

Every tool is a weapon if you hold it right...

About Immaterial Labor and Biopower

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Capital itself is the moving contradiction, in that it presses to reduce labor time to a minimum, while it posits labor time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth.

—Karl Marx

Work, Work, Work. Everywhere one looks, make-work projects, job creation offensives, the carrot and the stick, all done in order to sustain a reserve army of labor made surplus through transformations of the means and methods of production. With “welfare to work” as their motto, Liberals and Conservatives both go about the purpose of rolling back what they call the privileges of the welfare state. And the Social Democrats, who worship labor and fall to their knees before the “savior of the new times,” as Joseph Dietzgen remarked, follow suit, both in and out of office. Critiques of work and labor thus get short shrift.

Few buzzwords suffice to describe transformations of the mode of production in mature capitalist societies. It is *common sense* that so-called Fordism—which, despite differences between nationally specific forms, was stamped by a Keynesian welfare state class compromise, taylorised industrial mass production, a nationally regulated economy, the separation of factory from home, as well as work and free time from production and consumption—has disintegrated. This *common sense* rests on a positivism of the existing order (*Positivismus des Bestehenden*). But a critique of social relations must go beyond that. In order to avoid apologetics for the existing capitalist system, the central question must address relations of exploitation today.

Shaped by information technology and networked, globalized production, contemporary capitalism continues to be characterized by relations of exploitation. But theoretical instruments rooted in Fordism are not adequate for critiquing relations of exploitation today. We thank Walter Benjamin for the insight that the historical materialist, in order to keep class conflict in her sights, does not select her tools based on their beauty or elegance. Contemporary Marxist authors, particularly “post-operaist” theorists and co-authors of *Empire*, Toni Negri and Michael Hardt, offer new tools to analyze the dynamics of the newest form of capitalism in relationship to social production and biopower, thereby making use of a series of new, familiar, or recontextualized concepts like immaterial labor, general intellect, mass intelligence, biopolitics, and multitude.

Objections have been raised against Hardt and Negri’s approach. One objection is that the analysis of immaterial labor does not adequately capture the production process and thus negates the salience of exploitation. Jeremy Rifkin’s conceptualization of the end of work is similarly inadequate, as George Caffentzis’ research on class conflict in the United States since the beginning of the 70s makes clear.

Critiques of Hardt and Negri intensified with the appearance of the German translation of *Empire*. Radical left authors such as Dirk Hauer, Felix Kurz and Detlef Hartmann brand and scorch the work for its postmodern outlook: through the “renunciation of any empirical research,” Hardt and Negri succeed in creating a “tunnel vision about the reality of labor

relations” and thus paint an ideologically distorted picture of a sound, intact world of new labor relations. Worse still, exploitation is obscured within a “celebration of productivity” that gets bid up to a “boundless and expansive productivism” and translates into reactionary threats against the “unproductive.”

Such sectarian critiques of *Empire* lack perspective. What matters instead are attempts to grasp transformations in capitalism and reformulate critiques of work and exploitation. It is indeed difficult to differentiate between the permanence of exploitation and the assumed, though not proven, continuity of conditions characteristic of “Fordist” capitalism. For some, this continuity is simply presupposed and subsumed into a sociological description that treats transformations as mere moments of modernization. Others frame this continuity thesis in terms of a Marxist critique of the ever-deepening penetration of capital into social relations.

It makes more sense to regard contemporary society as being in transition, or a state of passage. The concept of passage refers neither to the goal of historical transformation nor to a yet-to-be achieved state of being that we are moving towards. Passage is thus not a “transformation to something.” Passage is itself a mode of production, or better, the simultaneous co-presence of various modes of production, viewed metaphorically. In the metaphor of passage, stability and fragility are simultaneously articulated. Passage in this context denotes the restructuring of space and time.

Passage is itself subject to analysis as is the perpetuation of relationships of exploitation within it. To undermine the conception of a simple continuity of modernization and capital penetration, one better adopt a perspective that begins with the forces and dynamics of social transformation. The history of society is still, or again, to be seen as “the history of class struggles.” The *post-operaist* proposition—and this is one of its strengths—expands and reorients this well-known thesis of the *Communist Manifesto* and highlights the primacy and positivity of resistance. Thus, the transformation of contemporary society can be understood through the lens of social struggles for liberation in the era of late Fordism in the second half of the 20th century: anticolonial revolutions on the three continents, anti-authoritarian revolts, the struggle of women, the struggle of minorities, the subversion and resistance against work, and the discipline of the factory floor worldwide. Inscribed in the current passage is the defeat of these struggles and movements as counterrevolutions of the previous era.

Informationization of Production

Today, change in social production is known as “tertiarization” to underscore that the center of production is no longer in the so-called secondary sector of the economy, industry, but in the tertiary sector, service. The notion of tertiarization is analogous to the earlier large-scale economic shift from primary sectors (agriculture and mining) to industry. The shift to tertiary production is merely a continuation of this process of economic transformation under late capitalism.

Today “services” have become increasingly central in all aspects of production. The term describes activities ranging from health care, education, finance, and transportation to entertainment and advertising. Many in these jobs are highly mobile, and the jobs require flexible skills. Education and knowledge, communication and information as well as the production and reproduction of symbols and affects are particularly important skills for service workers.

The concept of immaterial labor was developed with these transformations of social production in mind. Unlike technological determinism, exemplified in Daniel Bell's work on "post-industrial society" or Manuel Castells' research on the "Information Age," the concept of immaterial labor gives primacy to the social struggle against the social organization of production and underlines the resistance against work. The concept of immaterial labor is also directed against the sensualistic, empiricist understanding of matter and the naturalistic conceptualization of labor one can find, for example, in André Gorz's writing on the "metamorphosis of labor" and the "end of the wage-based society."

