the world we know. It is not our daily experience of commodification and subsumption. But we are told: although what we see is the opposite, we have to believe that what we see around is simply a distortion due to capital's overlap with an otherwise free and autonomous process of production and ideal democratic exchange.

If we have to abandon Marxism, which seemed to correctly describe the present world, for a doctrine which correctly describes what we cannot actually see, we need faith: Negri and Hardt's doctrine is indeed a new religion for a 'new' world. Like all religion, we are told not to look at the world and our experience, but to something beyond, which we cannot see. In fact, we can entirely apply to Negri and Hardt, one by one, Marx's words about religion:

[Negri and Hardt's work] is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic com- pendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d'honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human

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communism where, instead, there is an aggressive capitalism... more than a beautiful utopia this seems to me, frankly, hallucination' (Maria Turchetto, 'L'Impero').

<sup>90</sup> We assume Alexiej Sayle and his company don't mind if we have freely adopted the concept of Negative Reality Inversion presented in 'Sick', The Young Ones, series 2.

essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against [Negri and Hardt's work] is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is [the creativity and communicativity of immaterial production] (Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Introduction, italics from the original.<sup>91</sup>).

The new religion for the 'new' times, however, can present itself only as rational and based on 'facts'. Thus it can be only based on a skilful capacity to find facts as evidences of their inverse, and indeed Negri and Hardt are very skilled in this. We call this the method of Negative Reality Inversion.

Does our work get increasingly commanded through IT means? This means that the 'intelligence' of IT 'permeates' us and makes us 'more informationalised' and 'more intelligent'.

Do we interact through automated systems? This does not mean that our communication is not real, it is only virtual.

Do scientists complain about the recent increasing privatisation of research, previously supported by state funds – e.g. patenting DNA, etc.? This is evidence that production is 'increasingly' made in common.<sup>92</sup>

Are services increasingly privatised and increasingly run like businesses? This means that today all production is increasingly run like services!<sup>93</sup>

Does Toyotism imposes stricter managerial control over the communication between workers? This means that Toyotism has increased communication because the control of it is central in production.

Are recent struggles such as the Los Angeles riots, the revolt in Chiapas, etc. isolated explosions that do not communicate in an 'era' of communication and cooperation? This means that they are communicative – but it's a new communication, not horizontal but... vertical (Empire, p. 55).

Are the propertyless deprived of the power to produce? This means that they are productive (of needs).

Are the poor 'subjugated'? This means that they are 'powerful, always more powerful' (sic, Empire, p. 157).

To conclude, we invite readers to recall their healthy suspicions about priests. The critique of religion is the prerequisite of all critique.

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<sup>91</sup> [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org). See also *Early Writings*, p. 244.

<sup>92</sup> See *Multitude*, pp. 337–8 and pp. 185–6.

<sup>93</sup> The prescription to run businesses like services, popular in the business literature of the '80s, were nothing other than the re-edition of old the bourgeois ideology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The prescription to run production for profit like a service, or simply to understand it as a service, hides the delusion to abolish its inherent contradictions as a production for profit through a change of the staff's attitude towards the customer or towards themselves. Instead, the recent increasing privatisation of state-run services like the British National Health Service is a concrete change of a service into a profit-making machine. This has really concrete effects, it is not simply the ideological prescription of a change in attitude. But Negri and Hardt, who pay respect to business guru prescriptions, do not bother about these much more relevant changes in the 'new' era of increasing privatisation!

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