

Alienation and the anticapitalist politics of general intellect

Abstract

Work is a site of the production of the political subject. This paper addresses the production of political subjectivity by exploring the relationship between the development of fixed capital, i.e. machines for the production of commodities, and the character of the political apparatuses which determine what work itself is.

The interpretation and extension of Marx's general intellect that stands at the centre of post-*operaismo* neglects a key contingency of this form-determination of capital today: Negri, Virno, Berardi, *et al.*, respectively underplay, ignore or malign the alien character of labour time and the politics that are concomitant to this character. The post-*operaisti* regard the labour time of so-called biopolitical production as productive of mechanisms of the production of subjectivity that are similar to those mechanisms produced by free time in Marx's theory on the politics of the development of fixed capital in *Grundrisse*. They argue that the organisation of labour is indicative of the immanent development of the potential for praxis. This paper intervenes against this presupposition of an emancipatory character to labour time by examining the post-*operaisti* extension of general intellect in light of Marx's theory of alienation. Labour processes are not autonomous, even at the vanguard of labour that post-*operaismo* purports to describe, and their central characteristic is not the auto-production of cooperation. Rather, apparently autonomous labour processes are merely a surface phenomenon resulting from the worker's formal control of the cognitive aspects of some forms of work. It is the alien character of labour time, not an increase of free time, that reacts back on the cognitive, linguistic, and affective capacities of the individual, i.e. on intellect, and transforms the subject in accordance with it.

Introduction

Post-*operaismo* theories of the political economy of contemporary capitalism do not offer political purchase for revolutionary praxis. Rather, the politics of post-*operaismo* is akin to the patient waiting upon Althusser's overdetermination. The notion of a shared theoretical outlook amongst post-*operaisti* is not without its problems; nonetheless, the validity of such a view centres on the notion of autonomy. As philosophical currents have ebbed and flowed amidst the dissolution of the *operaismo* tendency into 'autonomia' and its subsequent disintegration following the failure of the wage-struggles in Italy, when considering post-*operaismo* we must recognise the divergence and difference in theoretical frameworks and concepts. Some post-*operaisti* refute the conceptual bases for some key themes of what is regarded as post-*operaismo*, and a key characteristic of post-*operaismo* is the different interpretations of concepts. Notwithstanding, there is a common theoretical framework operating amongst these tensions that is the key consequence of a shared philosophical principle – the political economic primacy of an antagonistic relation between labour and

capital that is immanent to the relations between class composition and working-class autonomy – and a common theoretical concept – general intellect. A particular interpretation and theoretical extension of Marx's general intellect stands at the centre of post-*operaismo* and is the foundation of the various revolutionary theses of exodus, multitude and 'collective political therapy'¹ that the post-*operaisti* propose. The method of the post-*operaisti* extension of Marx's general intellect is the selection of the factors of Marx's general intellect that can support, theoretically, a revolutionary thesis in accordance with Tronti's inversion of Marx's² labour/capital antagonism. The method is also, it appears, to obviate those factors of Marx's general intellect that do not support theses that arise from this understanding of the labour/capital antagonism. I make this argument on the basis of the post-*operaisti* neglect of Marx's contingency that '[t]he *theft of alien labour time, on which the present wealth is based*, appears a miserable foundation in the face of this new one, created by large-scale industry itself'.³ A reading of the *Grundrisse* that is sympathetic to the continuities of his work, rather than Althusserian notions of an epistemological break or other attempts to represent one work over another as the *true* Marx⁴, reveals that the theory of alienation is a central mechanism within the general intellect thesis.

Marx's general intellect is his political economy of the breakdown of the formal equality imbued by the wage-labour relation that is upheld by the historically specific alienation of labour. That is, general intellect is the theory of the dealienation of labour that was absent from the *Paris Manuscripts*. The emancipatory character immanent to the centrality of knowledge in production is predicated on mechanisms of the production of subjectivity that emerge from the production of 'time for the free development of individualities'⁵ resulting from the technological development of fixed capital. The post-*operaisti* assertion that the organisation of political economy today demonstrates that general intellect is 'actually fully realised'⁶ amounts to a synonymization, albeit not a simple one, of the 'free time' of the *Fragment on Machines* and the 'labour time' of today. Of course, we can convincingly argue that there is a relation between the subjective qualities of labour power in the forms of production of which the post-*operaisti* speak and the qualities of subjectivity in general. I argue, however, that the post-*operaisti* do not properly account for the distinction between

¹ Respectively, Paulo Virno, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and Franco "Bifo" Berardi.

² Or perhaps better to talk of his inversion of the Second International's antagonism.

³ Marx 1973, p.705.

⁴ Notably, the socialist humanists prioritise 1844, the post-*operaisti* 1857-8, and the orthodox productivists 1867.

⁵ Marx 1973, p.711.

⁶ Virno 2007, p.4.

free time and labour time as a result of their failure to properly integrate Marx's theory of alienation. In turn, they offer a fundamentally flawed evaluation of the labour process of their vanguard form of production, and a concomitantly untenable definition of autonomy. More importantly, to talk of an immanent, becoming, or virtual autonomy is a barrier to revolutionary, practical-critical activity. Their revolutionary theses are contingent on the interaction of a variety of essentially contested concepts within an overarching framework of immanence that is characterised by Mario Tronti's contentious declaration that it is the working class that produce capital.

To address the problems of the post-*operaisti* extension of Marx's general intellect the article examines the purpose of the *Fragment* and its key concept, the cause and contradictions of the post-*operaismo* extension of Marx's theory, and explores the emancipatory potential of knowledge in the context of the character of the time in which it is articulated.

