

## ***SYMPOSIUM***

### **Investigating Bio-Politics: Promises and Limitations**

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It has been one of the core interests of socialist ecologists to think about the relationship between human labor and nature and, hence, the intertwining of human and natural history. After all, for Marx, it was labor that was the most immediate human intersection with physical nature. The perpetual transformation and production of nature lies at the heart of the capitalist production process. Some of the most important works in political ecology, for example well-known books by Gorz and Lipietz, focused on the restructuring of labor. More recently, building on theoretical work associated with the Italian *Autonomia* movement (see, for example, the work by Maurizio Lazzarato and Paolo Virno), Hardt and Negri have reformulated the workerist/operaist claims of the 1970s and posed a new set of questions around the biopolitical constitution of work and labor as the foundation of their 2000 book, *Empire*.

In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri build on Foucault's analysis of power and expand his concept of biopower when they suggest that through the rise of immaterial, or non-physical, work, the entirety of the "processes of life" are increasingly being subordinated to the exigencies of capitalist productivity. In this process, biopolitics is the form of government that regulates the production and reproduction of life. The expansion of society's productive labor into the realm of communication, knowledge, and affects blurs the traditional distinction between the sphere of life and the sphere of (capitalist) production and forces us to rethink and broaden Marxist political economy, especially with respect to labor, its social reproduction, and the creation of value. In the words of Maurizio Lazzarato, "political economy, as a syntagm of biopolitics, encompasses power *dispositifs* that amplify the whole range of relations between the forces that extend throughout the *social body* rather than, as in classical political economy and its critique, the relationship between capital and labor exclusively."

The critique of the labor/capital binary and the claim of an all-encompassing "biopolitical productivity" challenge the traditional Marxist understanding of wage labor and, thus, our understanding of the relationship between nature and society. The relevance of the concept of biopolitics for questions of political ecology lies in its focus on the (social) body as the central nexus in the rearticulation of the relationship between society and economy and, consequently, society and nature. The new reality of (immaterial) work and (biopolitical) productivity after Fordism challenges Marxist political ecology to rethink its concepts around several issues: economics and ecology, radical democracy, and community and workplace struggles against racism and for social and environmental justice.

This review essay on a special issue of the Austrian journal *Kurswechsel* and the following set of translated articles by Thomas Atzert, Christoph Hermann, and Susanne Schultz are devoted to exploring the prospects and limits of the notion of biopower and politics and its relevance for political ecologists. The volume brings together an interesting theoretically and politically diverse collection of ten articles from mainly Austrian and German scholars written in German (with the exception of contributions by Chris Roberts and Jamie

Peck). It could be said that the common denominator of all the contributions—despite their vast theoretical diversity—is a focus on the political (re)constitution of work after Fordism and on possible emancipatory strategies after the demise of the Fordist social compromise. All authors seem to agree that a return to old forms of the organization of social change is no longer feasible under the current conditions of globalization, which entail a weakening of traditional forms of capital-labor bargaining structures.

The editors argue that after more than two decades of relative academic neglect of questions of work and politics—which they attribute largely to the rise of new social movements and the “postmaterial turn”—a variety of different, yet interdependent, developments make the resumption of questions of work, politics and emancipation not only timely, but necessary. There is a steady rise of precarious, atypical forms of employment and the feminization of labor; a drastic reshaping of the political constitution of work in society (shifting social and employment standards and policies); and a fundamental restructuring of the capitalist state. These developments have led to the re-emergence of questions about work on the academic agenda in the 1990s. The political relevance of this work has been further underlined by significant political events in the past decade, such as the general strikes in France and Italy, the “Justice for Janitors” movement in the United States, and the successful *altermondialiste* showdowns from Seattle to Genoa.

The intention of *Kurswechsel* is to form the basis of a critique of the contemporary political constitution of work and, perhaps on that basis, open up an emancipatory perspective. The volume does not intend to present a coherent analysis of the current conditions, nor a unified political answer to the challenges workers face under globalized capitalism. Rather, the intention is to draw attention to the *variety* and *heterogeneity* of the different approaches to the study of work and its transformation under the current conditions of Empire. The volume is meant to highlight the theoretical and practical difficulties to understanding the relation between work, politics and emancipation in the current societal context—a highly timely endeavor.

