



# ephemera: theory & politics in organization



# the politics of workers' inquiry



## **What is *ephemera*: theory & politics in organization?**

*ephemera* is an independent journal, founded in 2001. *ephemera* provides its content free of charge, and charges its readers only with free thought.

### **theory**

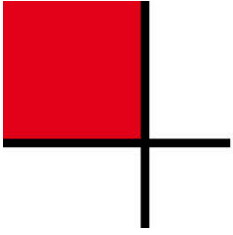
*ephemera* encourages contributions that explicitly engage with theoretical and conceptual understandings of organizational issues, organizational processes and organizational life. This does not preclude empirical studies or commentaries on contemporary issues, but such contributions consider how theory and practice intersect in these cases. We especially publish articles that apply or develop theoretical insights that are not part of the established canon of organization studies. *ephemera* counters the current hegemonization of social theory and operates at the borders of organization studies in that it continuously seeks to question what organization studies is and what it can become.

### **politics**

*ephemera* encourages the amplification of the political problematics of organization within academic debate, which today is being actively de-politized by the current organization of thought within and without universities and business schools. We welcome papers that engage the political in a variety of ways as required by the organizational forms being interrogated in a given instance.

### **organization**

Articles published in *ephemera* are concerned with theoretical and political aspects of organizations, organization and organizing. We refrain from imposing a narrow definition of organization, which would unnecessarily halt debate. Eager to avoid the charge of 'anything goes' however, we do invite our authors to state how their contributions connect to questions of organization and organizing, both theoretical and practical.



ephemera

*theory & politics in organization*

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## The politics of workers' inquiry

Joanna Figiel, Stevphen Shukaitis and Abe Walker

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Cover image: Jon McKenzie, "Professor Challenger theory tableau," 1992-98, mixed media.

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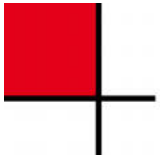
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## The politics of workers' inquiry

Joanna Figiel, Stevphen Shukaitis and Abe Walker

This special issue brings together a series of commentaries, intervention, and projects in various stages of completion, all centred on the theme of workers inquiry<sup>1</sup>. Workers' inquiry is an approach to and practice of knowledge production that seeks to understand the changing composition of labour and its potential for revolutionary social transformation. It is the practice of turning the tools of the social sciences into weapons of class struggle. Workers' inquiry seeks to map the continuing imposition of the class relation, not as a disinterested investigation, but rather to deepen and intensify social and political antagonisms.

While the pieces in this issue differ vastly in their approach, theoretical orientation, and political alignment, several common strains can be detailed. Consistent with our call for papers, the authors critically interrogate workers' inquiry rather than accept received knowledge and methodological tools as given. Of course, this is entirely consistent with workers' inquiry, which has always been an intensely self-critical practice. Indeed, the post-War Italian ferment from which workers' inquiry emerged consisted of a number of competing schools (*Quaderni Rossi*, *Classe Operaia*, *Potere Operaio*, *Lotta Continua*), each with its journals and allied forces, characterized more by antagonism rather than camaraderie. But if the pages of this special issue are any evidence, many of these debates are far from settled, and the contemporary social moment invokes still new questions.

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1 About half of the pieces that follow were presented in some form at *ephemera*'s 2013 annual conference, held 2-3 May at the University of Essex under the banner 'The politics of workers' inquiry', while the remaining pieces were solicited for this issue alone.

To provide some context, a bit of exposition covering the origins of workers inquiry may be necessary. Workers' inquiry developed in a context marked by rapid industrialization, mass migration, and the use of industrial sociology to discipline the working class. Workers' inquiry was formulated within autonomist movements as a sort of parallel sociology, one based on a radical re-reading of Marx (and Weber) against the politics of the communist party and the unions (Farris, 2011). While the practitioners of workers' inquiry were often professionally-trained academics – and especially sociologists – its proponents argued that their research differs in important ways from 'engaged' social science, and all varieties of industrial sociology, even if there are similarities. If bourgeois sociology sought to smooth over conflicts, and 'critical' sociology to expose these same conflicts, workers' inquiry took the contradictions of the labour process as a starting point and sought to draw out these antagonisms into the formation of new radical subjectivities.

Today we find ourselves at a moment when co-research, participatory action research, and other heterodox methods have been adopted by the academic mainstream, while managerial styles like TQM carry a faint echo of workers' inquiry. In the contemporary firm workers are already engaged in self-monitoring, peer interviews, and the creation of quasi-autonomous 'research' units, all sanctioned by management (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). Workers' inquiry is now part of the accepted social science repertoire: its techniques no longer seem dangerous, but familiar, at least at the methodological level. The bosses' arsenal now includes weapons mimicking the style, if not the substance, of workers' inquiry. And as George Steinmetz (2005) has suggested, while blatantly positivistic research styles have fallen out of favour, this obscures the 'positivist unconscious' that continues to interpellate even apparently anti-positivist methodologies.

With this issue we seek to rethink workers' inquiry as a practice and perspective in order to understand and catalyse emergent moments of political composition. We note that the very term workers' inquiry immediately conjures both a subject of analysis (*workers*) and an epistemological approach (*inquiry*). As such, the articles fall into two categories: those that problematize, extend, or decentre the category of *workers* (Curcio, Evangelinidis, Murray, Moore, Cowen/Rault, and Elzenbaumer/Giuliani) and those that trouble notions of *inquiry* (Woodcock, Roggero, Fasulo, Pitts, Colectivo Situaciones, and Wellbrook). In other words, the pieces in this special issue come in two varieties – concrete applications of inquiry to a group of workers, and meta-reflections on the practice of inquiry at a more abstract level. But of course this binary is too simple, for inquiry has always resisted neat categorizations as 'theory' and 'practice'. Instead, theoretical advances in inquiry are typically inseparable from the structural realities from



which they emerge. Therefore, inquiry has undergone constant reinvention as it strives to apply itself in new settings, even as the expanding scope of inquiry is itself generative of increasing theoretical sophistication. So the empirical case studies that follow often gesture toward advances in inquiry, while the theoretical tracts are often suggestive of new research projects.

An article by Fabrizio Fasulo entitled 'Raniero Panzieri and workers' inquiry: The perspective of living labour, the function of science and the relationship between class and capital' offers a passionate and spirited defence of Raniero Panzieri's ideas on utility of scientific knowledge. One of the major debates that wracked workers inquiry in its classical period concerned the functions of industrial sociology and its applicability to anti-capitalist struggle. Panzieri emerged as perhaps the most vocal proponent of a position that viewed sociology itself as toxic, but believed its essential techniques, including its orientation toward science, could be refashioned into weapons of the working class. As Fasulo observes, this position is derived in part of from a reading of Marx that understands his political economy as proto-sociological. But crucially, Fasulo indicates that Panzieri differentiated between sociological discourses and sociological tools: whereas the former is strictly the province of capital, the latter might be appropriated by forces antagonistic to capital. There is a danger here, as with any act of reappropriation, that the working class might simply reinvent bourgeois sociology in its own name. But for Panzieri, this possibility is all but precluded by the very nature of the working class: whereas capital is only so much dead labour, the working class is both prior to capital and an evolving, dynamic form, so its modes of inquiry are necessary anticipatory. The working class can repurpose sociology, and indeed Panzieri hoped such a socialist sociology would be the essence of inquiry.