The development of the phase of the general intellect

Marx proposes the general intellect as a prediction of new qualities and processes of the exploitation of surplus-value and of a new character to this exploitation which comes as a result of a growing centrality of knowledge in the production process. Nonetheless, the category of general intellect is not a mere law of value but is a category that accounts for the extent to which 'the conditions of the process of social life' and the degree to which 'the powers of social production have been produced...as immediate organs of social practice'⁷. General intellect categorises the phenomenon of general social knowledge becoming a *force of production*, a condition which the post-*operaisti* claim is the definitive factor of our contemporary political economy. If we were to assume that the post-*operaisti* justification for the priority for Marx's concept of general intellect is its conceptual prescience in terms of the organisation of production in contemporary life, its significance lies in their notion that in it, they argue, Marx foresaw the coming 'hegemony of intelligence'⁸ in which 'knowledges [will] make up the epicentre of social production and pre-ordain all areas of life'⁹. Thus the post-*operaisti* argue that general intellect is a signifier for a new phase in the development of the capitalist mode of production. Intelligence and knowledge are fundamentally embodied

⁷ Marx 1973, p706.

⁸ Negri 2008a, p.126.

⁹ Virno 2007, pp.3-4.

characteristics of subjects, at least in the first instance; therefore, the general intellect is a category which purports to describe a new form of subjectivity. The general intellect is a term which purports to describe a phase of capitalism, a particular form of subjectivity within that phase, and therefore a particular form of the processes of the production of subjectivity.

General intellect is foundational to post-*operaismo*: it is from this form of the capitalist mode of production, both they and Marx argue, that wage-labour will abolish itself and overcome capitalism through subjects' renewing of themselves 'as they renew the world of wealth they create'.¹⁰ What then, according to Marx's *Fragment on Machines*, are these new features of the capitalist mode of production, what are the conditions of their development, and in what sense do these features signify the politics of anticapitalism; that is, the process of the development of communism?

The character of the labour process, in terms of the changes that result from the development of fixed capital, is a central feature of the anticapitalist politics of general intellect. Capital, Marx states in his examination of capital as form-determination, sorts itself into three qualitatively different elements: 'the material of labour,' or circulating capital, 'the means of labour', or fixed capital, and 'living labour'¹¹, or variable capital. The labour process is the 'moving unity' of these three elements within a production process. With this development of the means of labour the workers themselves become 'conscious linkages'¹² within a process of production over which they are mere 'watchmen'. More importantly for Marx, and as post-*operaisti* interpretations highlight, this process of the development of fixed capital is the result of the diachronic appropriation of the knowledge of living labour by capital¹³, resulting from the rationalization of the labour processes of the formal subsumption of labour under capital, forced by capital's inability to abide a limit upon productivity. Thus, Marx argues, the development of fixed capital toward its adequate form – the automatic machine – is itself a stage in the development of capital toward its adequate form-determination – the form of scientific knowledges being transformed into production processes, that is, as circulating capital. The metamorphoses of fixed capital as it develops into this most adequate, most automated form finally result in the creation of free time and, therefore, the conditions for 'the free development of individualities'¹⁴. These conditions for free development contingently accord to the rate of application of scientific knowledge to production. The

¹⁰ Marx 1973, p.712.

¹¹ Marx 1973, p.691.

¹² Marx 1973, p. 692.

¹³ Marx 1973 p.694.

¹⁴ Marx 1973, p.699 and p.706.

objectification of knowledge in fixed capital is a change in the organic composition of capital in favour of fixed capital. Consequently, 'the saving of labour time [is] equal to an increase of free time'¹⁵ and cannot but be in the phase of the general intellect. The change in the organic composition of capital must result in the metamorphosis of the labour time necessary for the reproduction of capital into a non-labour free time because capital cannot re-appropriate this time as labour time as a result of the contingencies of the rate of profit laws within which this process operates. It is this free time that transforms 'its possessor into a different subject'¹⁶, i.e. an anticapitalist subject.

There is a distinct tension between Marx's writings in the *Fragment* and post-*operaisti* interpretations which appears to centre upon understandings of the development of a labour process that is concomitant to the new phase of the capitalist mode of production, which we are apparently in the midst of. I will demonstrate that the post-*operaisti* limit their understandings of the labour process in accordance with Marx's prediction of the third and final phase of capitalism, presupposing the character of the labour process in a way that is derivative of Marx's concept of general intellect, with little recourse to the examination of the power relations of production. The post-*operaisti* interpret this section of the *Fragment* not only as Marx's prediction of our contemporary capitalism, but as a phase that has been realized. The post-*operaisti* argue that this development of fixed capital has resulted in paradigm altering consequences in terms of the social productions which proceed from developments in the labour process, the loci of the production of economic value, and from concomitant alterations in the organic composition of capital. This dialectical development of capital has in turn been productive of a certain character of forms of the production of political subjectivity and, therefore, upon the political composition of the labouring class in such a way that revolution, with its various epithets in post-*operaismo*, is an immanent consequence.

Fixed capital and the production of subjectivity: Post-*operaismo* beyond Marx

With the development of fixed capital that began in the 18th century, from it being a 'means of labour' to being an industrial process in itself, the labour process is transformed as the necessity for the intervention of directly productive labour activity declines. The labour-time

¹⁵ Marx 1973, p.711.