## **Divergent Perspectives on (Bio)politics, Work, and Emancipation**

Thomas Atzert’s contribution, “Every tool is a weapon if you hold it right...” (“Über Immaterielle Arbeit und Biopolitik”) is a critique of the regulation approach to the understanding of post-Fordist work. Regulation theory, according to Atzert, has limited use for envisioning political-economic alternatives because of its “positivist” focus on the existing conditions and structures. The theoretical instruments of the regulation school, oriented at Fordism and its restructuring, are no longer sufficient to critique contemporary forms of exploitation. Following Hardt and Negri, he suggests that society can only be understood as a *passage*. The concept of passage characterizes society as being in a permanent state of stability and fragility (as opposed to succeeding stages, such as Fordism and Post-Fordism). The passage is the perpetual restructuring of space and time, and what we have to understand is the continuity of exploitation in this state of flux. Productive labor, according to Hardt and Negri, is increasingly becoming immaterial—i.e., surplus value is more and more produced by the intellectual, communicative, and cooperative capacities of the workers. Consequently, the immaterial character of work leads to the increasing integration of life and production and contributes to the complete subordination of society under the exigencies of capitalist

accumulation. Focusing on the biopolitical reconstitution of work, Atzert enables us to redefine the concept of productive labor.

Drawing on the work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben and Hardt and Negri in *Empire*, Manuela Bojadzjev, Serhat Karakayalı and Vassilis Tsianos (“Das Rätsel der Ankunft. Von Lagern und Gespenstern“), theorize migration as a form of class struggle in which claims for autonomy and self-determination are manifested. The authors follow Hardt and Negri in that under conditions of Empire, the new forms of “being against,” or resistance, are expressed spatially and in terms of mobility (nomadism, desertion, exodus). Resistance takes place, Hardt and Negri say, through the “evacuation of the places of power.” They further argue that “desertion and exodus are a powerful form of class struggle within and against imperial post-modernity.” This notion of mobility is employed here to outline the terrain for social and political struggle. Staying within the rhetoric of mobility, the authors use the term “circulation of struggles” as a more adequate conceptualization of social struggle than the traditional dualistic understanding of the struggle between capital and labor. Focusing on the dynamics (and autonomy) of migration enables us to understand the social and subjective dimensions of global migratory flows. The authors concede, however—and here Agamben enters the equation—that the autonomy of migration, as emphasized by Hardt and Negri, does not exist without mechanisms of control. The extreme form is Agamben's *camp*, the territorial condensation of a state of emergency, or the ultimate and violent fixation of mobile bodies in space. The relation between the two extremes is articulated through particular regimes of migration. And these regimes evolve around the question of work.

Roland Atzmüller and Robert Schwarz (“Flexible Innovationsfähigkeit: Qualifikationspolitik und die Veränderung von Staatlichkeit—Momente postfordistischer Hegemonie”) analyze the relation between changing conditions of work and production and the state. They argue that the *capacity to learn* is the dominant moment of post-Fordist hegemony. This new hegemony is intrinsically connected to (or based on) a fundamental restructuring of state institutions. The state changes its role in the provision of welfare, labor market regulation, and education policy. Atzmüller and Schwarz’s contribution is especially interesting, because it bridges the theoretical gap between political economy and postmodern accounts. They try to fill the conceptual blind spots of critical political economy with concepts stemming from the literature on biopolitics. So, the politics of flexible innovation, as they call it, is also about the biopolitical production of individual dispositions that mentally and physically enable people to work under conditions of globalization.

Other contributions to the volume are more critical of Hardt and Negri’s concepts. Christoph Hermann (“Arbeiten im Netzwerk”) traces the origins of the network-metaphor that fares so prominently in current debates about the restructuring of capitalism. Hermann provides a critical reflection of the network metaphor (suggested, among others, by Castells and Hardt/Negri) and argues that the emergence of network structures facilitates the increased control and surveillance of work. Hermann maintains that the contradiction between cooperation and competition and the irrationalities of capitalist development delineate the limits not only of the network(ed) enterprise but of network society as a whole.