An article by Frederick Pitts ('Follow the money') points to the limitations of workers inquiry, which in his view is hobbled by its emphasis on production. Even the much-lauded social factory, with its metaphor of industrial labour (however diffuse), fails to escape the productivist straightjacket. Instead he poses that contemporary inquiry must position circulation alongside production as co-constitutive of value, and therefore intrinsic to the modern economy. Relying on a feminist perspective, Pitts claims that by centring the commodity as the subject of analysis, researchers might move toward a full understanding of intertwined spheres of productive and circulation that points toward the importance of daily life. Pitts emphasizes the elusiveness of value, and how following the commodity through its circulation, in total processes/life, begins to address this shortcoming. It is alluded to that we have now the theoretical foundation for a more robust empirical examination of value.

Though many of our authors take up the role of the academy in shaping knowledge production, Christopher Wellbrook brings this issue into particular focus. One of the most significant debates in workers inquiry concerns the extent to which intellectuals at some remove from the conditions of the shop floor might provide the working class movement with leadership. At one pole, there were those who believed researchers should structure interviews and questionnaires to guide the working class toward the 'correct' formulations (à la Touraine), and others who believed researchers should immerse themselves in the factory setting and seek as much as possible to occlude traditional divisions between workers and intellectual. In 'A Workers inquiry or an inquiry of workers', Wellbrook leans hard toward the latter position, though without entirely dismissing the unique perspective and theoretical insight that intellectuals might sometimes offer. On the one hand, Wellbrook claims the contemporary demarcation between worker and intellectual is a historically specific phenomenon, divorced both from Marx's understanding of knowledge-production as authentically productive, and from the longstanding tradition of working class autodidacticism. In doing so, he calls into question co-research strategies that preserve an unbalanced power dynamic and privilege officially sanctioned forms of knowledge. His piece lays the groundwork for a revived humanist workers inquiry that privileges workers' experience and subverts boundaries between researcher and research subject via a 'reflective community of worker-organizers.'

As many observers recognize, the ascendant logistics sector is a site of particular vulnerability for global capital, as just-in-time production renders nodes of circulation more important than ever. In 'Practicing militant inquiry: Composition, strike, and betting in the logistics workers struggles in Italy', Anna Curcio draws on her experience as an embedded researcher in a wave of strikes by Italian warehouse workers to point to new forms of political recomposition in the modern economy. As she notes, this struggle has spawned new forms of subjectivity, as workers generate new forms of semi-autonomous organization vis-à-vis their unions, and as struggles become increasingly generalized across the social body. In this case, workers' insider knowledge of the production process and circulation cycles allowed them to leverage power in unique ways. One of Curcio's boldest claims is a direct challenge to conventional union thinking about strikes. Whereas unions often operate on the assumption that strikes will remain confined to the workplace, perhaps with token community support, Curcio suggests that unions should instead 'bet on generalization' by gambling on the chance that every strike may grow into a large-scale political mobilization. In a faint echo of Pascal's wager, Curcio seems to suggest that the potential benefit to a union that gambles successfully far outweighs the short-term damage of guessing wrong.

In a note entitled 'Crisis, governmentality, and new social conflict: Argentina as a laboratory', Colectivo Situaciones draws on the context of Argentina a decade since the 2001 economic collapse to ask how militant research can best respond to the partial subsumption of social movements by the state. They propose that militant research should be oriented around forms of protagonism they describe as 'social mobilities' – fleeting and unstable modes of organization that often overlap with government mechanisms. Of course, the contrast with 1970s Italy, when mass movements constituted themselves outside of and inevitably in opposition to government mechanisms, could not be starker.

In 'Workers' inquiry in praxis: The Greek student movement of 2006-2007', Angelos Evangelinidis traces out a trajectory of student activism in Greece centering on a wave of university occupations in 2006-07. Students, with their competing loyalties and ambiguous class position, have always been an attractive subject for inquiry, but until recently, were more likely to be practitioners than objects of investigation. As Evangelinidis points out, student movements have much to gain from an autonomist-inspired critique of traditional student activism. Just as the Italian autonomists found their point of departure in establishment unions, wholly captured by the institutional Left and often the State, the Greek autonomist student movement positioned itself in explicit opposition to organized Left groups on campus, often themselves aligned with political parties. Evangelinidis reports and analyses the finding of a major study of the occupation and strike wave that sought to evaluate the state of class composition within the mobilized student milieu. In the process, the researchers quickly discover that traditional units of measure ('consciousness', 'identity', 'ideology') fail to capture the totality of factors that may provoke a social explosion. Implicitly, they also seem to suggest that the questionnaire and interview, as tools of measure, are wholly inadequate to the task. While Evangelinidis refrains from generalizing his observations, his study would seem to raise questions about the utility of social scientific practices, in ways that directly challenge Panzieri's ideas, described above.

In 'The shame of servers: Inquiry and agency in a Manhattan cocktail lounge', Jennifer Murray puts workers inquiry in dialogue with recent theories of gendered labour, especially the work of Eve Sedgwick on shame. This piece points to the limits of inquiry, particularly when affective labour comes into play. Based on an extensive workers inquiry at a New Jersey (US) cocktail bar, she suggests the interview techniques can be emotionally damaging for vulnerable populations, and that inquiry should carefully consider its impact. Murray deploys the category of shame to examine the downsides of work in an upscale hotel bar for the mostly female staff. She looks at how workers experience shame, and their various strategies for coping with or minimizing it. The piece raises

some provocative questions challenging the paradigm of workers inquiry. It suggests that since unwelcome interrogation of workers' personal lives by bar patrons is a large part of what makes the work potentially shameful, similar questioning by researchers is a fraught endeavour.

As is well established, the sociology that served as an interlocutor for workers inquiry was, above all, a sociology of work and labour that privileged the factory and industrial modes of production. In contrast, artistic labour is marginalized or more commonly ignored by empirical sociologists, and the arts certainly do not figure prominently in the social science cannon. In 'Labour, religion and game or why is art relevant for social science', Michał Kozłowski offers a partial corrective, making a convincing case for positioning art at the centre, rather than at the margins, of social science theory and research. By implication, he suggests that workers' inquiry, to the extent it is modelled on a (heterodox) sociology, ignores art at its own peril. Kozłowski might therefore appreciate that three out of seven 'empirical' studies in our special issue concern artistic and creative workers. But a more generous reading of Kozłowski allows that the artistic turn is not merely a question of conducting research on art workers. Instead, for Kozłowski, a theory of art already lurks at the heart of the social sciences, revealed through thinkers like Pascal, Mauss, and Bourdieu. Giving voice to this subcurrent will have major implications for all social scientists and practitioners of workers inquiry, including those whose research is not explicitly 'about' artists.