¹⁶ Marx 1973, p712.

that is devoted to direct production becomes more productive and therefore labour-time that was once necessary to direct production of commodities at a given rate becomes extraneous to direct production that yields at the same rate. As production of commodities continues at a rate sufficient for the reproduction of capital, a process of reproduction still bound by the consequences of the distribution of wealth according to the labour theory of value, both of which bear upon the circulation and exchange of commodities produced for 'individual gratification'¹⁷, Marx argues that variable capital as labour-time must be turned toward the further development of fixed capital towards the most adequate form to the 'essential determination of capital'¹⁸ – the automatic machine. The utilisation of greater amounts of variable capital within a production process governed by an increasingly productive form of fixed capital would lead to crises of overproduction. On the basis that capital will sort itself into circulating capital, variable capital and fixed capital, we see that fixed capital is engaged in a process of increasing automation, and with labour increasingly moving to the side of the production process there is a rate of production of commodities for immediate gratification which will satisfy the requirements for the reproduction of that capital and no more, with little or no production or subsequent appropriation of surplus value. The production process, therefore, must be intent on the production of more and more automatic fixed capital if economic crisis is to be postponed. One essential character of fixed capital has not changed; like means of labour, the machine is also a commodity produced through the unity of the activity and scientific knowledge of labour. However, the continuing development of the form of fixed capital is a consequence of the changes in the labour process which this development itself sets in train: the labour process comes to be directed towards the further development of the automatic properties of specific objectifications of fixed capital, fixed capital becoming a production process in itself, and labour becoming a watchman. Commodity production in terms of the development of fixed capital (even, or rather, especially when we think of fixed capital as a commodity) becomes less about the direct intervention of the worker's skill in the fashioning of the object, 'but rather as the technological application of science'¹⁹. Therefore, in one sense, and Marx clearly states this, the production process is altered so that the activity of living labour can be immediately replaced by a machine that is the objectification of the knowledge of living labour, appropriated as private property. We see this in the institution of a capitalist technical

¹⁷ Marx 1973, p.707.

¹⁸ Smith 2013, p.14.

¹⁹ Marx 1973, p.699.

division of labour in the transition from the formal subsumption of labour under capital to the real subsumption and it corresponds to theses on capital's appropriation of labour's *technique*. In another sense, and this is fundamental to the post-*operaisti* interpretation of *The Fragment*, the process of this appropriation of knowledges is simultaneously a new character of labour process that necessitates a change in the locus of the cognitive aspect of control over the technical division of labour. For Vercellone, 'the productive value of intellectual and scientific labour becomes dominant'²⁰ and it is this commodification of knowledge, which we look at now from the perspective of the labour process, which he argues is the supersession of the Smithian or Fordist division of labour, and the potential for the overturning of the capitalist division of labour.

Socially-necessary labour-time, abstract labour time, is reduced as machines become more automatic, and this development of fixed capital causes a rupture in the tendency for capital to create free time and then 'convert it into surplus labour'²¹. If this tendency were to continue, Marx argues, a crisis of overproduction would result. Thus, the contradiction that Marx highlights is that capital tends to create free time by means of the development of fixed capital, but the consequences of the development of fixed capital in terms of the organic composition of capital renders capital unable to reabsorb this free time as directly productive surplus labour. Capital 'is thus, despite itself, instrumental in creating the means of social disposable time in order to reduce labour time for the whole society to a diminishing minimum, and thus free everyone's time for their own development.'²² Marx, of course, predicts that this tendency does continue and, as such, his theory on the development of fixed capital forms part of his theory of crisis and, more pertinently, his theory of revolution. It is at this point that the post-*operaisti* extension begins. Marx underestimates the processes by which capitalism temporarily resolves and relocates its contradictions and so assumes that capital's inability to reabsorb the free time it creates as directly productive labour must lead to the workers' reappropriation of this time²³. Nonetheless, despite capital's ability to continue to reappropriate the free-time it creates as labour-time, the post-*operaisti* still regard 'the tendency described by Marx [as] actually fully realised'²⁴ because of their presuppositions of an autonomous labour process.

²⁰ Vercellone 2007, p.19.

²¹ Marx 1973, p.708.

²² Marx 1973, p.708.

²³ Marx 1973, p.708.

²⁴ Virno 2007, p.4 .

In light of Virno's assessment of Marx's neglect of the idea that general intellect is embodied in living labour²⁵, the post-*operaisti* read Marx's proposal that the production process becomes subsumed under the technological application of science as an account, at least in part, of the everyday activity of the worker within the labour process. It is workers who apply science and their 'living' knowledge to the production process; therefore this ideal division of labour framework of the Taylorist fantasies, which imposes a partition between the cognitive factors of production and the manual factors, can no longer function. Worker control over the cognitive aspects of the labour process, concomitant of the development of fixed capital, is a definitive feature of contemporary capitalism. Nonetheless, it is clear that the post-*operaisti* offer a different and extended account of the labour process to Marx. They extend his account, and his account must be either extended or discarded as a possible explanation of contemporary political economy, because the contemporary political economic constitution is not one in which labour time has been reduced to a minimum nor is it one in which 'the saving of labour time [is] equal to an increase in free time'. In their extension however, they merely transpose his prediction of the political consequences of the development of fixed capital onto our contemporary political-economic constitution by way of a vanguard theory of labour that remains an assertion rather than a description of an actual labour process. Therefore, we ought not to go too far in calling the post-*operaisti* reading of the *Fragment on Machines* an interpretation. As Vercellone states, the *Fragment* offers 'elements'²⁶ for the understanding of contemporary political economy so we ought to read post-*operaismo* on the *Fragment* as an extension of Marx's ideas, albeit one which is nonetheless essentially tied to Marx's description of the consequences of the development of fixed capital. However, I argue that the post-*operaisti* consider those elements that accord to Tronti's *refusal* and the theory of the social factory and do not consider those factors of Marx's general intellect that do not accord.

