This means war: A review of Maurizio Lazzarato's treatise *Capital hates everyone*

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review of

Maurizio Lazzarato's polemical essay *Capital hates everyone: Fascism or revolution* is the latest in a series of prescient engagements by the militant theorist best known for his early work on post-Fordist production and immaterial labor. It comes courtesy of the semiotext(e) intervention series, which last published his riveting analysis of indebtedness developed during the 2008 financial and debt-crisis (Lazzarato, 2012). What makes Lazzarato's interventions so interesting is that he is both a tried and true militant in the Italian Operaist tradition and one of the most faithful and thorough scholars of authors such as Deleuze, Guattari and Foucault. In his books, the often opaque and difficult concepts developed by these thinkers find the concrete, timely and politically charged application that has become scarce after decades of sterile academic writing on 'French theory'.

Given how closely Lazzarato's theoretical trajectory has been tied to the direct engagement with current political events it is problematic that in the field of critical management studies in general and on the pages of *ephemera* in

particular, his name has so far been largely associated with his early essay on 'immaterial labor' (Coté and Pybus, 2007; Hearn, 2010; Mastrangelo, 2020). Given this anachronistic tendency in the reception of Lazzarato's work, some readers may be surprised to find among the targets of his recent polemics representatives of post-Operaismo, as well as key Foucauldian concepts that are closely associated with the trajectory of this movement. Thus, a brief recapitulation of the development and reception of post-Operaismo, its Foucauldian edge and Lazzarato's own engagement with these ideas seems in order. It should be noted that these remarks are to a considerable extend constricted by the limited translation of Lazzarato's work into English and my equally limited knowledge of French.

From immaterial labor to the limits of governmentality

Lazzarato's foundational essay on 'immaterial labor' is one of the key texts of post-Operaismo: an unholy or useful (depending on who you ask) union of French post-structuralism and Italian Operaismo. The latter is a Marxist heresy that seeks to build a new revolutionary theory starting from the immediate experiences and struggles of workers and capital's responding counter-strategies of discipline (Nunes, 2007). As the Fordist model of industrialist production gave way to post-Fordism, Operaist theorists established an influential dialogue with French post-structuralism. This included an emphatic reception of Foucault's notions of bio-politics and governmentality, both of which are primarily developed in Foucault's analysis of German and American (neo-)liberalism (Foucault, 2008). These concepts were to help analyze what is often referred to as (bio-)cognitive capitalism (Morini and Fumagalli, 2010): a regime of accumulation that depends on the capture of the very life and mind – the bio-cognitive – of its subjects (Lazzarato, 2004). Under this condition, Lazzarato's influential essay argued, 'immaterial labor', the labor productive of the informational and cultural content of commodities, becomes hegemonic (Lazzarato, 1996; Hardt and Negri, 2000). These new affective and cognitive labor capacities are not susceptible to capture and control by the tried and true panoptic surveillance-apparatus installed by Fordist and Taylorist management systems. Instead, novel forms of neoliberal control are said to operate cunningly at a distance by subjectifying workers as precarious entrepreneurs of themselves, units of

human capital, thus making them responsible *for* themselves and turning them into managers and control-centers *of* themselves. Here, Foucault's notion of governmentality and bio-politics provided a conceptual vocabulary for the subtle 'pivoting' (Fleming, 2022) of formally free entrepreneurial subjects in the increasingly open and uncertain environment associated with neoliberalism and post-Fordism. It seems obvious, why the thesis of immaterial labor and especially its intimate link to Foucauldian notions of bio-politics and governmentality would lend itself for critical research on the post-Fordist labor processes and its novel, ever more cunning and elusive forms of control. It allowed for a critical analysis of the new styles of decentralized, 'liberatory' (Peters, 1996) management and corresponding forms of precarious and entrepreneurial work as governmental techniques for capturing and controlling immaterial labor (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Fleming, 2009). However, in his more recent work, Lazzarato subjects these theories and especially their use of Foucauldian concepts to a consequential critique.

