

## Doing the Math: Reflections on the Alleged Obsolescence of the Law of Value under Post-Fordism

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### abstract

A recurring claim in the work of Antonio Negri and other post-*Operaista* theorists associated with him is that the law of value, which states that the value of a commodity is determined by the socially necessary labor time required for its production, is obsolete in today's post-Fordist economy. Negri supports this claim by arguing that the nature of labor has changed fundamentally – labor has become ever more complex, cooperative and immaterial – and that life time and labor time are becoming increasingly indistinguishable. These arguments distort aspects of Marx's theoretical framework in ways that yield counterfactual and contradictory claims. They also disregard the importance of Marx's quantitative approach to value for combating an entrepreneurial strategy that consists in expanding the sector of unremunerated or underpaid work within what has been called the 'social factory'.

Ever since the early 1990s, there has been a resurgence of interest – first in Italy, and then internationally – in the work of militant Marxists associated with the theoretical current known as *Operaismo* (or post-*Operaismo*, in its most recent transformation). Authors such as Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno are winning a growing audience for themselves by furnishing a conceptual apparatus that promises to unveil the secrets of capitalist exploitation during the decline of the Fordist economic regime. The theories elaborated by these authors have seemed to many to provide a convincing account of the new forms of work associated with information technology, science, and communication that have emerged in the leading capitalist nations during the past decades, and which are today widely associated with categories such as those of 'immaterial' and 'affective' labor.

Much of the current fascination with these theories appears to derive from their tendency to invoke a Marxist rhetoric while dismissing many of the more traditional elements of Marxist theory. The 'law of value' has been one of the first components of orthodox Marxism to fall by the wayside.<sup>1</sup> It was already dismissed as obsolete by

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1 The law of value states that a commodity's value is determined by the socially necessary labor-time required for its production. To cite a classic (Marxian) example: Diamonds will be an unusually valuable commodity for as long as discovering, extracting, and processing them will require, on average, relatively large amounts of labor-time. Since, in Marx's view, labor-power is itself a

Negri as early as the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> In what follows, Negri's arguments for the obsolescence of the law of value will be placed within the context of *Operaista* and post-*Operaista* theory and critically examined. After explaining why I feel these arguments are unsatisfactory, I will offer some (very rudimentary) suggestions as to other directions in which the analysis of contemporary forms of exploitation might proceed.

The critique of Negri presented here does not engage with the debate on Marx's theory of value that has been ongoing at least since the publication of Piero Sraffa's *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities*, even though that debate arguably constitutes part of the general backdrop of Negri's arguments.<sup>3</sup> Many aspects of Marx's theory – including those related to the so-called 'transformation problem', or the problem of the transformation of values into prices – undeniably require correction or at least further elaboration. Negri's arguments for the obsolescence of the law of value can however be refuted without extensive reference to the debate on Marx's theory of value – by indicating the counterfactual nature of the claims associated with them and the contradictions and conceptual confusions inherent in the underlying assumptions.

## Labor Militancy and Productivity: The *Operaista* Narrative

It is worth emphasizing that Italian *Operaismo* was not the unified movement as which it is sometimes presented.<sup>4</sup> One point of disagreement between the various theorists

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commodity (which also needs to be produced and reproduced), the law of value has important consequences for workers *qua* workers (i.e. it does not affect them simply because they are also consumers). As will be seen below, Negri's claim that the law of value is now defunct is largely premised on his views about the qualitative transformations of labor under post-Fordism.

- 2 See for example Antonio Negri (1997), *La costituzione del tempo*, Rome: Manifestolibri, 33-34 (written between 1980 and 1981).
- 3 Piero Sraffa (1960) *Production of Commodities by Means of Commodities. Prelude to a Critique of Economic Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Ian Steedman (1977) *Marx after Sraffa*, London: New Left Books; Diane Elson (1979) 'The Value Theory of Labour', in Diane Elson (ed.) *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism*, London: CSE Books, 115-180; and Ian Steedman (1981) *The Value Controversy*. New York and London: Verso. Two classic works on value theory also worth consulting are Ronald L. Meek (1956) *Studies in the Labor Theory of Value*. New York and London: Monthly Review Press, and Maurice Dobb (1973) *Theories of Value and Distribution since Adam Smith: Ideology and Economic Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. As far as more recent contributions to the debate are concerned, the work of George Caffentzis and Harry Cleaver seems to me to be especially significant. See George Caffentzis (1992) 'The Work / Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse', in Midnight Notes Collective (eds.) *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War, 1973-1992*, Brooklyn NY: Autonomedia, 215-271 (especially p. 232-248); George Caffentzis (2005) 'Immeasurable Value? An Essay on Marx's Legacy', *The Commoner*, 10: 87-114; and Harry Cleaver (2005) 'Work, Value and Domination. On the Continuing Relevance of the Marxian Labor Theory of Value in the Crisis of the Keynesian Planner State', *The Commoner*, 10: 115-131. While they disagree with him on important points, Caffentzis and Cleaver share with Negri a theoretical approach shaped by *Operaismo*. The critique of Negri developed in this essay is strongly indebted to their work.
- 4 The most thoroughly researched English-language account of the development of *Operaismo* is Steve Wright (2002) *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Autonomist Marxism*. London: Pluto Press.

associated with the movement concerns the nature of the relationship between capitalist productivity and worker struggles. Mario Tronti argued famously that labor militancy constrains capitalists to find ways of increasing productivity in order to continue extracting surplus value, or that labor militancy accelerates the transition from the 'formal' to the 'real' subsumption of labor under capital and from the extraction of 'absolute' to the extraction of 'relative' surplus value.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, Raniero Panzieri seldom went further than suggesting a parallelism between capitalist development and labor militancy. He rarely makes claims about a straightforward causal relationship between the two. Where he does make such claims, Panzieri tends towards reversing Tronti's position by suggesting that it is the capitalist reorganization of the production process that engenders new struggles, not vice versa.<sup>6</sup>

Panzieri's position is often neglected in contemporary discussions of *Operaismo*. The most well-known theorists associated with *Operaismo* who are still active today, such as Negri, tend to take Tronti's position as the premise of their arguments. One might say that if there exists such a thing as an '*Operaista* narrative' of social struggle and labor militancy today, its main characteristic is that it recounts the history of capitalist development in such a way as to stress the primacy of worker struggles over the initiative of entrepreneurs.