Harald Wolf (“Befreiung der Arbeit als kapitalistisches Projekt”) discusses the autonomy of work in the current phase of the restructuring of capitalism and argues that

critical projects of emancipation and collective autonomy are in crisis. Like Hermann, Wolf challenges the positive connotation of the *network society* in current debates around economic restructuring, for it fails to account for capitalism's contradictory reliance on the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of workers in and from the production process. The capitalist production process relies on the self-regulation and autonomy of the workers. In the past, this individual and collective autonomy has given rise to a variety of emancipatory projects as well as the institutionalization of class struggle (unions, labor parties, welfare states, etc.). The network metaphor symbolizes a renewal of the “capitalist imagery.” However, this renewal is not claimed and radicalized by a strong political movement, and Wolf concludes that this politicization could only take place *against* and not *within* the capitalist imagery.

Ulrike Papouschek and Ingrid Mairhuber (“Was tut Not? Anmerkungen zu einer geschlechtersensiblen Arbeitsforschung”) are critical that the concept of gender does not fare prominently in recent academic accounts of work and politics. In an article that resonates with Schultz's (this volume), they emphasize the gendered impact of current state restructuring processes and of the redrawing of the boundaries between the state, the market, families, and the nation. While I am sympathetic to their argument, it is somewhat surprising that the authors ignore the important work done by North American critical feminist political economists who, in recent years, have developed a rich and fruitful conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between gender and state restructuring. Nor do Papouschek and Mairhuber relate their claims to Hardt and Negri's argument about the ascendancy of “immaterial work,” which both includes what they call “affective work” and has fundamental implications for feminist theorizing about the relationship between productive and reproductive labor.

The final four contributions corroborate the critiques by Hermann and Wolf without, however, taking explicit issue with Hardt and Negri. Bernd Röttger (“Arbeit—Emanzipation—Passive Revolution. Metamorphosen der Arbeitspolitik und die Zukunft der Gewerkschaften”) focuses on capital's ongoing attack on unions and the undermining of the cooperative relationship between unions and the state that was characteristic in the Keynesian period. This, according to Röttger, results from reorganization of the economy following Fordism and the new individual integration of work under the exigencies of the corporate workplace. Capital's abandoning of the bargaining structures of Fordism has left behind “hollowed out institutions.” While Fordist institutional structures are still largely in place, they can no longer provide the spaces in which the political-economic development of corporatist capitalism can evolve. As a political strategy, unions have to reform and expand their (political) mandate beyond the workplace. Röttger's piece is a critique of neo-institutionalist interpretations of industrial relations, which assume continuity (and divergence) rather than change (and convergence).

In his article “Workers and Competitiveness in the North American Auto Industry,” Chris Roberts analyzes how automobile manufacturers in North America, now faced with the problem of overaccumulation, have used so-called “free trade” provisions in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to perpetually lower wages and deteriorate employment and working conditions in the industry. The increased competition NAFTA unleashed weakens even the traditionally strong unions of the automobile industry and exerts more and more pressure on them to make concessions. As a result of the movement of jobs in

the North American automobile sector outside of the U.S. and Canada, unions are increasingly turning to “voluntary recognition agreements” with employers. However, to overcome this vicious circle of both real and imagined competition and the resulting deterioration of work, Roberts says unions have to rethink their strategies. Like Röttger, he suggests unions can only achieve this through internal democratization and redefining their political mandate.

Drawing on regulation theory, Birgit Mahnkopf (“Zukunft der Arbeit: Globalisierung der Unsicherheit”) focuses on the global deinstitutionalization of the rules and norms of (labor) market restriction. She argues that the liberation of capitalism is not increasing the freedom of people but instead is producing a global “political economy of insecurity.” Capitalizing on labor's insecurity—mainly through informalization, subcontracting and outsourcing—becomes a basic feature of post-Fordist accumulation and regulation. She says that democracies rely on people's self-determination and the freedom of its citizens. Under current conditions, an increasing number of people are faced with economic uncertainty and fear, which undermine this basic freedom. Mahnkopf therefore concludes that state redistribution remains paramount.

In “The Rise of the Workfare State,” Jamie Peck suggests a workfare state is emerging where supply-side, market-oriented social policies, mandatory job search, and work-first strategies (“employability”) for welfare recipients and the unemployed are replacing the Keynesian welfare state of welfare entitlements and social citizenship. The appeal of workfare—or rather its rhetoric—is that it resonates with dominant neoliberal discourses of supply-side oriented economic regulation evolving around the demand for competitiveness and flexibility. Workfare functions to reshape the norms of labor market socialization and the creation and conditioning of a precarious labor market. Peck argues that a new form of workfarist societal regulation, characterized by active labor market inclusion vs. passive exclusion, is emerging.