According to Lazzarato, the understanding of (neo-)liberal governmentality as an art of frugal governance adequate to post-Fordist modes of production, in which the subjectivation of workers as entrepreneurial units replaces the need to direct state-enforced discipline, turned out be a misjudgment during the debt-crisis of the 2010s when states' enforcement of austerity was *all but frugal* (Lazzarato, 2013). Foucault's analysis of frugal governance, Lazzarato argues, paints a pacified picture of neoliberal power that risks 'obscuring, through the concept of governmentality, the violence that neoliberalism directly exerts on persons and things' (Lazzarato, 2021: 82). To counter this tendency, Lazzarato, in his recent work urges for a return to earlier versions of Foucault's analysis of power, which relied more on notions of direct confrontation and, ultimately, war (Alliez and Lazzarato, 2016; Lazzarato, 2021). For Lazzarato, analyses of the cunning governmental techniques of pivoting entrepreneurial subjects that figure so prominently in critical management scholars' accounts of neoliberalism (Walsh, 2018; Walker, Fleming and Berti, 2021; Fleming, 2022), proceed after the fact of direct and often violent confrontation between the state-capital nexus and its subjects. He reminds us that Chile became a laboratory for neoliberal techniques of governance only after and thanks to the establishment of a violently repressive military dictatorship. Moreover, he quite clearly conducts his

writing and research in France, which has experienced an intensifying back and forth between neoliberal reforms, public resistance and its increasingly violent repression. Emphasizing the importance of direct, repressive and violent power in Pinochet's Chile, Macron's France and the US' carceral state, Lazzarato in *Capital hates everyone* cautions that any analysis of neoliberalism and post-Fordism that proceeds from the notion of governmentality is necessarily incomplete since it cannot take into account the constituent and conservative function of these more direct confrontational forms of power.

Capitalism through the prism of war

Taking these as a starting point, Lazzarato suggests that it is necessary to look at capitalism through the prism of war. This perspective leads him to propose the hypothesis that war, along with the state and the financial system, is a constituent, even ontological, force in capitalist societies. What Lazzarato calls 'strategic confrontations' thus lie at the heart of the socio-ontological condition of the capitalist socius. As such, Lazzarato designates these confrontations as situations of direct and asymmetric confrontation between antagonists in which one party will necessarily win and the other lose. Drawing on earlier, more conflict oriented works of Foucault (2003), Lazzarato argues that these asymmetric strategic confrontations precede and underpin all relations of power in capitalist societies. If such a relation stabilizes itself in any arrangement resembling pacification, this means that one side of the strategic confrontation has emerged victorious. Critical accounts that proceed from this pacified situation, for Lazzarato, can only tell half the story. Accordingly, Lazzarato's challenges us to look beyond the metropolis in the capitalist core. Here in the center, the association of neoliberalism with creative precarity, bio-political production and self-entrepreneurship, which pervade the field of critical management studies, might be self-evident. However, integrated world capitalism relies just as much on direct violent material appropriation and suppression at the periphery, as it does on the glossy offices and tech companies that some management scholars still take to be the primordial face of contemporary capitalism.

From critical to revolutionary theory

As the title of *Capital hates everyone* already suggests, his theoretical moves have an explicit political motivation. According to Lazzarato, the leftist intelligentsia has wallowed far too long and too deep in critical theories of the supposed abstract, depersonalized and cunning nature of contemporary power. Against these accounts, Lazzarato calls for 'revolutionary' theories capable of identifying the concrete strategies employed by what he calls capital's war machine and providing emancipatory counter-strategies. Unfortunately, by the end of the essay, Lazzarato still owes the readers any suggestions on what such counter strategies might look like. Answers to this question might be found in a recently published book titled *The intolerable present, the urgency of revolution.*

In lieu of such strategic suggestions, Lazzarato spends much of his essay painting a desolate picture of our current predicament: Neoliberalism reigns supreme and represses every counter-insurgent force with violence and its seemingly all-powerful financial machine. Simultaneously, the defeated and humiliated subjectivities of the western bourgeoisie give rise to fascist political movements. These descriptions and their analysis through the prism of war are formulated in a rather declarative manner. Lazzarato is not out to convince anyone who is still hopeful in the prospects of technocratic or social-democratic solutions to our current malaise. He declares his polemic theses with ultimate certainty. For the reader it is a take it or leave it situation. Unfortunately, Lazzarato's polemics tend to paint a sometimes-oversimplified picture of our current predicament: On one side, you have violent repressive technocratic neoliberalism and on the other, violent repressive neo-fascist neoliberalism and in the background lurks an unfulfilled potential for rupture and revolution that Lazzarato presents as our only hope. On the one hand, this account might serve as a productive shake up for critical management scholars since it emphasizes the constitutive role of direct, strategic and violent confrontation in capitalist societies, which we tend to overlook. On the other hand, this conceptual framework has no room for the more progressive, 'enlightened' left wing of capital which we encounter at the contemporary business school: socially progressive, environmentally concerned and determined to square social and ecological sustainability with entrepreneurial activity. From Lazzarato's point of view,

such a discourse can only appear as a hollow humanist façade for violent repressive technocratic neoliberalism. Those laboring critically within this discourse might reasonably ask if it is really that simple. We should probably look elsewhere to answer this question. However, amongst Lazzarato's dire declarations of apocalyptic times, at the very heart of his essay readers will find a rich and thought-provoking sketch of a theory of technology – one that might be of profound interest for researchers interested in the field of critical management and studies.