Whatever the causal relationship between labor militancy and capitalist development may be, it is clear that both were amply in evidence during the heyday of *Operaismo* (the 1960s). What is more, it appears indeed to have been the case that the technology-based restructuring measures implemented by Italian corporations such as FIAT during the 1970s constituted a response to the labor militancy of the period.<sup>7</sup> Much of this

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- 5 See Mario Tronti (1966) 'Lenin in Inghilterra', in Mario Tronti, *Operai e capitale*, Turin: Einaudi, 89-95. In Marx's theory, the extraction of 'absolute' surplus value is proper to societies in which the capitalist mode of production is only beginning to emerge, and in which entrepreneurs appropriate labor-power for themselves without significantly transforming the production process – what Marx calls the 'formal subsumption of labor under capital'. At this early stage of capitalist development, surplus value is extracted from workers simply by ensuring that the workday exceeds the time required for necessary labor, or for producing commodities whose value is equivalent to that of the commodities required for reproducing the labor-power expended. According to Marx, the subsequent development of capitalism sees the production process being reorganized with an eye to making it more efficient from the standpoint of capitalist valorization. More commodities are produced in less time thanks to technological innovation. Productivity increases as the production process is transformed into a specifically capitalist production process. This is what Marx calls 'real subsumption'. If the exchange value of labor-power (the wage) remains constant or in any case does not rise as quickly as productivity, the proportion of necessary labor to surplus labor shifts in favor of the latter, since more value is produced in the same time. In this way, more surplus value can be extracted even without lengthening the workday. This is what Marx describes as an increase in 'relative' surplus value. See Karl Marx (1976) *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. B. Fowkes, Harmondsworth: Penguin, Chapter 14.
- 6 See Raniero Panzieri (1994) 'Lotte operaie nello sviluppo capitalistico', in Raniero Panzieri, *Spontaneità e organizzazione. Gli anni dei 'Quaderni rossi' 1959-1964. Scritti scelti a cura di Stefano Merli*, Pisa: Franco Serantini, 73-92 (especially p. 79-83).
- 7 On restructuring at FIAT, see the various documents in *Autonomie. Materialien gegen die Fabrikgesellschaft. Neue Folge* 9 (1982). See also Marco Revelli (1989) *Lavorare in Fiat*. Turin: Boringhieri; and Marco Revelli (1996) 'Fiat: la via italiana al postfordismo', *Le due destre*, Turin: Boringhieri, 116-130. It is worth emphasizing that the use of science as an instrument for reorganizing the production process, extracting relative surplus value, and curbing the possibilities

restructuring involved investment in semi-automated production processes. This in turn gave new importance to the capitalist recruitment of engineers and technicians (an issue already extensively debated during the 1960s).<sup>8</sup> Consequently, those passages in Marx that deal with automation and the integration of scientific knowledge into the production process – most importantly, the ‘Fragment on Machines’ in the *Grundrisse*, Marx’s preliminary notes for *Capital* – assumed a new relevance and topicality.<sup>9</sup> Negri’s claims concerning the obsolescence of the law of value largely derive from *Operaista* readings of the *Grundrisse*. Negri has long argued that this work by Marx provides more adequate tools for anti-capitalist struggle than those found in *Capital*.<sup>10</sup>

In the ‘Fragment on Machines’, Marx claims that “labor time ceases and must cease” to be the ‘measure’ of wealth once productivity has developed to the point where the expense of labor-power required for the production process becomes so negligible that workers become the ‘overseers’ rather than the agents of that process. In other words,

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for labor militancy predates the post-1945 period. The classic example of such an entrepreneurial strategy remains the application of Frederick Winslow Taylor’s techniques of ‘time and motion management’ (or ‘scientific management’) in US steel factories during the early 20th century. See Frederick Winslow Taylor (1911) *The Principles of Scientific Management*. New York and London: Harper and Brothers; David A. Hounshell (1984) *From the American System to Mass Production (1800-1932)*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press; and Stephen Meyer III (1981) *The Five Dollar Day: Labor Management and Social Control in the Ford Motor Company, 1908-1921*. Albany NY: State University of New York Press. See also Antonio Gramsci (1975) *Quaderni del carcere*. Turin: Einaudi (entries under ‘americanismo e fordismo’, eg. p. 1312-1313, p. 2146, p. 2160-2161, and p. 2164-2166); Harry Braverman (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Monthly Review; Karl Heinz Roth (1977) *Die ‘andere’ Arbeiterbewegung und die Entwicklung der kapitalistischen Repression von 1880 bis zur Gegenwart*. Munich: Trikont (especially p. 29-54 and p. 81-100, on Taylorism in Germany); and (on Taylorism in the Soviet Union) Angelika Ebbinghaus (1978) ‘Taylor in Rußland’, in Willi Bergmann (ed.) *Autonomie im Arbeiterkampf. Beiträge zum Kampf gegen die Fabrikgesellschaft*. Munich: Trikont, 143-164.

- 8 On analogous developments in the German Federal Republic, see Karl Heinz Roth (1970) ‘Wissenschaft, Bildung und wirtschaftliches Wachstum im wissenschaftlichen Kapitalismus’, in Eckard Kanzow and Karl Heinz Roth, *Unwissen als Ohnmacht. Zum Wechselverhältnis von Kapital und Wissenschaft*. Berlin: Voltaire, 9-160. Considerations on the integration of scientific labor into the production process were already central to debates that occurred within the Italian and German student movements during the 1960s. One of the most influential contributions to the German debate is Hans-Jürgen Krahl (1971) ‘Thesen zum allgemeinen Verhältnis von wissenschaftlicher Intelligenz und proletarischem Klassenbewusstsein’, *Konstitution und Klassenkampf. Zur historischen Dialektik von bürgerlicher Emanzipation und proletarischer Revolution*. Frankfurt: Neue Kritik, 330-347. The work of Krahl received considerable attention in Italy. For more recent, English-language analyses of the relationship between science, technology, and capitalism, see the 1997 anthology *Cutting Edge: Technology, Information, Capitalism and Social Revolution*, edited by Jim Davis, Thomas Hirschl, and Michael Stack. New York and London: Verso.
- 9 Karl Marx (1973) *Grundrisse*, trans. M. Nicolaus. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 699-711. On the *Grundrisse* and their relationship to *Capital*, see Roman Rosdolsky (1977) *The Making of Marx’s Capital*. London: Pluto Press.
- 10 See Antonio Negri (1977) ‘Dal Capitale ai Grundrisse’, in Antonio Negri, *La forma Stato. Per la critica dell’economia politica della costituzione*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 13-24. See also Antonio Negri (1979) *Marx oltre Marx. Quaderno di lavoro sui Grundrisse*. Milan: Feltrinelli; English translation: Antonio Negri (1991) *Marx Beyond Marx*, trans. Harry Cleaver, M. Ryan and M. Viano. New York: Autonomedia.

the Marx of the ‘Fragment’ envisions the breakdown of the law of value being brought about by the increasingly scientific nature of the production process.

[...] to the degree that large industry develops, the creation of real wealth comes to depend less on labor time and on the amount of labor employed than on the power of the agencies set in motion during labor time, whose ‘powerful effectiveness’ is itself in turn out of all proportion to the direct labor time spent on their production, but depends rather on the general state of science and on the progress of technology, or the application of this science to production. [...] [The] worker steps to the side of the production process instead of being its chief actor. [...] As soon as labor in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth, labor time ceases and must cease to be its measure, and hence exchange value [must cease to be the measure] of use value. The *surplus labor of the mass* has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth, just as the *non-labor of the few*, for the development of the general powers of the human head. With that, production based on exchange value breaks down and the direct, material production process is stripped of the form of penury and antithesis.<sup>11</sup>

Much turns on the extent to which one takes this passage to be a description of contemporary capitalism. It would seem that interpreting what Marx says in the ‘Fragment’ as a straightforward description of the world we live and work in is problematic. In the era of global markets and transnational production chains, an era that sees computer programmers in the United States contributing to the production of the same commodities as miners in the Congo, it does not appear that “production based on exchange value” has “broken down” or that the “direct, material production process” has been “stripped of the form of penury and antithesis.” The impression of historical necessity conveyed by Marx’s phrase ‘*ceases and must cease*’ would seem to be at odds with the historical development of capitalism during the past decades. Capitalism quite obviously disposes of the means to prevent even the most dramatic productivity gains from leading directly into communism, which is the development Marx seems to foresee in the ‘Fragment’.<sup>12</sup>

What is one to make, then, of Marx’s remark that when “labor in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth, labor time ceases and must cease to be its measure” – a remark that would seem to amount to the claim that, given a certain level of technological development, the law of value becomes defunct? The common-sense response consists perhaps in pointing out that such a degree of technological development has not been achieved throughout the capitalist world economy, and perhaps never will be. While the forms of work proper to high-tech economic sectors such as those associated with computer software do indeed often reduce the worker to a mere ‘overseer’, the development of these high-tech sectors has coincided with a

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11 Marx (1973: 704-706).