The post-*operaisti* take Marx's proposition that the development of fixed capital creates time for the 'full development of the individual, which in turn reacts back upon the productive power of labour'²⁷ and examine it in terms of the changing landscape of labour which has occurred in the post-industrial times and places. The development of the form-determination of capital is in intimate relation to 'the production of knowledges by means of knowledges

²⁵ Virno 2007, p.5.

²⁶ Vercellone 2007, p.15.

²⁷ Marx 1973, p.711.

connected to the increasingly immaterial and cognitive character of labour.²⁸ The character of the processes of the production of economic value is therefore contingent upon the character of the embodied attributes of labour. Many of the exchange-values that are produced under the exploitation of intimate properties of the subject, the worker, appear to emerge from that part of life that has been variously called the private sphere or the sphere of reproduction. As such, the post-*operaisti* contend that economic value is therefore produced by processes of subjectivation that occur outside the labour-process. For example, much service labour is a commodification of the use-values of 'thinking, caring, loving' and the 'capacity to enjoy'²⁹ of which Virno, Hardt and Negri speak, are conceived of as use-values produced at home, school, play, *etc.* It is in this theoretical manoeuvre that the post-*operaisti* simultaneously corroborate Marx's prediction of the emancipatory character of the historical development of the form-determination of capital and justify their application of general intellect to contemporary political economy by highlighting an empirical example, which is nonetheless a product of interpretation, of 'free time [that] reacts back on the productive power of labour'³⁰. They argue that the new intellectual and affective character of labour is an extension of capitalist norms of accumulation and their exploitation of use-values which have their locus outside the factory gates. The post-*operaisti* interpret this development in the relations of production, and the power relations it represents, as paradigmatic form of labour activity that is governed by processes of subjectivation which occur in a world that is no longer separated by a distinction between the inside and the outside of capital, thereby forcing us to examine whether home, school, play, *etc.* are actually just alternative representations of the social (once capitalist or becoming non-capitalist) factory.

'The disproportion between the role of knowledge objectified in machines and the decreasing relevance of labour-time has,' Virno states, 'given rise to new and stable forms of domination.'³¹ When we look at capital synchronically in what Virno calls post-Fordism, it has been unable, unwilling nor found it necessary to reabsorb all of the free time it creates. This has created modes of life that can be initially and tentatively categorised in two distinct forms: one of outright subjugation and one of apparent 'free development'. The free time that has been created by the development of fixed capital, which ought to be time for 'the

²⁸ Vercellone 2007, p.16.

²⁹ Virno 2007, p.5.

³⁰ Marx 1973, p711.

³¹ Virno 2007, p.5.

development of an individual potential'³² manifests itself as redundancy, structural unemployment³³ and those pockets of time that exist amidst precarious labour. Thus, for many, free time is a misery in which one cannot propose any semblance of activity which may contribute to any notion of 'free development'. For this other form of a mode of life, a form perhaps well-described by Bifo's 'cognitariat', capital in post-Fordism annexes the changes in the mode of life which occur outside work-time and which, according to the thesis of general intellect, would result in free time for creativity and other factors that would contribute to the potential for labouring as a 'total man'³⁴. It is in this way that the post-*operaisti* propose that capital exploits the knowledges produced in non-work and utilizes them within capitalist production processes. The workers of Bifo's cognitariat are mobile, adaptable, and communicative; they follow rules and make choices which remain within the bounds of the framework of capitalist processes of accumulation. These characteristics are, the post-*operaisti* assert, all 'results of a socialization that has its...centre of gravity *outside of the workplace*.'³⁵ Virno, in his examination of work, similarly to Negri's observations that 'workers do not feel their *own* capacities for thinking, loving, and caring when they are on the job'³⁶, notes that 'the greater "capacity to enjoy" is always on the verge of being turned into a labouring task.'³⁷ Whilst, in a worryingly ironic way, being amongst the most comprehensive of the post-*operaisti* in acknowledging the limits capital imposes upon the potential for autonomy within the processes of the production of subjectivities by means of the power of capitalist processes of accumulation over work, he nonetheless maintains that the changes in capitalist processes of the production of economic value have instituted the conditions of free time which have 'naturally transformed its possessor into a different subject'³⁸ who is capable of committing a 'mass defection from the state.'³⁹ This assessment of contemporary and future political action is one, with various limits and caveats, upon which the post-*operaisti* agree and they legitimate their position with recourse to this section of the *Fragment*:

"The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a direct force of production and to what degree, hence, the

³² Marx 1973, p.711.

³³ Virno 2007, p.5.

³⁴ Fritzhand 1967, p.159.

³⁵ Paulo Virno 1996a, p.15.

³⁶ Hardt and Negri 2009, p.140. My italics.

³⁷ Virno 2007, p.5.

³⁸ Marx 1973, p.712.

³⁹ Virno 1996b, p.197.

*conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it.*⁴⁰

In this sense many of them, particularly Virno, Bifo, and Vercellone, take a strong reading of Marx's proposition 'that the mass of workers must themselves appropriate their own surplus labour'⁴¹, thus proposing a politics predicated on an autonomous subject. The possibility of this politics is a predication of an autonomous subject, encapsulated in Lazzarato's assertion that 'the subjugation of this form of cooperation...does not take away the autonomy of the constitution and meaning of immaterial labour.'⁴² This predication of the subject precludes the possibility that the power relations of production might intervene against the possibility of autonomy.

Amidst this extension and application of Marx to our contemporary political economy, both of these arguments neglect a vital characteristic of Marx's definition of the qualities of the relations of production that are necessary for the workers' potential to reappropriate 'their own surplus labour'⁴³. Furthermore, consideration of this characteristic also has the potential to negotiate the consequences of the delimiting of the distinction between the inside and outside of capital in terms of the power relations that subsume processes of the formation of subjectivity.