Towards a conflict theory of technology

Lazzarato articulates his theory of technology in a lengthy chapter, which forms the centerpiece of his treatise and is, by comparison with the rest of the text, surprisingly argumentative in tone and structure. He takes as his starting point Deleuze's programmatic dictum, that the 'machines are always social before being technical' (Deleuze, 2006: 39). Connecting this sentiment with the thought of modern philosophers of technology, such as Gilbert Simondon, Lazzarato makes the case for the ontological indeterminacy of technological machines. Any technological machine, Lazzarato argues in typical Deleuzo-Guattarian jargon, is constituted by its interconnection with the social machine. Similarly, the subject itself is constituted through certain assemblages of 'enunciation', in which technical components play an increasingly important role. 'Man and machine', Lazzarato concludes 'are an assemblage [agencement], hence a field of possibilities, of virtualities as much as constituted elements (mechanical parts, software programs, algorithms), but all of that must be framed in relation to the possibilities and constituted elements of the war machine.' [162]. In my reading, the term 'war machine' in this context seems to refer to the capitalist socius, which, according to Lazzarato, is inherently warlike.

Thus, Lazzarato affirms the ontological indeterminacy of technical machines against critical theories that suspect modern machinery of holding a tendency towards either emancipation or repression. Within the former camp, Lazzarato groups leftist accelerationists who, he claims, see in the development of the means of production the skeleton key for a post-capitalist future. The main currents of post-Operaismo, with which Lazzarato is most

commonly identified in the critical management literature and on the pages of *ephemera* are lumped into this tendency as well.

Lazzarato's theory of technology is in line with his general argument, namely that contemporary critical theory has overemphasized the pacified governmentality of capitalist domination to the detriment of a coherent analysis of direct, strategic confrontations. If we understand a technological machine to be a field of virtualities that actualize themselves only in connection with the social machine, and if we understand the capitalist social machine to be premised on strategic confrontation and, thus, inherently warlike, then, Lazzarato argues, any analysis of technology has to take its conflictual strategic employment as a starting point. What Lazzarato seems to propose, therefore, is a socio-political determinism of technology in the last instance. Since Lazzarato posits war as a socio-ontological condition, it might be adequate to call Lazzarato's perspective a conflict theory of technology. This moves Lazzarato in close proximity with theories of early Operaismo and Labor Process Theory, which understands technology as a weapon in class struggle mobilized to secure capitalist domination (Panzieri, 1980; Noble, 2011). However, Lazzarato's account of the development of contemporary technology and the way it is shaped by conflict goes beyond class conflict to include geopolitical and (de-)colonial confrontations. Interestingly for critical management scholarship, Lazzarato also discusses organizational techniques, such as interdisciplinary teamwork in his analysis, showing how the Second World War necessitated and gave rise to modes of organization we today mostly associate with the creative and software industries. Creative destruction indeed. Turning to actual technical machines, Lazzarato gives us uncharacteristically detailed case-studies to demonstrate his conflict theory of technology. The most convincing and illustrative of these cases will be elaborated upon now.

The conflictual shaping of technology, or how the radio got its noise

Lazzarato gives an account of the strategic employment of the radio during the anti-colonial struggles in Algeria. Drawing primarily on Fanon's descriptions of the matter, he demonstrates how the very form and content of

the medium, its messages and the subjectivities of its users, were shaped by the conflictual social relationship between colonizer and colonized. At first, Lazzarato explains, radio in Algeria was a top-down propaganda tool employed by the French colonial state. However, during the anti-colonial struggle Algerians set up alternative, revolutionary broadcasts. This revolutionary employment of the medium gave it a completely different form. Not only did it turn the former top-down propaganda tool into a mode of revolutionary communication. It also reshaped the subjectivities of its recipients, since the highly patriarchal Algerian households gathered, regardless of gender, in front of the radio, becoming witnesses to and part of a process of politicization that traversed traditional gender and age hierarchies. Lazzarato goes so far as to claim that radio-jamming perpetrated by the French colonizers contributed to the conflictual shaping of the very medium and its reception. The constant interruptions of noise through jamming practices became part and parcel with revolutionary radio broadcasts, in turn triggering new, more attentive listening practices, and again, reshaping the subjectivities of those attached to this revolutionary socio-technological machine. Lazzarato's retelling of this period in revolutionary media-usage is highly suggestive and serves a convincing illustration for Lazzarato's view of both man and machine as assemblages of becoming that are enframed by social conflicts. What Lazzarato's argument underemphasizes, however, is the particular formal and historical logic of the broadcast medium, which enables certain revolutionary and counter-revolutionary styles of usage, while limiting the feasibility of others (Baudrillard, 2019), or to use the terms closer to contemporary organization studies: Its formal and material affordances and constraints.