12 The development of the semi-automated assembly line, of nuclear energy, genetically modified seeds, and Internet software all allowed for dramatic productivity gains, in the sense that they made forms of work previously required for the production of certain commodities expendable and increased the organic composition of capital (or decreased the relative magnitude of the wage bill with regard to investment in the means of production). None of these productivity gains led to the superation of capitalism. In fact, it does not take much imagination to recognize that at least one economic sector characterized by a high organic composition of capital and a strong reliance on “the general state of science” and “the progress of technology” – the nuclear sector – may herald for us a fate very different from communism.

proliferation of ‘low-tech’ work in other regions of the world. The two phenomena are also quite clearly related. As George Caffentzis wrote 26 years ago,

[...] an enormous amount of work must be produced and extracted from the Low sectors in order to be transformed to capital available for the High sector. In order to finance the new capitalist ‘utopia’ of ‘high-tech,’ venture-capital demanding industries in the energy, computer and genetic engineering areas, another capitalist ‘utopia’ must be created: a world of ‘labor intensive’, low waged, distracted and diffracted production. [...] In this juncture, as always in capitalism’s history, a leap in technology is financed out of the skins of the most technologically starved workers.<sup>13</sup>

If forms of ‘high-tech’ work have proliferated in parallel with forms of ‘low-tech’ work, and if this fact is to be explained economically, then the theory of value developed by Marx in the first volume of *Capital* presents itself as a relatively promising explanatory model (in the sense that the theory suggests entrepreneurs have an interest in workers not becoming mere ‘overseers’, but expending the greatest possible amount of labor-power). The ambivalent or multifaceted nature of global capitalism’s development also raises questions about the accuracy of the theories developed by Negri on the basis of Marx’s ‘Fragment’. As will be seen below, Negri argues that the historical tendency of capitalist development is that of replacing low-tech work with the scientific or ‘immaterial’ labor alluded to in the ‘Fragment’. It is on the basis of this assumption that Negri argues for the obsolescence of the law of value. But if the ‘High’ and the ‘Low’ sectors are actually expanding in concert, and if they are doing so for precise economic reasons related to the production and transfer of value, then Negri’s claims about capitalism’s historical tendency only tell half the story. His invocation of the concept of the historical tendency also begins to resemble an argumentative backdoor – one that allows him to dismiss those aspects of reality that don’t fit his theoretical model by suggesting they will soon disappear anyway.<sup>14</sup>

## Real Subsumption: The Post-Operaista Account

The stage of capitalist development Marx characterizes as that of the ‘real subsumption of labor under capital’ is the most advanced to have been described by him. As indicated above, some statements by Marx read as if real subsumption could be followed only by communism. Much of Negri’s recent work exploits this feature of Marx’s writing by identifying real subsumption with the present and suggesting that the superation of capitalism is imminent.<sup>15</sup> Negri and other theorists with an *Operaista*

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13 George Caffentzis (1992: 249).

14 While it is not explicitly invoked in the texts discussed below, the concept of the historical tendency is one Negri has been fond of referring to throughout his work. See for example Antonio Negri (1997) ‘Crisi dello Stato-piano’, now in: *I libri del rogo*, Rome: DeriveApprodi, p. 23-70 and p. 48-52. Arguably, Negri’s invocation of the concept often betrays a desire to open such an argumentative backdoor.

15 See for example Antonio Negri (1996) ‘Constituent Republic’, in Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (eds.) *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 213-222. In Marxist literature, the stage of real subsumption has been identified with a variety of historical periods, including the first industrial revolution, the years before the First World War (which saw the introduction of the assembly line), and today’s transition to a post-Fordist economic

background take the description of real subsumption offered in the 'Fragment on Machines' to be a description of contemporary capitalism and claim that the law of value is now "completely bankrupt."<sup>16</sup> They argue that the surge in productivity that occurred in Western nations during the 1960s and 1970s has resulted in capital being "pushed *beyond value*", such that a "radical revaluation of labor" has brought with it the "suppression of the law of value."<sup>17</sup>

Before examining how Negri supports such claims, it may be worth stressing what exactly the obsolescence of the law of value would entail. At least two things would be the case. Firstly, there would no longer be any relationship between a commodity's exchange value and the labor-power expended to produce that commodity. Secondly, there would no longer be any relationship between the value of a worker's labor-power (also a commodity) and the reproductive costs of that labor-power.<sup>18</sup> The first of these two states of affairs would mean that – in the absence of a measure of value that could substitute for the one provided by the expense of labor-power in Marx's theory – commodities could no longer be said to have exchange value at all. In other words, commodities (including labor-power itself) would no longer be commensurable. They would exist only as use values, not as exchange values, and could not be brought to market.

The second of these two states of affairs (the absence of any correlation between the value of a worker's labor-power and its reproductive costs) would also have at least one significant consequence. It would entail that there is no longer any sensible distinction between necessary labor and surplus labor. This in turn would make it impossible to speak of exploitation in the Marxian sense (since for Marx exploitation consists precisely in the existence of surplus labor).

Of course, post-*Operaista* theorists such as Negri are not denying the existence of the market or of exploitation. They do argue, however, that the commensurability of commodities is not so much reproduced economically as enforced politically, through the authority of nation-states and transnational capitalist institutions. On this view, any attempt at formulating quantitative, value-based explanations for the development of the economy is simply behind the times. If the wealth produced during the era of real subsumption escapes determination by the law of value (indeed, all measure), then

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regime (or even a 'post-industrial' society and a 'postmodern' culture). As noted, Negri chooses the latter option. Marx's use of the term 'real subsumption' strongly suggests he was thinking of the development first of manufacture and then of the factory system in England. On the basis of what was said above about the concept of the historical tendency, one could argue that 'real subsumption' in some parts of the world co-exists with 'formal subsumption' in others.

16 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (1994) *Labor of Dionysos: A Critique of the State-Form*. Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 10.

17 Mario Montano (1992) 'Notes on the International Crisis', in Midnight Notes Collective (eds.) *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War 1973-1992*. Brooklyn NY: Autonomedia, 115-142.