The alienation of general intellect

The general intellect as a category covers the entire range of relations, and therefore the contradictions and conflicts, which produce social life. As does Marx's theory of alienation. The general intellect describes a form of labour process which is qualitatively distinct from previous forms of labour process and therefore has the potential to illuminate not only the politics of contemporary work, but the politics that produce and reproduce the form(s) of contemporary work. Marx's concept of the general intellect, and the Fragment on Machines, is the positivity of Marx's theory of alienation. Marx's alienation is a description of the political consequences, that is the the social, psychological and human consequences, of

⁴⁰ Marx 1973, p.706.

⁴¹ Marx 1973, p.708.

⁴² Lazzarato 1996, p.145.

⁴³ Marx 1973, p.708.

economic value production under wage-labour in capitalism; Marx's category of general intellect is his description of the dialectical overcoming of these consequences.

Insofar as general social knowledge is possessed and articulated by the workers, as the *universal class* opposed to the bourgeoisie, the category of the general intellect is a representation of the relative characteristics of and potential for subjugation or liberation within the social constitution it proposes. This character, within Marx's dialectical materialist analysis of the development of capital, unerringly swings toward liberation. The *Fragment*, the post-*operaisti* reading of the *Fragment*, identifies a causal relation between the extent of the development of fixed capital and general social knowledge. The post-*operaisti*, however, prioritise this relation alone at the expense of other factors when they attempt to interpret the extent of the development of this relation as a barometer to measure the potential for revolutionary transformation. It is through the prism of an assumed priority for a causal relation between the development of fixed capital and the extent of diffuseness of general social knowledge that they attempt to understand the development or production, within 'the process of social life itself', of subjects' intellectual capacities and potential for self-liberation. In doing so, the post-*operaisti* conflate the increasing role of the knowledge of living labour in production by making a categorical relation between a purported class-basis of this productive knowledge, in both its cognition and activity, and a degree by which processes of the production of subjectivity are under the control of this class-borne concatenation of knowledges. In Marx, and in the *Fragment*, as we shall see, there is another set of relations which measure the *actuality* of a counter-capitalist revolutionary change, that is, the theory of alienation. In Marx, the theory of alienation is central to any possible notion that a particular mode or form of labour may be a force for freedom.

The post-*operaisti* overlook this key characteristic of Marx's general intellect despite a clear indication of its importance in the *Fragment* and despite the, demonstrably limited, integration of the concept of alienation elsewhere in their corpus. In the phase of the general intellect, Marx argues that '[t]he *theft of alien labour time, on which the present wealth is based*, appears a miserable foundation in the face of this new one.'⁴⁴ The production of economic value in Marx's general intellect is, therefore, not based upon the 'theft of alien labour time' but 'on the power of the agencies set in motion during labour time'⁴⁵. Of course, we can align with the post-*operaisti* on the basis that there is a growing centrality of the role

⁴⁴ Marx 1973, p.705.

⁴⁵ Marx 1973, p.706.

of knowledge in production and see the greater productive power that results from the objectification of knowledge in machines. We also know that at the very least there is a great deal of validity in exploring the extent to which 'general productive knowledge', developing as it does outside of labour-time, 'in turn reacts back upon the productive power of labour as itself the greatest productive power'⁴⁶. But knowledge has always been a force of production; therefore, there is little justification for neologisms given that the basis of capitalist production is alien labour time. The most radical of the post-*operaisti* interpretations of our contemporary political economy – that the labour process, and therefore life, is an activity in which the worker is autonomous from capital – has not been demonstrated, either theoretically or in practice. Rather, the power relations which labour-activity operates under, even at the vanguard of Bifo's 'cognitariat', have been identified in a variety of previous researches in such a way that demands further positive investigation into the alien quality, rather than the autonomous quality, of the processes which make up the times of production and an examination of the deleterious effects of alienation upon the character of subjectivities formed, at least in part, at the site of production.

Inadequate conceptions of alienation are at the heart of the post-*operaisti* extension of the general intellect. As such, the autonomous worker that they propose, and their definition of capital, is untenable. This criticism does not constitute a rejection of the entirety of post-*operaismo* thought, but rather highlights some debates within the school and the contradictions that emerge from an examination of their general intellect thesis. Through this critique, we might propose other means by which we can reconsider praxis today. First, the question of alienated time has caused a schism between the post-*operaisti*. On the one hand, Berardi argues that the semiotics of contemporary capitalist economy forbid the free development of individual potentialities⁴⁷, while on the other Negri's Multitude thesis does not merely obviate questions regarding the authenticity of subjectivation under capitalist power relations but is rather based on the assertion that 'freedom is today, in a fundamental sense, part and parcel of the labour process.'⁴⁸ Nonetheless, we must not overplay this schism; the two hands meet on the question of the *potential* for autonomy. The post-*operaisti* extension of Marx's general intellect is central to their proposal of autonomy, notwithstanding whether that proposal be a mere potential for autonomy, as proposed by the 'naturalist' strain of post-*operaismo*, which includes Virno, a 'virtual' autonomy

⁴⁶ Marx 1973, p.711.

⁴⁷ Berardi 2009, p.64.