'Designers' inquiry: Mapping the socio-economic conditions of designers in Italy', by Bianca Elzenbaumer and Caterina Giuliani, studies an industry populated by disparate workers with few social ties who do not understand their daily practice as labour. While inquiry has often confronted workers who might be classified as depoliticized or lacking class consciousness, this projects teases the boundaries of a workers inquiry, and is all the more important as contemporary workplaces come increasingly to resemble the design sector. In the process, the authors speak to the necessity of reconceptualising design-work as a site for struggle.

In 'Art workers want to know', Alan W. Moore traces out a genealogy of the Art Workers Coalition, a now-defunct collective formation that sought to transform the art world. Moore suggests that the spectre of this organization presents itself in the form of contemporary squatted social centre. By explicitly suggesting that a movement may outlast its formal demise, he flaunts traditional understanding of movement life cycles, and raises important questions about the remainder through processes of decomposition.

A number of contributions to this issue engage with groups of workers that are relatively depoliticized, thus posing questions about the relation between militants and class composition. In 'The labour of being studied in a free love economy', T.L. Cowan and Jasmine Rault offer a model of an (as-yet unrealized) initiative to study the labour of feminist and queer creative workers. If workers inquiry has often tended to privilege the wage relation as a basic starting point for understanding labour, Cowan and Rault confront the specter of voluntarism and affective labour, and other forms of unwaged work. While they have yet to execute their proposed project, they are particularly attuned to the possibility that their research will be poorly received by a community that has an ambivalent relationship to work.

In 'The workers' inquiry from Trotskyism to *Operaismo*: A political methodology for investigating the workplace', Jamie Woodcock offers something of a heterodox history of workers' inquiry. He recommends that modern inquiry combine the best insights of American Trotskyism and Italian *operaismo* to create a unique amalgam, not far removed from the work of the collective Kolinko in call centres.

In a note entitled 'We didn't expect the revolt, but we've organized it: Notes on co-research and workers inquiry', which served as the introductory presentation for the conference upon which this special issue is based, Gigi Roggero asks a number of prescient questions about the future of co-research, which he views as a privileged subcategory within inquiry. For Roggero, co-research intervenes while struggles are ascendant, but before they have exploded. In what might be read as a rebuttal to Wellbrook et al., he offers a cautionary note to those who conceive of co-research merely as a democratic relationship between subject and object. Instead, he poses that co-research must preserve and foreground power imbalances, as it is itself embedded within class relations.

This issue is admittedly inconclusive with regard to the future of inquiry. Indeed, the authors present wildly divergent positions that are often mutually contradictory, and nearly impossible to generalize. What is clear, however, is that new sites and subjects cannot be agglomerated to the tradition of inquiry in an additive fashion. Nor can workers' inquiry, with its origins in the Italian factories in the 1960s, be transposed across time and space without significant modifications. Instead, workers' inquiry must remain resilient – as it always has been. Just as the relative marginalization of the mass worker led to a crisis in inquiry that later spawned the social factory, the impending implosion of the social factory may portend another looming crisis. Clearly, none of the authors in this issue suggest that inquiry must be abandoned altogether. But for some, the future of inquiry will require altering its fundamental precepts, and therefore

creating a mode of research that may no longer be recognizable as ‘inquiry’. In our call for papers, we questioned whether the weapons of managerial control can be cleanly re-appropriated by inquiry without reproducing the very social world they were designed to take apart, and it is clear that many of our contributors share these reservations. But this is no contradiction – inquiry has always traded in ambiguity. Just as Roggero suggests, the modern strike must be both constituent and destituent, and the same precept may apply to inquiry.

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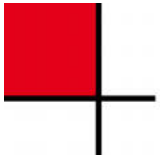
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# Raniero Panzieri and workers' inquiry: The perspective of living labour, the function of science and the relationship between class and capital

Fabrizio Fasulo

## abstract

This paper discusses the Raniero Panzieri workers' inquiry and hopes to contribute to a wider knowledge of Panzieri's thought. The role and the deep meaning of the workers' inquiry are parts of a larger and general view, developed by Panzieri about Marxism as a science of revolution and its relationship with the bourgeois disciplines and their capitalist uses. I try to illustrate how Panzieri establishes a profound connection between Marxism and the sociological discipline. Mature Marxism traces in the specificities of capitalist reality, thus giving the Marxian investigation specifically sociological foundations. According to Panzieri both class and capital must be specific objects of theoretical consideration, underlining above all how the working class – the subjective and conscious element, 'the conflicting and potentially antagonistic element' (Panzieri, 1976: 92) – does not derive automatically from the movement of capital. The scientific knowledge concerning living labour is then generated through the inquiry; an inquiry that is an integral part of political intervention. Panzieri considers the sociological discourse, circulating in neo-capitalism, as a capitalist use of science, aimed at integrating the working class into the planning of capital. Scientific tools and methods can however be socialistically used, once they are directed to producers' interests, and to the definition of another rationality, alternative to capital's quantitative one. Just as there is a capitalist use of science, there may be an antagonist and socialist use of it.

The role and function of theory in the relationship between class and capital, as well as the position of inquiry as knowledge production and political intervention in the face of basic contradictions of capitalist society, are expressed – perhaps

most clearly – in a lecture given by Raniero Panzieri in 1964<sup>1</sup>. On that occasion Panzieri's contribution both helped to define the instruments of sociological survey and the theoretical, methodological and political issues subtended by the use of workers' inquiry. Furthermore, he also proposed an overall, general understanding of Marxism, more adequate to the capitalist society of that time, treating the question of the relationship between Marxism and 'bourgeois' disciplines.

Panzieri was opposed to the mistrust and disapproval shown by some forms of contemporary Marxism to sociology and the use of its tools, establishing a profound connection between Marxism and the sociological discipline. Mature Marxism, that is Marxism of *Capital* and of the *Critique of political economy*, in its critical apprehension of the ideological one-sidedness of political economy, traces in the specificities of capitalist reality the contradictions and the mystifications typical of that bourgeois political economy. It thus gives the Marxian investigation specifically sociological foundations:

Marxism – of the mature Marx – was born as sociology; what is *Capital*, as a critique of political economy, if not an outline of sociology? The basis of the critique of political economy is the accusation [...] of the unilateral character of political economy in itself [...]. The political economy that reduces the worker to a factor of production is seen, not in its falsehood, but in its limit, precisely in this: political economy claims to close the social reality within the confined framework of a particular mode of operation, and then accepts it as the best mode of operation, the natural one. But while in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and in all works of the young Marx this critique of political economy is then connected to a historical-philosophical vision of humanity and history [...] the Marx of *Capital* abandons this philosophical and metaphysical theme, [and] this criticism is directed only to a specific situation, that is the capitalist reality [...]. (Panzieri, 1976: 88)

Marxism is therefore regarded as sociology, a sociology as political science, as the science of revolution<sup>2</sup>:

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- 1 The lecture was delivered at a seminar on workers' inquiry that took place on 12-14th September 1964 in Turin. The lecture was published posthumously in the fifth issue of *Quaderni Rossi* in April 1965 (Panzieri, 1965: 67-76). This essay was also republished in several anthologies by Dario Lanzardo (Panzieri, 1972a: 314-25), Sandro Mancini (Panzieri, 1976: 87-96), Stefano Merli (Panzieri, 1994: 121-8). Recently the essay has been republished also by Paolo Ferrero (Ferrero et al., 2006: 330-9). The paper is also available in English on this website: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0406/panzieri/en>. The next quotes from the essay will rely on the text published by Einaudi and curated by Mancini. All quotations, from now on, are my own translation.
  - 2 Panzieri took part in the Italian debate about the role of sociology within the labor movement (Panzieri et al., 1956). A key moment of this debate was the 1956. The



If you have to give a general definition of Marxism I would say that is this: a sociology conceived of as political science, as a science of revolution. From this science of revolution every mystical significance is taken away, and it is then referred to rigorous observation, to scientific analysis. (Panzieri, 1976: 88)

Panzieri (1976: 88) denounces the existence of a 'current' that is traced back to some writings of Engels, in which a complete system is developed, a generic materialism and a dialectic extended both to social sciences and to physical ones. This, he argues, is contrary to this sociological and revolutionary component found in Marx.

This line recreates a 'metaphysics, which is both the metaphysics of the labour movement and the metaphysics of the tadpole and the frog', and it hides a 'mystical conception of the working class and of its historic mission' (Panzieri, 1976: 89). Its naturalistic objectivism makes it effectively impossible to demystify the class nature of the conditions of production, thus impeding the disclosure of the social relations of production, hidden behind the empirical and 'objective' crystallizations. Ferrero recognizes in these pages 'a clear distinction between Marxism as a science and Marxism as metaphysics, as a "grand narrative", as a reassuring ideology' (Ferrero et al., 2006: 41). The positive dimension of the sociology, derived from Marx, which distinguishes it from other sociologies, lies in the peculiarity of being born from the critique of political economy: that is, from the fallacy of the presumed universality which this science would aim for. This is a fallacy against which Marx declines to set a unilateral totality:

Because Marx's sociology arises from the critique of political economy, it comes from an ascertainment and an observation of the capitalist society, a dichotomous society. A society in which the unilateral representation of science – the science of political economy – leaves out the other half of reality. Treating the labour force only as part of the capital, according to Marx, causes in principle a limitation from the theoretical point of view and also an internal deformation to the system that is so constructed. (Panzieri, 1976: 89)

Panzieri reiterates what was already evident in his thinking about the concept of verification at the level of capital: that is, the dichotomous character of capitalist society, composed around two elements, in mutual antagonism: capital and working class. In contrast with the positions expressed by Tronti (who theorized

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discussion around the role of sociology characterized the attempt to overcome, from left, the Stalinism, aiming to give new tools and practices to the labor movement theory. Magazines such as *Opinione* and *Ragionamenti* hosted this debate. For a wider and detailed study, see Lopez (2013). About the relationship of Panzieri with the sociological discipline I would like to point out the important role played by Panzieri during his period of work at the Italian publishing house Einaudi. During that time (1959-1963) Panzieri indeed edited several sociological studies, also promoting the translation of many non-Italian texts (Baranelli, 1985; 2006).

absolute priority – logical and historical – of the working class over capital), Panzieri sustains the inseparability of the two terms and confirms what Mancini (Mancini, 1977: 107) calls the intrinsically relational nature (*‘il carattere intrinsecamente relazionistico’*) of the class relationship that sees them involved, through the living-labour subduing, in the capital relation.

With his dichotomous view of capitalist society, Panzieri argues for the study of both, the movement of capital and the movement of labour force. The ‘science of revolution’ has thus a twofold object; it is not one-dimensional, because neither of the two movements can be deduced from the other. (Mancini, 1977: 109-10)

So, I think that the movement of the workforce, to which Panzieri refers, should relate also to the dialectic between class *in itself* and class *for itself*, between variable capital and the working class, between workforce and living labour. Panzieri, asserting the sociological character of Marxism, reiterates the fact that both class and capital must be specific objects of theoretical consideration, underlining above all how the working class – the subjective and conscious element, ‘the conflicting and potentially antagonistic element’ (Panzieri, 1976: 92) – does not derive automatically from the movement of capital:

Therefore, in the opinion of Marx, socialist sociological analysis (understood as political science, because it is an observation that pretends to overcome that one-sidedness and to reach the social reality in its entirety) is characterised by the specific consideration of the two fundamental classes that constitute it. I stress again the sociological character of Marx's thought from this point of view: he refuses to identify the working class starting from the movement of capital, that is, he affirms is not possible to trace back automatically from the movement of capital to the study of the working class. The working class requires an absolutely scientific observation aside, both when it operates as a conflictual element, therefore capitalist, and when operates as antagonistic element, therefore anti-capitalist<sup>3</sup>. (Panzieri, 1976: 89- 90)

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- 3 As I will show later, Panzieri distinguished between ‘conflict’ and ‘antagonism’. He argues capitalism is indeed an inherently conflictual system, in which conflictuality between living-labour and capital is the inner motor of the capital development. Since his essay *On the capitalist use of machinery* and his studies on the fourth section of the first book of *The capital*, Panzieri sees development and innovation as the internal driving forces of capitalism itself. These forces constantly reacting to the living-labour insubordination, conflictually opposed to its transformation into variable-capital. If conflict is a part of the capitalist device – because of the capitalist pole is able to subsume it within its expansion process – antagonism is referred to a wider attempt. Antagonism indeed represents the historical affirmation of the working class, a radically new balance of society, a new political class organization able to prefigure and anticipate an overall new form of society and articulation of social needs, overcoming and incorporating the social organization founded on capital. Around this issue see Mancini (1977: 103): ‘It must gain the real terms of the conflict, which can then be transformed into antagonism. The transition from conflict to antagonism

Since it is not possible to reduce capital to the working class and vice versa, the study of both is necessary. Scientific knowledge concerning class is generated through the inquiry; an inquiry that is an integral part of political intervention. So, it is impossible to conceive of the results of the inquiry as an external knowledge of static objects.

The inquiry, approaches and ascertains the degree of workers' awareness, to determine the mode of its development – the object of its knowledge and its method are therefore a constitution of a conscious subjectivity. The rigorous use of scientific and sociological tools and the refusal of mystical and eschatological concepts of the class, do not mean, for Panzieri, adopting a detached model of the class knowledge. Rather, these factors involve the awareness that the knowledge level about class directly affects the class's own process of theoretical awareness and its political struggle.