18 Here, I assume Marx is correct in characterizing labor-power as a commodity, even though this has become a controversial issue. See for example Ingeborg Dummer (1997) *Die Arbeitskraft – Eine Ware? Eine werttheoretische Betrachtung*. Hamburg: VSA.

quantitative explanations of capitalism in terms of value transfers are simply of no interest.<sup>19</sup>

The concepts of labor and exploitation used in the work of post-*Operaista* theorists such as Negri abandon every attempt at quantitative determination. For example, they break with Marx in that they no longer speak of surplus labor (a quantitative concept). As will be seen below, Negri tends towards collapsing distinctions such as that between necessary labor and surplus labor. The distinctions between work and non-work, and between production and reproduction, are given much the same treatment by him. The result is a dramatically enlarged concept of labor, one that includes all forms of human activity.<sup>20</sup>

Another Marxian distinction Negri and other post-*Operaista* theorists have little patience with is that between productive and unproductive labor.<sup>21</sup> According to Paolo Virno, the proliferation of forms of ‘immaterial’ and ‘affective’ labor (or what most economists would call the expansion of the service sector) entails the obsolescence of this distinction.<sup>22</sup> At one point in his argument, Virno accuses Marx of mistakenly dismissing those forms of service work that don’t result in a tangible and lasting product (such as an artistic performance, the care work of a nurse, or the lecturing activity of a university professor) as unproductive and hence irrelevant to the mechanisms of capital accumulation.<sup>23</sup> While a cursory reading of some Marxian statements on productive and unproductive work could lead one to agree with Virno, Marx does explicitly note, in *Capital*, that a worker does not necessarily have to directly produce a tangible and

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19 As George Caffentzis puts it: “If value is beyond measure [...], then either Negri’s and Hardt’s ideal anti-capitalist theory is a self-proclaimed failure at quantitative explanation or the very task of quantitative explanation is to be rejected because its object, postmodern capitalism, is lacking any feature worth measuring” (2005: 99). In his essay, Caffentzis goes on to elaborate usefully on how many aspects of contemporary capitalism are in fact very much in need of quantitative explanation. See Caffentzis (2005: 100-104).

20 Caffentzis (2005) describes this as a collapsing of the Aristotelian distinction between labor and action. He rightly emphasizes that such a theoretical move constitutes a radical departure from Marx, and especially from the latter’s attention to the quantitative aspects of economic interaction. Caffentzis writes that what Negri describes as labor “does not seem to refer to what billions of people across the planet do every day under the surveillance of bosses vitally concerned about *how much time* the workers are at the job and *how well they do it again and again*” (2005: 97, emphasis in original). See also Cleaver (2005: 121-122). This second passage convincingly demonstrates that many people’s lives can still be quite accurately described using a more traditional Marxian concept of work.

21 For Marx, and as explained by him in Chapter 14 of the first volume of *Capital*, productive work is work that is directly productive of surplus value, or work that is performed in exchange for a wage expended by the capitalist for the purpose of generating an exchange value greater than that of the original investment. It follows from this definition that while all productive workers are waged workers, not all waged workers are productive workers. In *Theories of Surplus Value*, Marx considers workers whose activities are merely incidental to the creation of economic value, such as factory superintendents, unproductive. See Karl Marx (1972) *Theories of Surplus Value*, Part 3. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 505.

22 Paolo Virno (1994) ‘Virtuosismo e rivoluzione’, in Paolo Virno, *Mondanità: l’idea di mondo tra esperienza sensibile e sfera pubblica*. Rome: Manifestolibri, 87-119; trans Ed Emery ‘Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus’, in Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (1996), 189-210.

23 Paolo Virno (1994: 90-93).

lasting product in order to be a productive worker, especially once capitalism has reached a certain level of development, characterized by a strong division of labor.<sup>24</sup> Virno's argument rests on the widespread observation that capitalism is rendering more and more formerly 'unproductive' activities 'productive' in the sense that it is re-organizing them in accordance with the exigencies of capital accumulation. It is not clear, however, that noting this fact obliges one to completely abandon the distinction between productive and unproductive labor. Such a theoretical move may be overhasty.<sup>25</sup>

Negri's penchant for dismissing central components of Marx's theoretical model is no less pronounced than Virno's. This is especially obvious in the case of the arguments Negri presents to demonstrate the obsolescence of the law of value. It is worth considering two of these arguments in greater detail. I will call them 'the argument from the qualitative transformations of labor' and 'the argument from substance and measure'. As will become clear, the two really converge so as to make up a single theoretical move. Distinguishing between the two arguments and discussing them consecutively is nonetheless helpful for understanding how they operate.

### **Writing Off the Law of Value (1): The Argument from the Qualitative Transformations of Labor**

Negri distinguishes two functions of the law of value: that of establishing the commensurability not just of different commodities, but also of various economic sectors, and that of registering the value of labor-power.<sup>26</sup> In the first case, the law of value is a device for understanding transfers of value on the macroeconomic level. In the second case, which Negri is rightly more interested in, the law of value registers the magnitude of necessary labor and its relation to surplus labor. In other words, it registers the value of labor-power, thereby providing an index of the relations of power between workers and entrepreneurs.<sup>27</sup>

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24 See Marx (1976: 643-644): "With the progressive accentuation of the co-operative character of the labour process, there necessarily occurs a progressive extension of the concept of productive labour, and of the concept of the bearer of that labour, the productive worker. In order to work productively, it is no longer necessary for the individual worker himself to put his hand to the object; it is sufficient for him to be an organ of the collective labourer, and to perform any one of its subordinate functions." This passage suggests that the activity of the factory superintendent can eventually become productive work (perhaps when 'security' firms organize such activity as a specific form of capitalist exploitation). As Marx points out elsewhere, what matters is not the specific content of the work activity but its place within "the social relations of production" (Karl Marx (1969) *Theories of Surplus Value*, Part I. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 157).

25 For a discussion of the distinction between productive and unproductive work in the context of contemporary economic developments, see David Harvie (2005) 'All Labour Produces Value For Capital And We All Struggle Against Value', *The Commoner*, 10: 132-171. While Harvie's conclusions are in some ways unsatisfactory, he poses the problem excellently and with close attention to Marx's statements on the matter.

26 Antonio Negri (1992) 'Valeur travail: crise et problèmes de reconstruction dans le post-moderne', *Futur Antérieur*, 10: 30-36. I take this opportunity to thank Antonella Corsani for drawing my attention to this article, arguably the most comprehensive formulation of Negri's position on the law of value.

27 Antonio Negri (1992: 32).

Having distinguished between these two functions of the law of value, Negri points out there is a relationship between them: When labor militancy shifts the proportion of necessary labor to surplus labor in favor of the former, entrepreneurs are constrained to respond by means of economic restructuring, both within single enterprises and on the macroeconomic level. Negri follows Marx in identifying increases in the organic composition of capital as a typical feature of such restructuring. He also follows Marx in identifying these increases in organic composition with productivity gains – that is, with the transition from formal to real subsumption, or from absolute to relative surplus value.

Negri closes his argument by claiming these productivity gains are now so great that the law of value has become obsolete, or that value can no longer be measured at all. He relates this alleged breakdown of the law of value to the aggravation of what he identifies as three of capitalism's 'internal contradictions' – the opposition between simple labor and complex labor, the opposition between productive and unproductive labor, and the impossibility of reducing scientific labor to either simple labor or cooperation.<sup>28</sup> In short, Negri argues that the obsolescence of the law of value results from labor having been qualitatively transformed. It has become ever more complex, ever more productive, and ever more immaterial. Each of these three 'contradictions' merits closer consideration.

'Complex labor' is the Marxian term for what is otherwise referred to as 'qualified labor'. In traditional Marxist theory, the labor-power of an engineer is considered an example of complex labor in the sense that its production and reproduction involve not just the costs associated with physical survival and recreation (food and shelter), but also those associated with education, training, and the various activities that allow a brain worker to keep abreast with developments in his or her field. The labor of such a worker is 'complex' with regard to the 'simple' labor of an assembly line worker in the sense that one needs to multiply the value of the latter by a coefficient in order to arrive at the value of the former. That the coefficient is a variable one – or that it is negotiable – makes no significant difference to this general state of affairs. The coefficient may change over time, but it is fixed for the purpose of every specific set of wage agreements.