⁴⁸ Negri 2008c, p164.

characteristic of Lazzarato and the differential spiritualist strain, or actually existing, practical and critical autonomy in action of Hardt and Negri's 'classical' tendency.⁴⁹ Second, I am not making a claim that some of the apparent contradictions of post-*operaismo* on the questions of freedom, autonomy, and subjugation in work are not fully intended as intrinsic factors of their proposed immanent character of revolutionary potential. For example, Lazzarato is incredibly clear on the expectation and compulsion for 'workers...to become "active subjects" in the coordination of various functions of [capitalist] production'⁵⁰, that the work of immaterial labour is the transformation of ideological products into commodities.⁵¹ Nonetheless, Lazzarato also argues that 'work [today] is immediately something free and constructive'⁵² because, for Lazzarato, the 'meaning' of immaterial labour is its autonomous constitution. The producers of ideological commodities, he argues, and their consumers who of course already are or will go on to become producers, will always overcome the subjugatory practices of capitalism because the contradictions of immaterial labour play out as mechanisms of the production of revolutionary subjectivities within a field of immanence. My argument is that these chains of immanence, linked by an inverted conception of alienation, shatter under the scrutiny of the Marxist theory of alienation.

Post-*operaismo* alienation, Berardi argues, is not predicated on a human essence or human universality, and it therefore differs radically from Hegelian, Marxist and existentialist theories of alienation. Post-*operaismo* does not propose the ontological possibility of a 'restoration' of humanity. Like Tronti's inversion of Marx's theory on the relation between the development of capital and the working-class power, the ontology of Bifo's theory is anti-labourist and he therefore conceives of alienation as a positive estrangement *from* labour under capitalism, qualified in the context of the *Operaismo* tenet of the refusal of work. Workers are estranged from labour as a result of 'radical inhumanity'⁵³ of their existence and by the systems of control which make up work. In this way, Bifo argues that 'what is seen by the negative thought of humanistic derivation as a sign of alienation, is seen by the Workerist-Compositionists,' the post-*operaisti*, 'as a sign of estrangement and a refusal to identify with the general interest of capitalistic economy.'⁵⁴ This epistemological principle particularly illuminates Negri's negligent use of the concept of alienation. In these terms, of

⁴⁹ Categorisation of post-*operaismo* from Toscano 2007, p.73.

⁵⁰ Lazzarato 1996, p.135.

⁵¹ Lazzarato 1996, p.146.

⁵² Lazzarato and Negri. in Gorz 1999, p.40.

⁵³ Berardi 2009, p.44

⁵⁴ Berardi 2009, p.46

course Negri is able to highlight the growing exploitation of the qualitative aspects of labour, and to point to “intimate” or “essential” qualities of labour without further discussion because, one might imagine, this alienation *qua* positive estrangement from capital becomes more fire to the flames that make for the revolutionary exodus of the Multitude. Negri, nonetheless, shields his theory of a revolutionary Multitude from the view of any notion of the human costs of labour under capitalism. His assertion that ‘cognitive labour...generally produce(s) cooperation autonomously from capitalist command’⁵⁵ allows him to obviate questions regarding the effect of capitalist power relations upon the integrity of the person and to instead focus his attention upon the processes of subjectivation which ensue from these so-called autonomously-produced cooperative arrangements, thus synonymising the free time of the *Fragment* with the labour time of so-called biopolitical production. Furthermore, Negri does not consider the alienation of intimate qualities of personhood as something which is important in our contemporary political economy. In fact, with his attempt to integrate the category of bare life into his theory of revolution,⁵⁶ Negri implies that the alienation of these intimate qualities plays a foundational role in the formation of the power which resists. In the context of a growing materialisation of the autonomy of labour, this will lead to the amputation of capital from production and these intimate qualities will then surely be retrieved. Within this framework, any notion of the effects of the alienation of activity, and the alienation of these intimate qualities of the self, is thus counterbalanced and negated by an immanent revolutionary thesis that is optimistic at best; which at worst is counter praxis. The post-*operaisti* are not interested in the potential of the concept of alienation to examine the relation between labour and the production of life itself. This is not to say that they ignore this relation but that, in light of assertions regarding the new character of the organisation of productive cooperation, they prefer to highlight conceptual notions which contribute to the thesis of the emergence of a revolutionary Multitude, an exodus from capital, and/or the practice of collective political therapy, resulting from the subjectivity-producing character of general intellect. I suggest that they do this at the expense of an investigation into the possibility that the production and reproduction of the power relations in contemporary forms of production might create conditions which inhibit rather than enhance the potential for liberation from capitalism.

⁵⁵ Hardt and Negri 2009, p.140.

⁵⁶ Negri 2008b, pp.208-9.

Despite their rejection of humanism and Sartrean existentialism, post-*operaismo* does not traverse the philosophical problems associated with either, or those ontological problems that arise when attempting to construct a theory of alienation which rejects both of these perspectives. They merely relocate the problems associated with notions of a human essence and of the phenomenological approach to freedom by offering a universalising interpretation of the contemporary experience of labour, consumption, and the reproductive relations that link and decouple them. For example, Bifo's theory of the production of psychopathologies implicates the fundamental assumptions of both humanism (essence) and existentialism (man is free) even though he claims to reject them. This contradictory position stems from the epistemological principles which underpin post-*operaismo* and the method which these principles imply. Therefore, the most appropriate place to begin this critique is with an analysis of the method, from which we can illuminate the problems of a post-*operaismo* theory of alienation by examining the epistemological foundation of post-*operaismo*.

The post-*operaisti* declare that they focus only on the most 'innovative' forms of cognitive labour because it is these forms, they argue, which characterize the new autonomous labour processes which in turn 'represent the trend that is transforming the whole of social production.'⁵⁷ Again, there is some conflict. Bifo argues against Negri; there is no case for an autonomous labour process in these forms of labour. But he does not make the case for the potential development of autonomous labour processes in these forms of labour without recourse to psychoanalytic concepts. He foregoes a political economy of work and therefore cannot convincingly argue that a growing autonomy of the labour process across all forms of production is a characteristic of labour in contemporary capitalism. Of course, labour in these forms does draw upon the cognitive, emotional and affective capabilities of the worker and, as Negri argues, we can talk of these capabilities as something intimate and essential to the self⁵⁸, but the exercise of aspects of the self cannot be synonymous with autonomy unless there is an absence of compulsion. By refusing to account for the strictures of the technical division of labour, the post-*operaisti* mistake formal control of one's own cognitive activity in work as autonomous, self-direction in work. Nonetheless, it would be a simplistic reading of Bifo to suggest that he performs this synonymization in the way that we can accuse Negri of presupposing an autonomous subject emerging from a self-directing labour process, however, he does propose the becoming of this autonomous subject by predicting a future

⁵⁷ Berardi 2009, p.87.

