

## Dissolved Boundaries and “Affective Labor”: On the Disappearance of Reproductive Labor and Feminist Critique in *Empire*

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There are good reasons why comprehensive explanations of the world—including left, poststructuralist, post-operaist theories—provoke skepticism rather than euphoria among feminists. Left hegemonic theory too often employs feminist rhetoric without incorporating feminist terms and concepts systematically into its own perspectives. This reduces theoretical claims to universality to “patrilineal discourse,” as Donna Haraway points out. It is in this context that we must discuss the relevance of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s theses on the relationship between productive and reproductive labor for feminist thinking.

*Empire* is a good book to the extent that one can make good use of certain fragments, for instance the discussion about transformations of military logics or shifts in “imperial” subjectivity. But, these attractive attributes are of little help in the development of feminist theory. Despite its pervasive sense of itself as foundational, *Empire* almost entirely lacks an analysis of gender relations. At the same time, the authors’ central focus is on biopolitics, affective labor and the transformations of the relationship between productive and reproductive labor—all questions for feminist theory.

In *Empire*, labor and (re)productive relations are analyzed through the lens of “biopolitics.” Hardt and Negri initially draw on Foucault, for whom biopolitics is a superordinate term that identifies the connection between the disciplining of individual bodies and the constitution and regulation of the population as an object of state action. A weak point in Foucault’s conceptualization of the biopolitical is that Foucault places sexuality at the interface between population policy and the disciplining of individual bodies, while modern reproductive regimes and the gendering of bodies are hardly addressed. Despite this, the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics is important for a feminist critique of body and population policy. With Foucault, one may analyze how such policies are handled as objective, apolitical questions of natural science, even as they stand in the center of the genealogy of modern statehood. The concept of biopolitics also clarifies why an unproblematic, positivist account of nature or bodily integrity does not hold up to closer scrutiny.

Using the term “biopolitical productivity,” Hardt and Negri expand the concept of biopower to encompass the entirety of social life. They conceive of biopolitical productivity as a network without a center. The concept melts into their thesis that capitalist productivity can no longer be reduced to the sphere of wage labor. The extent to which the all-encompassing productive forces represent the emancipatory potential of the “multitude” or are permeated by networks of power remains fundamentally unclear. This lack of clarity also applies to the concept of biopower. The formula *control-society equals biopower equals the new productive forces equal the social life as a whole* is a circular equation. Questions about the historical transformations of the concept of life and its relevance for a politics of biotechnology, medicine, demography, or eugenics remain unasked.

### **Biopolitics: Life as a Whole**

Hardt and Negri concretize their materialist ontology of biopolitical production in the post-modern era in the figure of the immaterial laborer. They thereby fashion an anthropology of post-modernity, where humans produce themselves through specific—namely cybernetic—computer-based technologies. In this, they refer, among others, to the feminist theoretician Donna Haraway and her “cyborg” concept. The problem is, for Haraway the cyborg is a completely different concept. She casts the cyborg in an ironic—and certainly not innocent—mould to develop a *critique* of technology and intervene in specific contemporary discourses about technology and life. Hardt and Negri’s emphasis on the productivity of bodies and the hybridization of human and machine tends to revive the old socialist dream about the

possibility of reappropriating “machines and technologies” for different uses. This tendency is reinforced in *Empire* by the strong focus on information and communication technology. By contrast, there is no discussion about biotechnologies and their entanglement in eugenics and gene-trait selections mechanisms.

Hardt and Negri use the term “affective labor” to expand Lazzarato’s concept of immaterial labor. Immaterial labor describes the predominance of new labor relations in the service industry, post-Fordism. These labor relations also revolutionize other, ostensibly subordinate sectors of the economy. Lazzarato concerns himself primarily with information and communications industries. In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri expand the analysis of immaterial labor to include a third aspect, that of affective labor.

With the concept of affective labor, the new productive forces can be construed in their totality as forces that affect social life as a whole. “Intelligence and affect (or really, the brain coextensive with the body), just when they become the primary productive powers, make production and life coincide across the terrain on which they operate, because life is nothing other than the production and reproduction of the set of bodies and brains.” While they deduce the informational and communicative aspects of immaterial labor from the model of computer technology, Hardt and Negri claim to use the term “affective labor” to describe what feminist analyses of “women’s work” have called “labor in the bodily mode.” Although they describe affective labor not as work done by women but as an aspect of immaterial labor, Hardt and Negri keep alive a curiously traditional understanding of the gender division of labor.

### **New (Affective) Labor, Old Dualisms**

At first, the hierarchy between intellectual and emotional labor is made clear. On the one hand, there are the occupations of the mind, which are summarized as “symbolic-analytical services” that involve tasks such as “problem-definition, problem-solving, strategic brokering activities.” On the other hand, the authors underline the corporeality and emotionality of services that require human contact or the production of affect through “virtual contact,” as in the entertainment industry. In this way, they minimize the strategic, analytic and problem-solving aspects of these occupations. In addition, affective labor is conceived in the final instance as a nonobjectified, noninstrumentalized activity. “Interpersonal contacts” are presented as egalitarian and cooperative and thus, nonhierarchical. More than anything, affective labor exemplifies the communist potential of biopower: “Affective labor produces [...] social networks, forms of community, biopower.”