The 'contradiction' Negri identifies between simple and complex labor turns out to be little more than indignation at the often gratuitous manner in which the coefficient is determined. As far as I can see, this is the only way of reading Negri's claim that complex labor 'cannot' be reduced to simple labor without making that claim counterfactual.<sup>29</sup> One can perhaps say that the reduction cannot be undertaken in the sense that there is something disrespectful or perhaps even scandalous in doing so. But this is to say no more than that the purely quantitative approach to value that is proper to capitalism, and which finds expression in the law of value, is unpalatable to some of us. The fact is that a precise quantitative relationship between the value of simple and complex labor is established every time an entrepreneur distinguishes between

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28 *Ibid.*

29 *Ibid.*

‘qualified’ and ‘unqualified’ (or ‘less qualified’) workers, decides to pay them different wages, and determines the exact magnitude of those wages.

Negri goes on to note that there often seems to be a discrepancy between the value of qualified labor and the value of its products, which is to say no more than that one brain worker’s bright idea can provide an entrepreneur with an amount of surplus value out of all proportion to the value of that brain worker’s labor-power (as expressed in his or her wage).<sup>30</sup> But this simply means that capital uses workers to produce value greater than the exchange value of their labor-power. This phenomenon is in no way an example of the law of value breaking down. It is rather an example of how the law of value functions – by recognizing only the exchange value of labor-power (its reproductive costs, which are variable over time, but fixed whenever an employment contract is signed) and thereby allowing the entrepreneur to appropriate everything that is produced by that labor-power and exceeds its exchange value. To point out that this occurs is simply to recognize the existence of surplus value, or of exploitation. It is to confirm the law of value, rather than to diagnose its obsolescence.

The ‘contradiction’ Negri identifies between productive and unproductive labor amounts to the observation that, under the conditions of production proper to real subsumption, productive labor tends to be organized in a way that involves a high degree of cooperation between workers. Negri notes that the entrepreneur remunerates single workers for their labor-power but appropriates free of charge the additional value produced by the benefits of cooperation. In other words, Negri points out that the overall value produced by cooperating workers exceeds the aggregate of the values they would produce individually if they did not cooperate.<sup>31</sup> Much the same observation can be found in Marx’s discussion of manufacture (in Chapter 12 of the first volume of *Capital*). In other words, the phenomenon it addresses is not specific to post-Fordist society. Here as in his remarks on complex labor, Negri does no more than indicate the existence of what traditional Marxist theory calls ‘surplus value’. There is nothing in these remarks to warrant more than indignation over the persistent functioning of the law of value. In no way does Negri demonstrate that this law has become obsolete.

As for the claim that scientific labor is not reducible to either simple labor or cooperation, it does no more than re-state the same unsatisfactory argument in different terms. Negri invokes the concept of ‘creativity’ to address the often glaring discrepancy between the value an entrepreneur obtains from the scientific discoveries of his or her intellectual workers and the wages of those workers. Negri sees the value of such scientific discoveries as the product of an achievement that can never be fully explained in terms of the original investment (the wage bill and the means of production), just as it cannot be reduced to the conditions of production (cooperation).<sup>32</sup> While this is well and good, the fact remains that the entrepreneur is simply not interested in the nature of such creative achievement, but only in its capacity to yield surplus value. Whatever wonders and mysteries human creativity may allude to, what the entrepreneur cares about is the balance sheet.

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30 *Ibid.*

31 Antonio Negri (1992: 32-33).

32 Antonio Negri (1992: 33).

## Writing Off the Law of Value (2): The Argument from Substance and Measure

Negri's second argument for the obsolescence of the law of value has a considerably more scholastic flavor. It is premised on his idiosyncratic interpretation of Marx's concept of real subsumption. As noted above, Negri posits that the transition to real subsumption occurred more recently than is often assumed. According to Negri, this transition was brought about by the labor struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. The socio-economic order that emerged in the wake of these struggles is identified by him not just as post-Fordist, but also as 'post-industrial' and 'postmodern'.<sup>33</sup>

The argument from substance and measure involves two claims that have struck many readers as both counterintuitive and counterfactual, where their sometimes cryptic character has not simply elicited puzzlement and frustration. In what follows, I will suggest several ways of understanding these claims before examining the assumptions that appear to underlie them.

The first claim is that, during the present era of real subsumption, all use value has been reduced to exchange value, or subsumed by capital.<sup>34</sup> One way of understanding this claim is by thinking of how the privatization of communally owned land has led to the use values contained in that land (such as natural resources) becoming commodities. Negri would then be arguing that this process has developed as far as possible.<sup>35</sup> In fact, Negri seems to be thinking not of this phenomenon, but rather of the use value of labor-power. His claim that all use value has been reduced to exchange value appears to be the claim that labor-power has become a commodity everywhere in the world, or that the capitalist conception of labor-power as a commodity has triumphed over every other conception of labor-power.<sup>36</sup>

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33 As George Caffentzis writes: "This conceptual move is attractive, but it certainly does not fit Marx's historical assumptions. For Marx real subsumption was not a thing of the 'future,' it was fully present in his time" (2005: 104).

34 Antonio Negri (1992: 34).

35 Interpreted in such a way, the claim is obviously counterfactual. For it too be true, it would not be enough for all land to have been commodified. The same would have to be true of water and air space, perhaps even of outer space. That such processes of commodification are in fact occurring today (although they are far from having been completed) is one reason why Negri's argument appeals to many readers. Negri's occasional invocation of Michel Foucault's concept of 'biopolitics' caters to this fascination with processes of commodification, but it remains purely suggestive and never opens itself to empirical verification.

36 Antonio Negri (1992: 34). It is worth stressing that this claim is quite obviously not true of housework, which is not remunerated and therefore not a commodity. See Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (1972) *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community*. Bristol: Falling Wall Press; the various contributions to the 1975 anthology *All Work And No Pay: Women, Housework, and the Wages Due*, edited by the Power of Women Collective. Bristol: Falling Wall Press; and Silvia Federici (1975) *Wages Against Housework*. Bristol: Falling Wall Press. On the relationship between housework and the exploitation of women in the Third World, see Maria Mies (1986) *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*. London: Zed Books; and, in German, Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, Maria Mies, and Claudia von Werlhof (1992) *Frauen, die letzte Kolonie. Zur Hausfrauisierung der Arbeit*. Zürich: Rotpunkt (originally published in 1983).

The second claim involved in Negri's argument is that all time has become productive for capital. To say this is to say considerably more than that the social workday has been extended as far as possible, if one assumes that the social workday continues to be divided into a period of necessary labor and one of surplus labor. By definition, necessary labor is not productive for capital. It does not involve the production of surplus value and is therefore unproductive in the Marxian sense.

Nor is Negri simply pointing out that someone is always performing surplus labor, even if not everyone is doing so all the time. Negri's claim is far more radical. It is the claim that every human being is productive for the entire duration of their life time. The only way of making this claim hold up is by assuming that there is no longer any genuine distinction between work and non-work, production and reproduction, necessary labor and surplus labor. This may in fact be what the first of Negri's two claims is meant to establish. If one posits that non-work, reproductive work, and necessary labor belong to the domain of use value, rather than to that of exchange value, then the abolition of every distinction between use value and exchange value would seem to entail that non-work has become work, that reproduction has become production *tout court*, and that necessary labor has become surplus labor – in short, that life time and production time fully coincide.