Panzieri takes into consideration the great development of bourgeois sociology in his time. He considers the sociological *discourse*, circulating in neo-capitalism, as a use of science, aimed at integrating the working class into the planning of capital (as already pointed out in his 1961 essay on the capitalist use of machinery):

One can hazard a guess, in Marxian language, that capitalism, having lost classical thought in political economy [...], has, on the contrary, found its not-vulgar science in sociology. (Panzieri, 1976: 90)

Neo-capitalism requires sociology, because its Fordist paradigm must extend its accumulative rationality to the whole of society, by means of capitalist planning. It needs to ensure consensus and social reactions that develop from the productive sphere. Also, from the point of view of capitalist use of science, therefore, the concept of *extension of the factory into society* has important consequences. The arrival of neo-capitalism inaugurates a use of bourgeois science aimed at the management of consensus and the management of a rationality of accumulation. The latter is extended to the whole range of social relations, now subsumed by the capital relation:

At first, capitalism needs to investigate its own operating mechanisms. Later, as it matures, it needs instead to organize the study of consensus; it needs to study social reactions that emerge from its mechanisms. This clearly becomes all the more urgent for capitalism, as it develops and evolves to the upper phase, the planning phase, and, instead of property relations, it bases more and more of its

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is the transformation of the class *itself* in the class *itself*, is the process of formation of class consciousness, is – as Lukacs writes – the proletariat which becomes “identical subject-object of history”.

stability and its power over the growing rationality of accumulation. (Panzieri, 1976: 90-1)

This is why Panzieri, in order to define the relationship between the non-Marxist sociology and the 'working class' sociology, uses a parallel to Marx's position on classical economics. Marx indeed does not reject classical economics inasmuch it's bourgeois. On the contrary, he subjects classical economics to a critique, and denounces its bias, one-sidedness and limits. Classical political economics is not able to consider these features of its own one-sidedness and, on the contrary, tries to sublimate them ideologically into their opposite. That's why classical political economics needed a critical but, after that, could be also used by the living labour point of view:

We can use, treat and criticize sociology as Marx did with classical political economy, that is, seeing it as a limited science (and, moreover, it is evident that, in the kind of inquiry that we are planning, there are already all the assumptions that go over the framework of current sociology). However, this means that what sociology knows, in general, is true, is not falsified in itself, but is, rather, something limited, which causes internal distortions. However, it keeps what Marx considered the character of a science, that is, an autonomy based on a scientific and logical rigor of coherence. (Panzieri, 1976: 91)

Panzieri complains about an ideological connotation, present in sociology and in the knowledge produced by capitalist society in general. This connotation, however, is not entirely false. The ideological character lies in the non-recognition of the foreignness of living labour, of its alienation and enslavement within the capitalist relation, in considering the working class only as variable capital. There is no negation of the totality of scientific knowledge, just because produced within the capitalist society. There is, if anything, an assumption of limitation, due to the ideological concealment of the rationality of accumulation, operating in scientific knowledge. This concealment also covers the nexus of class, the agent at the heart of the subsumption of knowledge to the needs of valorization of capital, as opposed to living labour. Therefore, there is no simple opposition between Marxism and bourgeois ideologies, around the respective poles of falsehood and truth<sup>4</sup>.

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4 It is exactly the centrality of living labor that allows Panzieri to criticize Adorno: 'Adorno [...] does not see the proletariat, does not see the forces that, in the sphere of production, at the root, they can overthrow those processes. It then falls back to this humanitarian-existentialist position' (Panzieri, 1972c: 213). On the relationship between Panzieri and the Frankfurt School, see Meriggi (1975), Marramao (1975), D'Alessandro (2003) and Mancini (1977: 77-8), where it is also tracked down an interesting parallel between Panzieri and Hans Jürgen Krahl: 'Must be reported an interesting analogy between Panzieri's thought and the reflection initiated by H.J. Krahl, the most significant theoretical exponent of the new German Left. Indeed both

Ideology is thus the acceptance of the supposed neutrality of capital's rationality, of the economic structure and of the development of productive forces; ideology is the concealment of the class relationship, the relationship that is the pulsating core of the productive process. Such an ideology can therefore be traced even in orthodox Marxism that uncritically assumes the neutral logic of the economic development. Panzieri, on the contrary, since his essay *On the use of machinery into neo-capitalism* (Panzieri, 1961)<sup>5</sup>, has uncovered the fetishistic effects of capital, inherent to the same presumed objectivity of the production, and he has retrieved its constitutive class relationship, its constitutive class connotation and its command of living labour to extract value from it.

Even theory, therefore, must act symmetrically, coherent with the critique of fetishism, operating into the heart of production objectivity. Theory must find the fundamental contradiction of capitalist society, the contradiction between dead labour – accumulated under objective conditions and operating within the capital relationship – and living labour. The theory must assume, pre-emptively, the awareness of partiality, unspoken by the ideological sciences:

What characterizes the revolutionary perspective, in the theoretical field, is, instead, the attitude aimed at highlighting the separation between the capitalist conditions of production, of social life, and the subjectivity of living labor. (Mancini, 1977: 115)

It is no longer a simple opposition between truth and falsehood, but rather between an awareness of the dichotomous dialectic of society (and therefore the awareness of demystification of the same category of objectivity) and the supine assumption of the capitalist class relation.

This is why scientific tools and methods can be used, once they are directed to producers' interests, and to the definition of another rationality, alternative to

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authors assimilate from the Frankfurt School the conceptual instrumentation for the critique of technocratic and planned form of capitalism, but reject, on the one hand, the split between ideology critique and political economy critique and, on the other hand, they reject the separation between theory and practice as of fact it has been made by the philosophers of the Frankfurt School. In reality, the substantive aspect that separates the two theorists of the New Left from the Critical Theory is the theory of the integration of the working class. It is therefore significant that Krahll [...] formulates, in respect of technical progress, the same criticism developed by Panzieri'. See also Krahll (1978: 322, 383).

- 5 The essay was published by Panzieri in the first issue of *Quaderni Rossi* in 1961 (Panzieri, 1961: 53-72). Also this essay was republished posthumously by several editors: (Panzieri, 1972a: 148-69), (Panzieri, 1976: 3-23), (Panzieri, 1994: 25-41); more recently the essay has been repropose by Paolo Ferrero (Ferrero et al., 2006: 308-24). The paper is also available in English on this website: <http://libcom.org/library/capalist-use-machinery-raniero-panzieri>.

capital's quantitative one. Just as there is a capitalist use of science, there may be an antagonist and socialist use of it.

Mancini points to Panzieri's 'keep[ing] in mind the distinction and the relationship between the level of analysis of society and the other levels of knowledge' (Mancini, 1977: 109). In fact, Panzieri thought it was possible to find a distinction between capital's rationality of accumulation and scientific knowledge in general. The latter is compromised by the concealment effect, due to fetishism, and partiality arises from it, but it is not at all dismissible in terms of a falsehood. In this regard Mancini points out that:

While the first [capital's rationality of accumulation] is entirely determined by the class relationship that shapes it, the second [scientific knowledge in general] is only affected by it, since it contains a specific irreducible residue, consisting of the knowledge that mankind has accumulated in its path. For this reason Panzieri speaks of capitalist rationality and antagonistic rationality, in reference to the mechanisms of social development, and of the contrasting [*contrapposto*] use of science [...], in reference to the general problems of knowledge. (Mancini, 1977: 116-7)

The revolutionary use of theory and knowledge depends on assuming the perspective of living labour, of its possible construction of a rationality opposed to capital planning rationality, which redefines and redirect the function of the knowledge accumulated by the society. In a society free of capitalism, objective conditions of production would assume completely different connotations, just as they would be subsumed under different social relations. Similarly, with living labour, rather than capital, at the centre of social relations, the socialist use of science would re-polarize and give new meaning to what was previously known to humans.