Technology in the contemporary labor process

Thus, Lazzarato's conflict theory of technology is highly provocative and suggestive. It portrays technological machines as ontologically open and undetermined assemblages and sensitizes the reader to the particular styles of usage through which a machine is individuated and actualized. Furthermore, it shows how the subjectivities of the users themselves are shaped both by the constituted technological elements of the machine and the way these are enacted in an inherently conflictual social setting.

It thus serves as an effective antidote to popular narratives about the either emancipatory or catastrophic consequences of seemingly independent technological developments. Similarly, it can serve as a counterweight to critical discourses about the way contemporary technological developments depersonalize and reify power relations by way of algorithmization and automation. In the field of critical management and organization studies, Lazzarato's arguments could be put into a productive dialogue with currently fashionable theories of socio-materialism which similarly underscore the relative indeterminacy of technologies and the constitutive role of intra-active assemblages of human and nonhuman elements (Orlikowski and Scott, 2008). One possible contribution Lazzarato's theory could make here is positioning these intra-actions in a particular socio-historical formation: capitalism. And since, for Lazzarato, capitalism is inherently conflictual, a further development of his lines of arguments in *Capital hates everyone* might even enable a reevaluation of the relationship between socio-material and historical material approaches such as Labor Process Theory. Lazzarato himself gives a rough sketch of how his theory could be applied to the labor context through his analysis of the recent work of French sociologist Marie-Anne Dujarier.

He employs Dujarier's research to argue that technological abstraction is not a means to the end of automating managerial decision-processes but rather of centralizing decision making power and moving it up organizational hierarchies. If, for example, an algorithmic project management tool is implemented into a labor process, this does not simply mean that certain mid-level decisions are automated, but that the decision-making power is centralized among those who set the algorithmic parameters of the tool. Cue TIQQUN: 'In each apparatus, there is a hidden decision' (TIQQUN, 2011: 154). Thus, organizations are still based on (managerial) decisions. Any study of algorithmic decision making in organizations should, therefore, hone in on the decisions *behind* the algorithm. 'The automatic machine' Lazzarato writes 'centralizes decision making even further: instead of abolishing it it exalts it' [175]. True to his focus on antagonistic strategies, Lazzarato suspects a strategy of secession behind this development. This would allow capitalists and their functional elites to separate themselves from the workers on the shop floor and in the home office, a strategy that, as we can clearly see in the

case of platform labor, also enables capitalists to shed any responsibilities formerly enshrined in the Fordist capital-labor compromise. Thus, Lazzarato's analysis seems to come down on the side of those observing a Taylorism 2.0 at work in contemporary labor processes. The big difference between old and new Taylorisms being that the Taylorists of the past still had to visit the shop floor to carry out their measurements, while the new Taylorists are entirely separated from the concrete labor process, instead acting upon an 'abstraction' [181].

Conclusion

For those unfamiliar with Lazzarato's intellectual trajectory in recent years, the theoretical positions in 'Capital Hates Everyone' might come as a surprise. Given the fact that aside from his work on debt and indebtedness, Lazzarato is still often cited within critical management studies as a proponent of post-Operaismo's main currents, a reevaluation of his latest work should be in order. Unfortunately, his most recent texts are not ideal places to start such a reevaluation. His collaboration with Eric Alliez is mostly concerned with an analysis of the role of war in capitalist modernity. As such, it is highly relevant given our current geopolitical climate. However, it rarely touches the fields of interest of critical management scholars. For readers within this discipline, *Capital hates everyone* might serve first and foremost as a stark illumination of the manifold differences between Lazzarato's most recent works and texts such as 'Immaterial labor' (1996). In part, this is due to the text's highly polemic and agitating style. This very style might deter some readers, who do not share Lazzarato's theoretical and political sentiments. However, those not deterred by these issues might just discover the outlines of a provocative and highly fruitful analysis of the role of strategic confrontation in neoliberalism as well as the political and antagonistic facets of technology and its employment in contemporary labor processes. We can only hope that some of these ideas will be fleshed out further in future texts. A new book, twice the size of *Capital hates everyone* was just published, again through the semiotext(e) intervention series (for a review see Diefenhardt, 2023).

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