It seems to me that the claim does not hold up logically. More precisely, it renders nonsensical the very concepts by means of which it is formulated. The distinction between production and reproduction is indeed in many ways tenuous (a problem feminist theory has devoted considerable attention to).<sup>37</sup> As for the concepts of necessary labor and surplus labor, however, it ought to be obvious that they only make sense for as long as they are thought of as mutually exclusive. The same is obviously true of the concepts of work and non-work.<sup>38</sup> To continue using these concepts while claiming that the distinction between them has collapsed is to entangle oneself in contradictions.

From his claim that life time and production time fully coincide, Negri derives the conclusion that the law of value is defunct.<sup>39</sup> He appears to mean that where life time and production time coincide, it becomes pointless to measure one in relation to the other. But not only is this not quite the same as saying that such measurement has

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37 In addition to the works cited in the previous footnote, see Wally Secombe (1973), 'The Housewife and her Labor under Capitalism', *New Left Review* 83 (1973), p. 3-22; Christine Delphy (1977), *Close to Home: A Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression*, Harvard MA: University of Massachusetts Press. In German, see Gisela Bock and Barbara Duden (1977), 'Arbeit aus Liebe – Liebe als Arbeit. Zur Entstehung der Hausarbeit im Kapitalismus', in *Frauen und Wissenschaft. Beiträge zur Berliner Sommeruniversität für Frauen, Juli 1976*. Berlin: Courage, 118-199; and Andrea Joosten (1980) *Mann, Marx spricht nicht über Hausarbeit*, Berlin: AHDE. On the useful notion of interconnected productive and reproductive cycles, see Harry Cleaver (1979) *Reading Capital Politically*, Brighton: Harvester Press, 123.

38 If there is such a thing as a physiological limit to the extension of the workday, as Marx always assumed, then it would seem there also has to be a valid distinction between work and non-work. The problem is of course at least partly one of definitions. Much of what Negri considers work would have been considered non-work by Marx.

39 Antonio Negri (1992: 34). This passage is virtually identical with another in Antonio Negri (1997) *La costituzione del tempo*. Rome: Manifestolibri, 30-31.

become impossible,<sup>40</sup> there also seems to be an underhanded argumentative move being made here, since the Marxian understanding of the law of value as a device for measuring the value of labor-power does not involve measuring life time and production time in relation to one another at all. It involves a distinction between necessary and surplus labor, both of which belong to production time. Life time is a variable that never enters the formula.

Negri provides an alternative formulation of his claim concerning the identity of life time and production time when he says that ‘substance’ (that which is being measured) and ‘measure’ (that which is used to measure) fully coincide. Negri tends to identify life time (substance) with use value and the Hegelian concept of quality, whereas he identifies production time (measure) with exchange value and quantity – in order then to argue that their having become identical renders the law of value obsolete.<sup>41</sup>

There are many objections that could be raised at this point. One could take issue, for example, with Negri’s unwillingness to entertain the possibility that there may be a logically valid distinction between terms with an identical referent. This unwillingness is all the more puzzling in that it comes from someone who is at least partially reasoning in Marxist terms. After all, a central category of Marxist theory, that of the commodity, refers precisely to an object that has both a qualitative and a quantitative aspect (use value and exchange value).<sup>42</sup> In Negri’s work, that use value has become identical with exchange value often seems to mean that use value has all but disappeared, whereas the Marxian concept of the commodity is precisely the concept of something that has use value and exchange value (quality and quantity) at one and the same time.

It seems that what is really at stake here is not so much Marx’s critique of political economy as Negri’s quarrel with the philosophy of Hegel, and more specifically with the Hegelian concept of dialectics. Negri seldom misses an opportunity to declare himself an enemy of dialectical thought, the latter being understood by him as a philosophical method that operates by exploring the co-implication of logically opposed concepts in order to posit their ultimate reconciliation.<sup>43</sup> Harry Cleaver and others have

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40 All that has happened is that any statement positing a relationship between life time and production time must necessarily have become tautological, just as the relationship between the expressions ‘one day’ and ‘24 hours’ cannot be expressed other than tautologically (even though one can still draw a logical or linguistic distinction between ‘one day’ and ‘24 hours’).

41 Negri’s terminology alludes to that used by Marx in the opening chapter of *Capital*. There, Marx draws a distinction between labor as the substance of value (*Wertschranz*) and labor time as the measure or magnitude of value (*Wertma*). For a useful discussion of this passage, see Cleaver (1979: 87-127). Like Cleaver’s entire book, his commentary illustrates how this and other Marxian distinctions can be put to a more rigorous and empirically verifiable use than that opted for by Negri. In Negri’s work, *Wertma* becomes ‘measure’ (*misura* in Italian), whereas Cleaver speaks of ‘magnitude.’ Much of the confusion surrounding Negri’s claims on the law of value could conceivably be dealt with by a closer look at this terminological slippage, one of whose more banal origins may simply lie in divergent translations of Marx.

42 See Cleaver (1979: 89-99).

43 Negri’s quarrel with the dialectic strongly informs much of his work, in particular his readings of Spinoza and Leopardi. These are most consistently developed in Antonio Negri (1981) *L’anomalia selvaggia. Saggio su potere e potenza in Baruch Spinoza*. Milan: Feltrinelli; trans. as Antonio Negri

pointed out that many of the oppositions found in Marxist theory – such as the one between use value and exchange value and the one between quality and quantity – can be understood as dialectical oppositions.<sup>44</sup> Negri's claim on the obsolescence of the law of value may therefore be no more than one further example of his desire to establish that Hegelian 'dialectics is over.'<sup>45</sup> If the argument from substance and measure is often a source of confusion and bewilderment to those seeking to make sense of exploitation today, this may be because it has more to do with Negri's long-standing engagement with Hegel – and, more specifically, with Hegel's dialectical method as developed in the *Logic* – than with the critique of political economy.

One final remark on the argument from substance and measure: after making the claims discussed above, Negri goes on to state that exploitation continues to exist even though the law of value can no longer measure it. There is an obvious contradiction here, at least if one adopts Marx's usage of the term 'exploitation' as synonymous with 'extraction of surplus labor'. The existence of surplus labor can only be verified where it has been established that the length of the workday exceeds the duration of time during which necessary labor is performed. If this duration of time can be determined, then the law of value has not ceased functioning.

## Doing the Math: Work and Non-Work in the Social Factory

The two arguments just surveyed are the most comprehensive arguments for the obsolescence of the law of value under post-Fordism that I have been able to find anywhere in Negri's work, or in that of other post-*Operaista* theorists associated with Negri, including the work produced by the various theorists of 'immaterial' or 'affective' labor. Often, the obsolescence of the law of value is simply stated by these theorists as if it were an obvious fact, without any attempt at a logical or empirical demonstration being made.

I hope to have shown why Negri's arguments are at best problematic. Many general criticisms of Negri's style of argument could still be made, especially with regard to his inclination to develop Marxian concepts to the point where they no longer function in the way intended by Marx – an inclination that often seems to involve the risk of losing sight of empirical reality.

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(1991) *The Savage Anomaly*, trans. Michael Hardt, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press; and Antonio Negri (1987) *Lenta ginestra. Saggio sull'ontologia di Giacomo Leopardi*. Milan: SugarCo. See also Antonio Negri (1977) 'Il lavoro nella Costituzione', in Antonio Negri, *La forma Stato: per la critica dell'economia politica della Costituzione*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 27-110 (especially p. 110).