### **The Question of Space—Or the Lack Thereof**

In order to understand work and its political constitution in the current context of globalizing capitalism, one must have a definition of globalization that takes the question of space seriously. Globalization can be understood as the rescaling of economic and political decision-making capacity and responsibility. This rescaling entails both upwards and downwards shifts: from the national level to the supranational/global and to the subnational, local, individual/body level. This process is capital's response to a crisis of overaccumulation and manifests itself, as David Harvey succinctly pointed out, in the production of a qualitatively new uneven temporal and geographical development. This understanding of globalization as a process the perpetual “creative destruction” of spaces of accumulation and regulation (“spatial fix”) has fundamental implications not only for the political constitution of work but also for our understanding of ecological questions. It is, of course, at the heart of the historical-geographical materialist understanding of nature-society metabolism and a scaled socio-ecological politics shaped by, among others, Neil Smith, David Harvey, and Erik Swyngedouw.

The nation state (the dominant scale of Keynesian-Fordist regulation) is being undermined. Its powers and responsibilities are being unevenly shifted upwards to

multinational corporations and supranational organizations and downwards to the subnational, local, household, and body level, producing new geometries of power and (dis)empowerment that further the erosion of traditional social citizenship. It is interesting—or rather astounding—to have an entire volume dedicated to the question of work and politics that does not take this spatial aspect more seriously. Questions of space and scale are implicit in most accounts; an explicit theoretical analysis of the connection between the political constitution of work and space is, however, missing.

Even the question of emancipation can only be conceptualized as evolving around the production of space. It must take into account not only existing and emerging geographies of exploitation and questions of the global division of labor, but also envisage spaces for progressive politics. Following Lefebvre, if we understand the spaces of everyday life as the nexus between individual agents (in this case, workers) and larger social structures (class, globalization, the market), then questions of emancipation must better understand the production and structuring of these spaces. In this sense, *spatializing* the accounts in *Kurswechsel* would further the writing of a radical geography of emancipation under conditions of globalization.

In two chapters, the question of space is more explicitly integrated into a theoretical framework, albeit from different theoretical and political perspectives. Peck, a geographer by profession, best integrates questions of space and scale in his analysis of the emergence of the workfare state. He discusses welfare “reform” as an inherently spatial process in which decentralization and local “laboratories of workfare experimentation” have been instrumental in undermining national standards of work and welfare. Local experimentation and interlocal competition have helped to undermine national welfare institutions. Bojadzijeve, et al. use a specialized language (territoriality, exterritoriality, “the camp,” exodus, desertion) in their interpretation of migration and migratory flows as a form of class struggle. Yet their interpretation of migration regimes as control modes of the global flow of bodies would benefit from a critical political economy perspective that sees their regulatory function as an essential part of the production of uneven spatial and temporal development. While I agree with the authors about the—at least partial—autonomy of migratory flows, one has to better understand how this autonomy of the mobile body is repressed, undermined, or instrumentalized by the capitalist state.

The political (re)constitution of work in the age of Empire is an inherently geographical process. This is also the case for feminist considerations of social reproduction, which Schultz raises without reference to recent debates on scaling or spatializing patriarchy. Close attention to the question of space and scale is not only necessary in order to explain the changing political economy and the restructuring of the state but also to envision a politics of resistance and emancipation conceived in both human-social and socio-ecological terms. If production and social reproduction are central to an understanding of human-ecology metabolisms, the roles of space, scale, and uneven development need to be given more sustained attention.

The strength of this edition of *Kurswechsel* lies in its attempt to bring together a variety of articles from a broad range of theoretical backgrounds. While one can see a gap between more traditional critical political economy and postmodern accounts (especially the

contributions drawing on the work by Hardt and Negri), it is important not to see this ontological and epistemological division as unsurpassable. In fact, integrating a critical political economy with the concepts of biopolitics and biopower becomes paramount if we want to fully comprehend the current restructuring of capitalism and the state and its relation to work and emancipation. It is the editors' achievement to bring together this wide range of approaches in one volume, thereby opening up spaces for fruitful academic debate and political practice. For *CNS* readers, the idea of biopolitics—although filled with numerous conceptual and political pitfalls—remains one important subject for debate on the character of socialist ecology.