⁵⁸ Hardt and Negri 2004, p.111.

condition of crisis, a crisis which is immanent of the political constitution of contemporary labour. It is in this methodological movement that Bifo's statement of the post-*operaisti* rejection of humanism and existentialism collides with the ontological exigencies required by a theory of immanence.

Immanence is central to the political economy of the post-*operaisti*, and the nature of this immanence accords to Tronti's Copernican revolution. All of the concepts that populate the post-*operaismo* theoretical matrix have at their root the idea that labour, from the perspective in which we consider its 'form', develops within an immanent process which proceeds according to the epistemological principle that the 'capitalist class, from its birth, is in fact subordinate to the working class'⁵⁹. We see that Negri formulates the concept of alienation in such a way that it comes to illuminate the nature of exploitation under contemporary capitalism, so that it specifies the qualities of labour-power which produce economic value, and simultaneously limits the scope of the concept. Negri's conceptualization of alienation does this because he reads the development of the form of contemporary labour as a consequence of a labour-capital antagonism in which capital is subordinate to labour, as a form of labour which has been determined by the labour-class as a reaction to the iniquities of Fordist labour and therefore a consequence of the *refusal to work*. Negri sees the contemporary form of labour as one which has resulted from class-struggle and one which is constituted in such a way that its labourers can now, finally, emancipate themselves from capital. Negri regards 'biopolitical production' as a reference point between a historically immanent process which began at the onset of the industrial revolution when 'the worker (became) the *provider of capital*'⁶⁰.

Whereas Marx's formulation of the labour-capital antagonism includes the possibility that labour can become autonomous from capital, Tronti's inversion precludes the possibility of Marx's position. That is, the post-*operaismo* formulations fails to consider the possibility that the assemblages and apparatuses of capital, and the articulations of power that occur within capitalism, might not be part of a historical process in which the autonomy of the working-class is to be realised. Because they are the 'providers of capital', the working-class are *categorically* autonomous from capital, and cannot but be autonomous because they are the working-class. I argue that, in order to maintain the validity of this principle, the immanent development of the conditions of capitalism proposed by the post-*operaisti* must obviate

⁵⁹ Tronti 1980, p.31.

⁶⁰ Tronti 1980, p. 30.

some key questions and problems that are apparent in our contemporary political economy, such as the problem of alienated labour and the question of whether labour is autonomous. The post-*operaisti* begin from the assumption that alienation under capitalism is the active self-estrangement of the autonomous worker from capital, rather than conclude on this point. As a result, what might appear in terms of the internal validity of the theory as an assemblage of processes that is immanent of political economy is actually, in terms of its' external validity, an 'hypostatization of the mechanisms of the reproduction of subjectivity'⁶¹. To propose the immanence of the formation of autonomous subjects within an autonomous class is, I argue, to presuppose the qualities of the processes which form subjectivity and to presuppose the qualities of subjectivities themselves. This epistemological position explains how, for example, Lazzarato is able to propose an autonomous yet subjugated worker. Zanini argues that this hypostatization occurs only 'sometimes' in post-*operaismo*⁶². Nonetheless, I propose that because of the philosophy and the method implied by this interpretation of the labour-capital antagonism, the presupposition of processes of the formation of subjectivity, and a presupposition of the subject that supposedly emerges from these processes, is a key characteristic of post-*operaismo*. It is intrinsic to their central epistemological assumption regarding the character of the labour/capital antagonism and their erroneous extension of Marx's general intellect.

Post-*operaismo* presupposes an anti-capitalist subject; a presupposition which is drawn directly from Tronti's inversion of Marx's labour-capital antagonism. By inverting Marx's definition of the antagonism, Tronti and the other post-*operaisti* assume a unitary class subject. The key concepts of post-*operaismo* always tend to the justification of this fundamental and unchanging assumption, thus Negri's alienation does not affect the autonomy of his Multitude, Bifo's alienation creates the conditions for the exodus from capital, and neither conceptualization impinges on their understanding of general intellect. I suggest that this causes a great deal of harm to the potential for post-*operaismo* to illuminate further the power-relations of work, its object and commodity relations, the politics that emerge from work, and the immediate impact of capitalism upon the person and their work too often tends to the selection and conception of aspects of the processes of the production of subjectivity that justify their key epistemological assumption. Bifo's attempt to form a

⁶¹ Zanini 2010, p.41.

⁶² Zanini 2010, p.41.

theory of crisis on the basis of a coming collective nervous breakdown illustrates their 'hypostatisation of the mechanisms of the reproduction of subjectivity'⁶³.