44 Cleaver (1979: 87-173). While Cleaver is wary of overly 'dialectical' interpretations of Marx (see p. 31-32), others have insisted very strongly on the importance of the Hegelian dialectic for Marx's theory. See for example Res Strehle (1991) *Kapital und Krise. Einführung in die politische Ökonomie*. Berlin and Göttingen: Schwarze Risse / Rote Straße, 7-21.

45 Antonio Negri (1977: 110).

It is worth asking just why Negri's theory remains so attractive to many readers. My own view is that – like much of the discourse of 'immaterial' labor – Negri's theory contains elements that are ideologically compatible with contemporary regimes of exploitation and may help stabilize those regimes. It offers an account of contemporary capitalism that certain relatively privileged sectors of the world's working population can recognize themselves in, albeit in a manner that leads them to take an affirmative stance towards their own exposure to and complicity in exploitation. This would seem to be the case for those segments of the metropolitan middle classes to whom the rhetoric of 'immaterial labor' is largely addressed. They include students and professional academics, artists, freelancers, and others to whom the association of work with creativity and claims concerning the (tendential or actual) identification of life time and production time are not entirely implausible. While these workers are certainly not privileged in terms of their conditions of employment (many work without a proper contract and lack possibilities for collective organization available in other sectors of the economy), their conditions of work are often quite comfortable. Many of them are also able to compensate for the economic risks involved in their status on the labor market by drawing on financial assets such as parental support or inheritances.

The status of these workers within the capitalist world economy is arguably that of an elite or even a 'worker aristocracy'. I will leave aside the – important – question of what function this elite serves in a process of economic globalization that entails racist violence, open state repression, famine, poverty, and war for much of humanity. Suffice it to point out that groups such as the 'Immaterial Workers of the World' are doing themselves no favors by throwing overboard the distinction between work and non-work.<sup>46</sup> They are themselves increasingly becoming the object of entrepreneurial strategies that involve the (often surreptitious) extension of the social workday and the delegation of formerly waged labor into the area of 'free time'.<sup>47</sup> By celebrating the new forms of underpaid or unremunerated work they perform as examples of an unleashed 'creativity' that just happens to be hampered by 'parasitic' mechanisms of capitalist valorization, a substantial part of Negri's readership is waving today's socio-economic realities goodbye about as vigorously as those who wax eloquent on how post-Fordism's "systematic application of technico-scientific knowledge to production" has led to "a great variety of human activity" being "thrown into the abyss of non-work."<sup>48</sup>

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46 'Immaterial Workers of the World' was the name of an Italian group of activists strongly influenced by Negri's theories. Their founding document was published (and extensively discussed, including by Negri himself) in *DeriveApprodi*, 18 (1999) p. 30-39.

47 Internet technology and microelectronics in general have allowed for delegating many activities formerly recognized as work (and remunerated) into the domain of 'free time' – from obtaining product information to acquiring computer skills. The various forms of 'self-service' (at gas stations and bank autoteller machines, for example) are also part of this trend. On the extension of the social workday under post-Fordism, see especially Sergio Bologna (1996) 'Durée du travail et post-fordisme', *Futur Antérieur*, 35/36, 125-138. Apart from Bologna, one of the few Italian theorists who has consistently refused to gloss over the fact that the technological innovations characteristic of post-Fordism lead to an extension of the social workday is Christian Marazzi. See Christian Marazzi (1999) *Il posto dei calzini: la svolta linguistica dell'economia e i suoi effetti sulla politica*. Turin: Boringhieri, 68 (where this fact is explicitly noted).

48 Franco Piperno (1996) 'Technological and Sentimental Education', trans. Paul Colilli, in Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (eds.) *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*. Minneapolis MN:

In other words, it may simply not be wise to let distinctions such as the one between necessary labor and surplus labor disappear into the obscurity that often surrounds Negri's concept of real subsumption. It is worth asking whether a militant practice adequate to today's forms of exploitation does not require something very different – namely, an empirically grounded effort at re-locating the ever more unpredictably shifting lines between necessary labor and surplus labor and, more generally, between work and non-work. Such an effort would obviously require one to resist the temptation to abandon these conceptual oppositions. (Whether or not one wants to think of the relationship between them as 'dialectical' would appear to be an entirely secondary issue.)

There is much to suggest that the most important prerequisite for developing an adequate approach to post-Fordist exploitation consists in a willingness to take seriously the fact that entrepreneurs continue to measure, compare, and remunerate labor-power in terms of clearly defined units of time.<sup>49</sup> Recognizing this means recognizing that the law of value is anything but defunct when it comes to issues as quotidian – and as important – as paying one's rent, obtaining one's means of subsistence, and conquering for oneself and others a measure of individual and collective autonomy that allows for combating the wage relation and the mechanisms of exploitation inherent in it. Such an approach requires one to draw the line between work and non-work without being fooled by the many ways in which entrepreneurs have succeeded in disguising work as non-work, often by refusing to remunerate it.<sup>50</sup>

This is not to say that there are no elements of *Operaista* theory – including several contributed by Negri – that could not prove useful in the elaboration of new militant strategies adequate to post-Fordism. It seems to me that one such element consists in the

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University of Minnesota Press, 122-130. Piperno does have the good sense to add to his paraphrase of Marx's 'Fragment on Machines' that the large-scale integration of "technico-scientific knowledge" into the productive process has in fact not "[made] the measurement of wealth in terms of human labor time completely impossible", since working hours quite obviously "continue to govern industrial relations and the distribution of income" (*ibid.*). Yet the developments analyzed by authors such as Bologna – most importantly, the delegation of activities formerly recognized as work into the domain of 'free time' – are completely ignored by Piperno.

49 As George Caffentzis writes: "Any reading of the financial press and economic policy makers' positions [sic] statements would give one the impression that the Law of Value, as usually understood, is a truism. Surely what is the prescription for any economic problem but more discipline of labor, more labor flexibility and productivity, a reduction of labor costs, and so on? This is so obvious one must be incredulous in hearing the snide comments academic economists make about the law of value" (2005: 106).

50 Clearly, some sense of these exigencies has survived in the theoretical positions elaborated by Negri and his colleagues – witness the persistency with which they return to the demand for a basic or guaranteed income. See especially Andrea Fumagalli (1999) 'Dodici tesi sul reddito di cittadinanza', in Andrea Fumagalli and Maurizio Lazzarato (eds.) *Tute bianche. Disoccupazione di masse e reddito di cittadinanza*. Rome: DeriveApprodi, 13-44; and Lanfranco Caminiti, Agostino Mantegna, and Andrea Tiddi (1999) 'Reddito garantito e lavoro immateriale', *DeriveApprodi*, 18: 82-84. Notwithstanding their claims about the newly 'immeasurable' character of labor-power's value, Negri and his colleagues seem quite happy to give post-Fordist entrepreneurs and the state institutions catering to their interests a helping hand when it comes to finding new ways of fixing that value in an effective and socially pacifying manner. Arguably, this is precisely what the demand for a basic income amounts to.