Immaterial labor should be understood in materialist terms as form, or, more specifically, as the new dominant form of social labor, rather than the result of a sociological description or the empirical account of a particular activity. This form of social labor questions traditional differentiations, such as the distinctions between mental and manual labor, intellectual and physical labor, and individual and collective labor. The strict division between the execution of physical labor and conceptual, administrative "intellectual" labor, typical in Fordism, is being dissolved under the conditions of Post-Fordism. Cooperation and self-employment, along with knowledge, creativity, language and affect, had been important moments in the struggle against work under Fordism, a fact too often neglected today. And today, cooperation and self-employment are becoming central moments in social production and reproduction as a whole. The redefinition of work with its information units and computerized networks makes the divisions of intellectual/physical and individual/collective labor obsolete. These categories cannot explain the new form of social labor, just as one could not derive the Fordist factory from the work of a blacksmith.

A critique of work and relations of exploitation requires a historical understanding of social production processes. As Marx identified the interconnections between the sites and functions of exploitation, he stressed the division of labor as the central mechanism in the appropriation of surplus value. Capital's command over the division of labor is the object above all of the so-called "historical" inquiries found in the explanation of manufacturing, machinery and big industry in Volume One of *Capital*. Marx's analysis has significance for other reasons as well: the process of industrialization that began in the 19th century was also a transition, a *passage*. In the case of manufacturing, exploitation relates to the appropriation of products. What is appropriated are the products of a labor process that is defined by "handicraft" production, a division of craft labor, and artisanal knowledge. Marx analyzes the imposition of capitalist command over the immediate labor process as industrialization, the application of large-scale industry. The division of labor is subjected to capital only in big industry and machine production. Capital *separates* the direct producers both from one another and from the labor process; it dissolves the artisanal division of labor as well as the relationship of the individual producer from the means of production, and *puts them together in a new way*. This separation and recomposition affects the organization of labor and the production of knowledge: planning and execution step away from one another. The resulting form of the social division of labor rests, then, on the separation of so-called head and hand work. The mechanization of work and its industrialization up to the assembly lines of Fordism belong to this historical epoch. Social labor is determined in its totality by industrialization, even if certain aspects of its organization are not specifically industrialized. Marx calls the results of this transformation of the immediate production process the passage from the formal to the real subordination of living work under capital.

Post-operaist authors are not making “mischief,” as Haug insinuates, when they take Marx’s lead and call the current transformation the real subsumption of society under capital. Language, communication, knowledge and affect are central moments of social reproduction and, simultaneously, decisive productive potentials of the present. To describe these productive forces, authors such as Hardt, Negri, Paolo Virno and others return to Marx’s notion of general intellect. Marx used this term in the *Grundrisse* to describe a tendency in the capitalist mode of production. Contrary to currently circulating interpretations of the general intellect as some supermachine of capitalist command, the term points to the social character of the mode of production from a perspective of liberation—that is, above all else, a liberation of non-work. Such a perspective suggests that one study the separation and recomposition of the division of labor not as a technical but a socio-historical process shaped by social struggle and resistance.

“Immaterial labor” refers to the restructuring of social labor in the present. The informationization of production is a significant, but not the only, moment in this restructuring. Immaterial labor as the dominant form of social labor is equally defined by communication, or, more generally, the manipulation of signs and the use of language. The third aspect of the recomposition of social labor encompasses the entire range of affective relationships.

Biopolitical Paradigms

The dominance of informationization and services establishes itself at a global scale through the networks of the world market. Such a perspective does not deny the existence of industrial production or agriculture, fishing, etc.; rather, it sees these things playing a subordinate role in the hierarchies of exploitation. The contours of a new global production hierarchy mean that a substantial portion of the world’s population will be excluded from the central aspects of the global economy and thus threatened with death by starvation, overexertion, or physical violence. “Half the world’s population and ever increasingly more are daily deprived of the opportunity to live through the biopower of Empire.”

The concept of biopower harkens back to Michel Foucault’s analysis of power. From the mid-1970s, Foucault argued against the characterization of power as boldfaced repression (the so-called repression hypothesis) and emphasized the relational character of power: “At the very heart of the power relationship [...] are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom,” he wrote in 1982. This new conception of power has primary significance in the analysis of social institutions, which become effective in a force field of power relations, or power *dispositifs* (described by Foucault as normalization and discipline). Biopower’s central focus is the regulation of the population. The highest function of this power is to establish life and to penetrate all its aspects in order to rule it. Biopower describes a situation where biopolitical population policy is oriented towards the control of production and reproduction of life itself.

Hardt and Negri use and expand the (historical and sociological) scope of the term biopower beyond Foucault’s usage. This expansion of the term occurs alongside a new ordering of social labor along the lines of communication, knowledge and affect. As the horizon of productive activities expands with this recomposition of social labor, and as life and production have a tendency of becoming one, the focus on biopolitics serves to redefine the Marxist conception of productive labor. The significance of the thesis of the real subsumption of society under capital becomes clear only with an analysis of biopower. Biopower—or to be more exact,

the biopolitical character of capitalist accumulation—mobilizes the interactive effects of all social forces and productive human expressions, down through “to the ganglia of the social structure and its processes of development.”

Biopolitics manifests itself in the deployment of social conflict and antagonism, in the terrain of domination, exploitation, subjugation and resistance. Against the state-centered illusions of reformers, who merely lament the process of social transformation (“Privatization!” “Government cut-backs!”), the task of a critical materialist social theory is not to ask for job creation but to show the struggles and real tendencies involved in the passage from a sociopolitical paradigm of disciplinary society to a biopolitical paradigm of controlling the population and life itself.