Despite post-*operaismo* proclamations of opposition to idealism, rejections of humanism, and denials of existentialism, we do not have to read too closely to see the ghosts of Hegel's Absolute and Feuerbach's rejection of God, operating alongside a theory of the development the relations of production, guiding an historical subject toward Freedom, or, to use their parlance, autonomy. The post-*operaisti* understanding of general intellect, complemented as it is by Negri's Multitude and Lazzarato's virtual communism demonstrate a tradition within post-*operaismo* in which freedom realizes itself as social relations alter and subjects' understanding of the world increases with the development of general intellect. Nonetheless, Bifo argues that this is not the case, that post-*operaismo* does not presuppose a 'universal principle from which workers' behaviours derive'⁶⁴, thereby denying a place for notions of essence in the theory, while contradictorily arguing that 'the workers' position is...one of estrangement, situating itself outside the logic and general interest of capitalistic society'⁶⁵. This 'position' is, I argue, a universal principle and is derived from an even longer series of assumptions than Hegel's self-realization of Absolute Freedom, Marx's essence of labouring man, and Sartre's *a posteriori* essence.

This hypostatisation is a product of a process of a philosophy that is itself little more than a form of idealism and results in a particular understanding of alienation. As Hegel's man becomes conscious that Freedom realizes itself through his action and realizes that he creates his world, so post-*operaismo* man realizes that his interests are divergent from the interests of capital and he estranges himself. When the post-*operaisti* do consider alienation, they do so within an idealist framework. That is, they think of alienation as a process that can be overcome without changing the labour process relation or the object relation, and this overcoming occurs according to the development of a quasi-Hegelian 'consciousness of Freedom'. They presuppose 'class-subject' who is a force of production and, as a result, they strongly imply that it is not the means of production which need to be appropriated by a revolutionary class but that the subjects of the revolutionary class must reappropriate themselves. By rejecting all previous political economic theories of alienation, the post-*operaisti* limit the scope of the concept of alienation to within the bounds of notions of inter-

⁶³ Zanini 2010, p.41.

⁶⁴ Berardi 2009, p.50.

⁶⁵ Berardi 2009, p.51

subjectivity; therefore, they suggest, alienation can be overcome by the same intersubjectivity in the time of the general intellect. Therefore, it is not surprising that Bifo in particular underplays the potential for a political conflict that plays out in production, or that he proposes a unity of politics and psychotherapy to be enacted outside the sphere of the production of economic value as an appropriate method by which capital can be subverted and autonomy achieved⁶⁶.

As a result, the post-*operaisti* understand the development of the capitalist phase of the general intellect as a reorganisation of the capitalist mode of production which proceeds from the notion of working-class autonomy and which is central to their theory of dealienation, that is, the exodus from capital. The post-*operaisti* assume that the development of fixed capital occurs solely as a result of working-class struggle, and it is with this in mind that we must attempt to understand their argument that we are living in Marx's phase of the general intellect. As we have discovered, this view is not without its problems. While proposals regarding the extent of political action required to mount an exodus from the state and from capital form a spectrum across post-*operaismo*, a notion that there is an historical movement towards autonomy inherent in the structure of capitalism persists. For Lazzarato, the intellectualization of the working-class under the auspices of the development of general intellect means that society today is, 'be it virtually, communist'⁶⁷. Industry, it is argued, simply co-opts an already autonomous organisation of labour power, which implies that industry can simply be cut away. Within Negri's 'subjective dialectic', this cutting away of a rentier capital is exactly what he proposes with his concepts of biopolitical production and Multitude, Virno asserts that 'every light we will ever find is already here in the so-called darkness'⁶⁸, and Bifo notes that a mere change in perceptions, a conscious realignment of subject position, is required in order to resolve the social, economic, cultural and existential problems of the contemporary order, a change which will come from 'the creation of an economy based on the sharing of common things and services and on the liberation of time for culture, pleasure and affection'⁶⁹. These proclamations all illustrate an inadequate conception of capital and the processes of the reproduction of capital. They are precisely Hegelian overtures to a collective mind.

⁶⁶ Berardi 2009, pp.220-221.

⁶⁷ Toscano 2007, p.74.

⁶⁸ Virno 1996a, p.26.

⁶⁹ Berardi 2009, p.219.

Importantly, according to the post-*operaisti*, these processes of the realization of autonomy are inevitable and this view is essential to the post-*operaismo* approach to alienated labour. Capitalism, they argue, cannot become organized in such a way that would preclude the realization of the autonomy of the working-class and the subjects of which it is composed; therefore, the post-*operaisti* cannot acknowledge the possibility that the political problems of labour under capitalism might have an interminable character. In itself, the refusal to rest on a position that makes claims to the interminability of capitalist power is not an altogether problematic view, and it is one to which I subscribe. However, I argue that the refusal of the post-*operaisti* to seriously consider the possibility that mechanisms of the production of subjectivity subsumed under alienated labour form apparatuses, particularly in the postindustrial times and spaces of the world, that contribute to the political economic and ideological discourses which reproduce capitalist relations of production is a negligent contribution to the anticapitalist project as a result of its overpowering optimism in the face of much evidence to the contrary (what evidence?). There is no indication that general social knowledge becoming a force of production might be a mechanism by which alien labour time is overcome. Rather, this becoming opens up a field of potentially new qualities of bodies, of subjects, that are coming under the dominion of capitalism. These qualities of personhood are valorised and commodified under capitalist politics of production; thus, what is new about the becoming of general social knowledge as a force of production is not the autonomy of labour, but rather the alienation and perversion of things intimate and essential to the self and the new and more extensive challenges that this presents to the project of a revolutionary praxis. This phase of the capitalist mode of production is not general intellect. It has not produced an organisation of production in which there has been either an increase of free time that has transformed the subject, nor one in which labour time has an emancipatory character, but rather it is one in which labour time is the reification and commodification of the cognitive, linguistic, and affective capacities of the worker. This is the process of the production of value in the forms of labour that are the focus of the post-*operaisti*. It is the alien character of labour time, not an increase of free time, which reacts back on the cognitive, linguistic, and affective capacities of the individual, i.e. on intellect, and transforms the subject in accordance with it.

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