Panzieri's inquiry belongs in this framework. As primary level knowledge about the class and of the class, it constitutes the heuristic expression of the irreducibility of living labour to capital, and therefore an immediate translation of revolutionary theoretical needs:

I would say that the method of the inquiry [...] is of permanent political reference for us [...]; it means the refusal to draw from an analysis of the capital level, the analysis of the working class level. It means, in essence, that we want to repeat Lenin's proposition that the workers' movement is an encounter between socialism and the working class's spontaneous movement. That is, that in the working class spontaneous movement, [...] if there isn't an encounter with socialism, as something voluntary, scientific and conscious, then there is the class adversary's ideology. The method of the inquiry is therefore the method that should allow you to escape any form of mystical vision concerning workers' movement; it should ensure, always, a scientific observation of the working class consciousness level, and therefore it should also be the way to bring this

awareness to higher grades; from this point of view there is a definite continuity between the moment of the sociological observation, conducted with rigorous and serious criteria, and political action. (Panzieri, 1976: 92)

Panzieri is aware that revolutionary theory, beyond reflecting the objective determinations of capital, has to look to what Mancini (1977: 109) calls 'the intersubjective operations of living labour', from which to gain knowledge about workers' awareness, through a practice that is already a political action in itself. This is the sense of continuity between observation and political action, which are logically separable, but that belong together in a theory and action nexus, determined by the centrality of the struggle. It is the *a priori* assumption of the class instance, which directs the use of science and investigation to bring out the contents on which to implant political action. But the same cognitive moment belongs to a wider political action, since it is oriented from the latter, starting from the perspective of living labour.

The inquiry was designed 'as 'co-research' [*conricerca*], that is, research focussing mainly on working conditions and on the workers' political consciousness; a research that workers and intellectuals must lead together' (Mancini, 1977: 110). The object of the inquiry is at the same time the subject of the investigation, a subject involved in a simultaneous process of gaining awareness and therefore involved in a change occurring at the centre of the cognitive dynamic. This process lies beyond the boundaries of 'traditional' knowledge, because what is known, is acquired by itself (with the fundamental mediation, not vertically or hierarchical, of intellectuals) and it changes within the acquisition process itself. The knowledge, of which the inquiry is the cognitive instrument, defines then, not an objective model of truth, but, a politically characterized truth, understood as progressive and conscious acquisition, starting from a dialectic of negativity that dwells within the same subject. The constitution of a conscious, dialectical subjectivity is triggered by the inquiry.

Panzieri explains how the use of socialist sociology involves very precise choices in the heuristic field: for example, selecting antagonising topics as opposed to ones that can easily be absorbed in a simple conflictual dimension. This is a clear indication of the priority of the living labour perspective and the socialist hypothesis:

It is evident that the use of socialist sociology requires a rethinking, changing ones mind; it requires that these tools are studied in light of fundamental assumptions, which then can be summarized in one: the fact that conflicts can be transformed into antagonisms and therefore no longer be functional to the system (taking into account that the conflicts are functional to the system, because it is a system that goes on with conflicts). (Panzieri, 1976: 93)

The basis of the inquiry method is then the assumption of the radical experience of living labour and of its 'look', the assumption of the new society latent request, together with a total rejection of subordination. In moments of struggle and conflict, Panzieri suggests, we are to 'study the relationship between conflict and antagonism, that is, study the manner the system of values, expressed by the worker in normal times changes, and how values are replaced with alternative awareness' (Panzieri, 1976: 94). The necessity to investigate the relationship between workers' solidarity in times of struggle and the rejection of the capital system, implicitly brings the issue of prefiguration to the foreground:

It is basically to verify the extent to which workers are aware of claiming, in the face of an unequal society, a society of equals, and how much they are aware this can become a general value for the society, as a value of equality in front of the capitalist inequality<sup>6</sup>. (Panzieri, 1976: 94)

In this context, it is always necessary to refer to the level achieved by the capital development, confirming the need for the overcoming of the latter that the working class must be able to bring about. Here is the verification of the inquiry's purpose of political recomposition:

We have instrumental goals, obviously very important, which are represented by the fact that the inquiry is a correct method, effective and politically fruitful for getting in touch with the workers [...]: there isn't a gap or a contradiction between the inquiry and this work of political construction, but the inquiry is also a key aspect of this work of political construction. (Panzieri, 1976: 95)

The use of socialist inquiry, and in general the use of science theorized and proposed by Panzieri, defines a specific relationship between intellectuals and workers, thus establishing a specific role and function of intellectuals in the political and knowledge production process mediated by the inquiry itself:

[Panzieri] sees in the inquiry the tool to create a new positive relationship, [a new positive link], between intellectuals and workers, without any of the two political subjects denying, a priori, its own identity [...]. The inquiry therefore configures a new role for the intellectual, tied directly to the working class environment, that places side by side – without confusing – theoretical engagement and a political one. (Mancini, 1977: 110)

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6 On the issue of values in Panzieri, see Mancini (1975: 215): 'Panzieri considers the communist values, such as conscious explication of the needs emerged in antagonistic struggles: they are, therefore, based on the needs and do not have an autonomous existence. The development of needs antagonistic in the new values, and their subsequent interiorization into the workers' consciousness, are important because they allow the worker antagonism stabilization and its materialization in the working class organization'.



In contrast to the positions expressed by *Classe Operaia*, and its denial of culture and cultural struggle (Mancini, 1977: 108 et seqq), Panzieri confers a significant role to the intellectuals: however, not in the sense of their separateness and externality to the class dynamics, bringing from the outside consciousness or political leadership<sup>7</sup>. This is instead the risk inherent in the position of Mario Tronti. The coincidence of tactics and the party, in fact, means that the intellectuals can assume the role of political organizers and tacticians of workers' autonomy (this, despite the intellectual function was officially rejected in the name of working class science).