In the last analysis, Hardt and Negri’s vague attempts to locate utopian potential in the new forces of production stand in a long left tradition of idealizing women’s and reproductive work as spheres free from alienation and domination. In this conception, the gesture they make towards feminist theory (in a mere footnote) is perhaps better understood as a gentleman-like dismissal of feminist critique, a way of keeping feminist critique at bay.

At first glance, it appears that Hardt and Negri equate affective labor with paid work; in classically left fashion, they concern themselves with “affective aspects” of *wage* labor. The few definitions they provide of affective labor refer to old and new service sectors (the health sector, advertising industry, etc.). This is no surprise: left theorists concern themselves with activities that are commonly ascribed to women within the framework of the gender division of labor only insofar as these activities appear in the sphere of wage labor and thus have to be included in the analysis of capitalism.

Nevertheless, it is too simplistic to accuse *Empire* of focusing on wage labor. Hardt and Negri claim that all activities hitherto relegated to the category of reproduction have been subsumed under the new capitalist production relations. The division between production and reproduction is thus rendered obsolete.

“The powers of production are in fact today entirely biopolitical; in other words, they run throughout and constitute directly not only production but also the

entire realm of reproduction. Biopower becomes an agent of production when the entire context of reproduction is subsumed under capitalist rule, that is, when reproduction and the vital relationships that constitute it themselves become directly productive.”

This is reminiscent of feminist theoreticians such as Frigga Haug who analyze gender relations as production relations. It also brings to mind a feminist concept of labor that does not limit the genesis of socially necessary labor to activities involved in the production of exchange value. Hardt and Negri’s call to treat contemporary women’s movements as directly economic struggles and not as cultural, specific or economically secondary forces in the “sphere of reproduction,” as is typical of much new scholarship on social movements, appears to aim in a similar direction.

### **The Dissolution of Boundaries as Theoretical Avoidance Strategy**

If one wants to do justice to this claim, one would have to push the *organization of the boundary* between paid and unpaid labor into the center of a critique of political economy—and this in order to comprehend the very shifts in this boundary. The thesis of a dissolving boundary between production and reproduction treats this boundary as an historical relic, an object of anachronistic research agendas, and thus no longer a valid subject of study. In Hardt and Negri, the division between productive and reproductive work only appears in the form of the distinction between direct and indirect forms of capitalist exploitation. This may be read as a vague reference to longstanding debates about the role of household work in the generation of surplus value, debates which Hardt and Negri do not engage with explicitly. Certainly, the thesis on the dissolution of boundaries makes it impossible to critique the hierarchies that are produced in the process of dividing paid from unpaid work.

This does not mean, however, that the division between productive and reproductive labor is not shifting. This becomes particularly clear when one considers hegemonic models of “female” wage labor, notably the attractive model of the “successful” professional woman in the fields of culture, finance or advertising. *Empire* correctly thematizes how qualifications acquired during so-called free time through cultural or political groups or through private relationships become valorized in the labor process. The division between work and leisure has become more mutable as a result of flexible working time. Certainly, the housewife model—the hegemonic model of femininity under Fordism—no longer applies (and was never a reality for many women, in any case). In light of these displacements, one should not lose sight of the fact that these boundaries shift in significantly uneven ways. Women’s workforce participation faces extremely stable gender divisions of labor in the so-called sphere of reproductive work, notably in child and elderly care. One only has to recall that that a mere 1.5 percent of people who take official parental leave in Germany are men. In this sense, the convergence model of production and reproduction reflects less the reality of labor relations than an increasingly hegemonic image of female subjectivity, where reproductive labor disappears into the holes and gaps of the patchwork that is the neoliberal working day.

The delegation of reproductive labor to underprivileged women, particularly migrant women, is certainly to be understood as a displacement of the boundaries between productive and reproductive labor as well. This case expresses everything but the dissolution of (unpaid) reproductive labor, however. One factor accounts for the extreme social and financial devaluation of this work. It is not seen as skilled and qualified labor, but rather as something that women and girls are “naturally” socialized to do. Also, reproductive labor remains structurally close to unpaid labor, with its extreme flexibility of hours and tasks as well as the mechanisms of emotional dependence and familial loyalty. This domestic worker model, which depends on high wage differentials, cannot be universalized. It is logically untenable for a domestic worker to pay yet another domestic to look after her own reproductive work. Finally, the thesis of a shrinking divide between production and reproduction appears absurd when one thinks of the neoliberal cutbacks to public services such as kindergartens and health care, which (re)privatize reproductive labor and force unpaid women to pick up the slack in the system.

How unpaid reproductive labor should be organized is no longer a question when its disappearance is quietly presupposed, as in *Empire*. Rather than speaking about a dissolution of the boundaries between production and reproduction, it would make more sense to analyze the restructuring of reproductive labor along the categories “race, class, gender” on an international level. This would be the only way to realize a materialist approach to the “production of life,” something Hardt and Negri promise but do not carry out. Because *Empire* offers no basis for a critique of the political economy of gender regimes, its claim to subvert dominant models of subjectivity must fail.