series of reflections that have developed out of the observation that exploitation does not take place at the workplace alone, and that it involves a greater number of social agents than those usually identified with the categories 'worker' and 'entrepreneur'. I am thinking especially of reflections around what has come to be called the 'social factory'.<sup>51</sup> This concept should not be interpreted as a justification for Negri's claims about the 'immeasurable' character of labor productivity today, but rather as a tool for understanding a Taylorization of social interaction that finds expression throughout our everyday experience, both at the workplace and beyond.<sup>52</sup> Feminist analyses of unremunerated reproductive work and the ways in which it lowers the value of labor-power (that is, its cost to entrepreneurs) by reducing the relative magnitude of necessary work within the immediate production process are highly relevant to the analysis of this development.<sup>53</sup> Feminist and Marxist analyses of the ways in which the welfare state and the tax measures associated with it reduce the cost of labor-power for entrepreneurs also merit reconsideration in this context.<sup>54</sup>

Another strand of the *Operaista* tradition that deserves to be taken up today is the one that examines the ways in which the relations of production are contained within the means of production, as Raniero Panzieri was fond of saying.<sup>55</sup> In his reflections on technology, Panzieri always stressed its capitalist birthmark, or its functionality for capitalist valorization – the fact that no technological innovation is ever economically or politically neutral. Such reflections might provide a useful antidote to the enthusiasm about contemporary information technology (and, more specifically, the Internet) that many theorists and activists still do not seem to have freed themselves of. A number of post-*Operaista* authors write as if the latest developments in information technology had created nothing less than the last missing prerequisites for communism, ruminating amply on what they take to be the emergence of new transnational communities of

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51 The concept of the social factory seems to have originated in the Italian feminist movement, although it was quickly taken up by theorists in the United States, Germany, and elsewhere. For early formulations, see Dalla Costa and James (1972: 32-42); and Cleveland Modern Times Group (1976) 'The Social Factory', *Falling Wall Review*, 5: 1-7. See also Cleaver (1979: 26-27, 57-59 and 122-23).

52 The development of home economics is perhaps the classic example of the Taylorization of reproduction. See Harry Cleaver (1976: 121-23) and Bock and Duden (1977). Another area where such Taylorization has occurred is urban planning. See Gisela Schmidt (1980) 'Entwicklung einer Strategie der Gewalt – Einkaufszentrum und Fußgängerzone', *Autonomie. Materialien gegen die Fabrikgesellschaft. Neue Folge*, 3: 33-42; Detlef Hartmann (1980) 'Zerstörung und Enteignung unseres Alltags', *Autonomie. Materialien gegen die Fabrikgesellschaft. Neue Folge*, 3: 97-100; and Detlef Hartmann (1981) *Leben als Sabotage*. Tübingen: IVA, especially p. 68-77.

53 In addition to the feminist works already cited, and especially Joosten (1980), see Iona Bauer (1987), 'Frauenarbeit und kapitalistische Reproduktionsarbeit', *Autonomie. Materialien Gegen die Fabrikgesellschaft. Neue Folge*, 14: 147-214. This article develops an analysis of the 'real subsumption of reproductive work' whose importance for understanding contemporary forms of exploitation it would be difficult to overstate.

54 An unsurpassed account of the historical function of the welfare state is provided by Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward (1971) *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*. New York: Random House. See also James O'Connor (1973) *The Fiscal Crisis of the State*. New York: St. Martin's Press. In German, see especially Inge Hehr and Carola Möller (1985) 'Die Illusion vom Sozialstaat', *Beiträge zur feministischen Theorie und Praxis*, 13: 95-104.

55 See Raniero Panzieri (1994) 'Sull'uso capitalistico delle macchine nel neocapitalismo', *Spontaneità e organizzazione. Scritti scelti a cura di Stefano Merli*. Pisa: Serantini, 25-41.

workers. In doing so, these authors collapse their own concept of ‘communication’ – which often seems to have been taken directly from a manual of social engineering – with the Marxian concept of cooperation in a way that conveniently forgets all the ambiguity inherent in the latter.<sup>56</sup> Writing about Italy’s accelerated industrialization during the 1950s, Panzieri already recognized that capitalist cooperation always involves the atomization of the social workforce, especially when that cooperation develops in technologically sophisticated forms.<sup>57</sup> That contemporary information technology as it is being developed in the context of the ‘social factory’ may be an expression not of the liberation of work, but of its ever more efficient Taylorization (or subjection to the exigencies of capitalist valorization) is a possibility some Marxist theorists have unfortunately neglected during the past decades.<sup>58</sup>

Finally, it is worth stressing that taking up these various strands of the *Operaista* tradition and following them in the directions suggested is a project that cannot be carried out fruitfully without considerable self-criticism. In Italy, Germany, and elsewhere, the radical left has a history of developing putatively alternative forms of life and work, complete with their own elaborate theoretical baggage, whose reformist practice has turned out to be far more long-lived than the revolutionary rhetoric associated with it – where it hasn’t simply fed into the rightward shift that many capitalist nations have witnessed during the past decades. Programs of social transformation should always be able to stand up to the question of whether their net outcome will not be more useful to entrepreneurs than to workers.<sup>59</sup>

My own position, the reasons for which I hope to have made clear in the preceding pages, is that Negri’s arguments for the obsolescence of the law of value under post-Fordism may not be the kind the global workforce stands to benefit from. I feel that the same is true of the political strategies developed on the basis of Negri’s arguments, such as those involving calls for a guaranteed income. It seems to me that what is most alluring about Negri’s arguments is his suggestion that capitalist exploitation can be overcome without careful consideration of how categories such as those of work and non-work manifest themselves under today’s socio-economic conditions – the

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56 See for example Patrick Dieuaide (1996) ‘La crise du rapport salarial fordiste: une interprétation’, *Futur Antérieur*, 35/36: 139-155. Similar tendencies can be found in Antonio Negri’s recent work, perhaps most strikingly in Antonio Negri (2000) *Kairòs, Alma Venus, Multitudo. Nove lezioni impartite a me stesso*. Rome: Manifestolibri (see especially p. 65-121).

57 See Panzieri (1994). One of the few Italian theorists to critically analyze the forms of cooperation and atomization proper to post-Fordism is Andrea Tiddi. See for example Andrea Tiddi (1999) ‘Narciso in vetrina’, *DeriveApprodi*, 17: 41-49, and Andrea Tiddi (2002) ‘La metropoli dei precari’, *Posse: Mappa politiche della moltitudine*, 300-308.

58 The single most important exception I am familiar with is represented by Detlef Hartmann and the theorists associated with him. See especially Detlef Hartmann (1981) ‘Das Maß technologischer Gewalt’, in Detlef Hartmann, *Leben als Sabotage*. Tübingen: IVA, 49-51.

59 On the melancholy history of post-1968 left reformism in Germany, see especially Karl Heinz Roth (1979) ‘Die Geschäftsführer der Alternativbewegung’, in Karl Heinz Roth and Fritz Teufel, *Klaut sie! Selbstkritische Beiträge zur Krise der Linken und der Guerrilla*. Tübingen: IVA, 105-119. Roth’s article should be supplemented by an account of how women have often been the prime victims of left reformism. Such an account can be found, for example, in Gertrud Backes, Gisela Notz, and Barbara Stiegler (1983) ‘Sie nützen viel und kosten nichts’, *Beiträge zur feministischen Theorie und Praxis*, 9/10: 92-103.

suggestion that an adequate communist practice can be developed today without empirically examining phenomena such as the extension of the social workday and 'doing the math.' I want to venture the hypothesis that we have an interest in taking the categories developed in the Marxist critique of political economy more seriously than Negri seems to do, for the simple reason that if we don't 'do the math' ourselves, others will do it for us.

**the author**

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