For Panzieri, autonomy of the class is declined in the light of the theme, derived from Rodolfo Morandi<sup>8</sup>, of free institutions in which the class struggle itself is composed. Without wanting to dissolve the specific position of intellectuals, and in so doing ignore the heterogeneous distribution of knowledge in an unequal society, Panzieri involves intellectuals in a political process of class composition, in which they cooperate with workers, in the production of knowledge. Panzieri's analysis of neo-capitalism has shown how the subordination of labour to capital generates a new class composition, in which intellectuals and technicians<sup>9</sup> become proletarians in the sense of an increasing dependence on capital, a growing dependence on a wage (even for those who possess education and culture):

Here's how the transformation of the working class must be seen: essentially of new relationships that are established between workers and technicians, in terms of the creation of new categories, and changes in the composition of the working class itself. (Panzieri, 1976: 95)

For Panzieri, the fact that intellectuals belong as part of the process of political class composition mediated by the inquiry is based on this aspect of the development of capital. Intellectual does not pretend to be what he is not. He does not simulate a 'workerism' of convenience as if he would melt, through a negation of himself, in an indistinct 'mass' of the oppressed, eschatologically considered. Instead he gives his contribution, through the inquiry, as an effective

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7 Concerning the line of *Classe Operaia* on this subject see, however, the views expressed in Tronti, (2006: 246 et seqq) and in Asor Rosa (1973: 39-48). An interesting and detailed reconstruction of the debate is the one made by Trotta and Milana (2008) in their book, in which is also available a digital version of all the issues of the journal.

8 About Rodolfo Morandi, see Agosti (1971).

9 Panzieri uses the word 'tecnici', that means the cultured technical social stratum involved in the modern and advanced fordist planned industrial production. So it is not a traditional intellectual group (neither umanistic nor scientific in the classic sense) because operates directly under capital control in the productive field.

component involved in the whole process of socialization and generalization of the labour's enslavement to the self-expansion's capital cycle. According to the above reflections I think it is possible to dissolve the aporia Tomassini would identify right in intellectual function inside the construction of class strategy:

The vanguard function should foster the development of this autonomous strategy, without regarding it as a given in the structural conditions of economic development and without pretending to centralize its consciousness. However, the intellectual function, developed in minority status, often seems to be a prerequisite for the process of class recomposition. Nor do we understand how this external consciousness, which, while it denies its own separateness and is related to the quality of the real movement, may be internal to the process of recomposition of class. (Tomassini, 1975: 72)

Tomassini does not adequately consider the non-dogmatic concept of class, which Panzieri brings out from reflections on neo-capitalism: a concept that also includes the intellectual, as an element also subject to the general subordination of labour to capital, subject to the extension of the relations of production to the entire society, subject to generalization of the surplus value's law. This means that the intellectual is no longer an independent creator of culture and is no longer considered an unproductive worker. The extension of the factory into society<sup>10</sup> implies that relations of production and, therefore, processes of valorisation, also involve the intellectual function. The intellectuals collaborate, as such, in the process of gaining awareness of the social whole and of its inherent contradiction. It becomes possible, in this way, the process of political composition of the class and the prospect of a shared knowledge, not separated from the leading role played by the subjectivity of living labour.

In this regard, Franco Momigliano writes, in the second issue of *Quaderni Rossi*, about the research method in QR:

The 'research' by the group, is seen as 'co-research', that is as research, which has an element of verification and validity in its own capacity to determine a process of participation, not only of the so-called 'active subjects' (such as the leaders of the trade union), but also of the so-called 'passive subjects' of social research (the workers organized in trade unions or not, workers involved in the struggles) [...]. These analyses were made, aiming to realize a particular situation, whereby:

- a. the worker becomes the protagonist not only of the struggle, but also of the research, within the company, on his condition in relation to the internal process of production;

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<sup>10</sup> This concept is not related to a simply internal enlargement of factories. It is, despite, the Marxian real subsumption process, in which capital relationship conquers new social territories, capital plan is generalized and the capitalist social relation dominates the living labor.

- b the social researcher does not conceive himself, in the moment of his investigation, as an outside objective observer, but as an active protagonist directly involved in the workers' struggle.

[...] The research itself is conceived as an element of solicitation to a new process of initiative and bottom-up participation in the formation of the organization [...]. (Momigliano, 1962: 100)

The inquiry, for Ferrero, must be an expression of:

The non-complete real subjugation of the class to capital. The inquiry explores the gap, the non-coincidence between the capitalist utopia of reducing workers to mere objects, to commodities, and the concrete reality of the class; the inquiry sheds light on the never completely realised real subsumption of labour to capital<sup>11</sup>. (Ferrero et al., 2006: 42)

The method of the inquiry is, therefore, cognitive and practical simultaneously; inquiry arises as a phenomenological dimension of the subject-object dialectic characteristic of the class itself (because it is forced to deny itself, as a mere workforce), a dialectic that is a consequence of the dialectic of capitalist society. Bringing into light the becoming subject of the class – through comparison and verification with the other element of the dialectic, the level of development of capital – the inquiry unfolds a space of political action, a space of concrete anticipation, with an entire strategic horizon of possibility, enclosed in a society based on the community of labour:

The inquiry is an attempt to seize [...] the unexpressed possibility of the class. The inquiry is an attempt to identify the 'already but not yet' of the class. This centrality of the inquiry, that is, the knowledge of the class in its concrete existence and in its concrete contradiction, in its tension between being subject and object, allows Panzieri to break with two settings, largely present in Marxism [...]. The first is the one that tends to see the class [...] as in need of an external consciousness to guide and enlighten it [...]. It is the idea of the class that needs a Guide Party, an external consciousness of a minor subjectivity, never able to fully master the conflict with the class enemy [...]. The second trend [...] is instead the one that tends to see the class – by virtue of capitalist development – as a subject full and 'continuous', always operating, already fully self-reflecting [...]. In this second Marxist trend, directly by virtue of capitalist development, class is no longer a dialectical unity of subject-object, but directly a full subject [...]. The inquiry establishes Panzieri's political speech because it investigates the dialectic between subject and object, which is proper to class and identifies the concrete space of politics in the construction of the class subjectivity, that is always opposed by capital and never given once and for all. (Ferrero et al., 2006: 43-5)

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11 Similar considerations are reiterated in Ferrero (2008: 94-6).

At the core of Panzieri's method there is therefore an awareness of the centrality of the 'possible' dimension: the possibility for the labour force to avoid reification, thus becoming class *for* itself, becoming an aware subject that could be a base of a transformed society; a possibility that is not deterministically guaranteed, but dialectically dependent on the development of capital's dominance. According to Miegge,

[...] the passage from the centrality of labour, in the production process, to the workers' struggle for power is not in fact spontaneous: it depends on the variables of autonomous organization and class consciousness. Here precisely lies the role of the inquiry. (Miegge, 2006: 192)

The political and theoretical frameworks within which we can insert Panzieri's concept of workers' inquiry are formed by the cognitive function of struggles: struggles must show, in effect, what capital is. All this allows us for a few brief remarks, regarding the topic of 'verification'<sup>12</sup> in Panzieri.

Workers' struggles thematize the subordination of class to the capital, and workers' claims express the working class level to the capital level. Indeed it is through the refusal and the needs expressed by the living labour subjectivity, that the most advanced point of development of the capital are demystified in their class mechanisms. So, thanks to the worker struggles, these points become non-ideologically knowable, and it is concretely possible to overcome them. The refusal expressed by workers' subjectivity demystifies the most advanced position of capitalist development. The level of worker consciousness, gained from the struggles and into the struggles, to be successful must therefore incorporate the overall capitalist relationship and be able to deal with the advanced levels of capital, overcome them. The social production based on the contradiction between capital and living labour, is centred on the despotism and the power of capital. The latter, with the increase of constant capital and of organic composition of capital, is likely to grow bigger. Therefore, only if the point of view expressed by the struggles is able to complete and get the whole relationship between capital and class, focusing on the subordination and despotism on which it is founded, would it be possible to overcome the society built on that

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12 The concept of 'verification' was very important in the last theoretical period of Panzieri and it is possible to view it strongly related with concepts as 'conflict' and 'antagonism'. He specially developed the concept of 'verification' in a lecture took place in Siena, in March 1962. The lecture was published for the first time posthumously, edited by V. Rieser and entitled *Lotte operaie nello sviluppo capitalistico*, in the twenty-ninth issue of *Quaderni Piacentini*, in January 1967 (Panzieri, 1967). Then the essay was also published by Lanzardo (Panzieri, 1972a: 240-66), Mancini (Panzieri, 1976: 25-50), Merli (Panzieri, 1994: 73-92). The next quotations from the essay will rely on the text published by Einaudi and curated by Mancini. All quotations, from now on, are my own translation.

relationship. Class and capital are contradicting terms, politically and ideologically the latter dominates and tries to absorb the contradiction itself. Capital is not a 'thing' but an ensemble of relationships. These relationships, being dominant, involve the class as part of a more general dialectic – a dialectic that involves the formation of the same class 'in itself', starting from variable capital. The verification of the level reached by the struggles must be placed, therefore, at the level of capital because of the set of social relations to overcome, the rationality to supplant, the set of objective conditions of production to redefine and renew, were established throughout the process of capitalist development.

We need to go to see what is the adversary, and if these struggles reveal the characteristic and objective traits of capital, or not; that is, you must go and see how capital is made, to decide, then, the political significance of these struggles. You have to have this verification: verification is always on the level of capital, can never be only within the worker level. Instead, the worker level is built seriously, only if it is raised to the level of capital, if he manages to dominate, to understand, to incorporate capital. [...] We can say that properly, the advanced nature of workers' struggles reveal, let us even say, advanced characteristics of capitalism, reveal, actually, the reality of today's capitalism. (Panzieri, 1976: 33)

What needs to be anticipated, prefigured, are then the trends of capitalist development. Of course living labour has not to anticipate the same capitalist production choices. Conversely it has to take an antagonistic position within the contradictions produced by capitalist development. According to the dialectical relationship between class and capital, a certain level of subordination and exploitation of labour gives a certain political content to the workers' claims, which they otherwise would not acquire:

This variable capital tends constantly to become working class and, tending to recognize the mankind that composes it and then to become working class, tends towards insubordination against the constant capital (even against himself as variable capital, which is very important to avoid a mystical concept of the working class). (Panzieri, 1976: 34)

The process of affirming free subjectivity therefore originates in the heart of the dialectical dynamic of capitalist society. The recognition of humanity reified by capital, must pass, dialectically, through the objective conditions that are prepared by capital itself, as it holds the levers of production and power. That is why struggles should be related to the level of capital to incorporate it, to enclose and redefine the entire sphere of social production.

The basis of the constitution of class, starting from the basic contradiction of a society governed by capital, is a subject-object dialectic. Panzieri considers this dialectic of subjective acquisition, and this rejection of objectification in the form

of variable capital as central. He identifies this dynamic with political and theoretical actions of the class. The rejection of ideologies and of integration, to ensure the workers recognise themselves as part of a worker collective, is what makes defining the process of class composition, and the creation of a society regulated by producers, possible.

The alternative rationality, of which living labour must be the bearer, thus comes from a refusal, by the class, of objective conditions prepared by capital. These conditions, however, involve the same workforce as such, as objectivity rationalized by capital in the form of variable capital. As variable capital, living labour must refuse itself because in this form is also part of the productive objectivity to be overcome, and must stand as subject, founding a new society.

If labour needs to overturn the dependency that sees it subordinated to capital, it must be able to incorporate the latter, anticipating its developments and its contradictions. It must provide a 'verification': this means that labour forces have not only to express the highest capitalist level. They have also to prove to be able to overcome capitalist society, reacting antagonistically to its contradictions and directing them to other forms of society. So it is necessary to develop the next process of class recomposition, the reconstruction of the collective worker and the affirmation of a social regulation of production. Starting from a productive moment, the relationship of class is already a political relationship. The centrality of the sphere of political mediation is not denied but rather extended to all production relations; it is no more confined only to the institutional level or at the state level. If we generalize the relation of production and the level of capital, we generalize the political relationship that underlies them:

Already in the factory, the class relationship tends to become a political relationship, a relationship of power. The sphere of political mediation not only does not disappear, but it is growing, and therefore the necessity of political action of the working class not only does not weaken, but rather is strengthened [...]. We must really see how, today, the political relationship of class, as political relationship, dominates every moment, all areas of the factory, of civil society, of the state. But capitalist development burns an older type of political mediation, old contents. Political mediation is no longer found only at the level of the state. (Panzieri, 1976: 45-6)

For Panzieri the planning of struggles consists of a unitary class composition process, but also of an awareness of the whole of the capitalist process:

The planning of the struggles corresponding to the level of capitalist planning, is not the sum of the new tensions, is not an automatic result of the new tensions

[...]. It is a process that can only be conceived as a process of awareness, of the whole of the process of capitalist unification<sup>13</sup>. (Panzieri, 1972b: 284)

The unification of struggles is in no way intended as an automatic and deterministic reflex to the trends of capital development. The class level, the subjective dimension, is not taken for granted, but is the result of a conscious and aware political intervention, mediated with the knowledge of the level of capital, but with no guaranteed outcomes:

Automatically, to the socialization of capital [...] does not correspond the planning of the struggle, does not correspond the working class. (Panzieri, 1972b: 285)

The thought of Panzieri is 'anticipatory' thought. He is able to articulate the latent conditions of possibility for the political action of the class, owing to a particular reflection on the nature of the contradiction between the working class and capital, and owing to a specific mode of action, the inquiry.

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<sup>13</sup> The text is an excerpt of a discourse of Panzieri, held in a meeting of QR, which took place in Milan in November 1962.

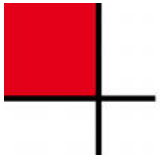
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## Follow the money? Value theory and social inquiry<sup>\*</sup>

Frederick H. Pitts

### abstract

The paper seeks to conceptualise Marxian value theory as a problem for social research to investigate. It is argued that so conceptualised, value can only be encountered by the study of the 'totality of social relations' in capitalist society, inside the workplace and outside in the wider sphere of everyday life. It first gives a brief overview of the author's interpretation of the theory of value. It then suggests a way of conceptualising the theory of value as an object of research. It is contended that such research requires the study of the different 'modes of existence' that value takes over the course of the production of commodities and their circulation in society. Possible research approaches are discussed. First, the Italian worker's inquiry tradition is analysed as a means by which production in capitalist economies can be investigated in its micro-level, everyday aspect. This is deemed inadequate for its simple engagement with the workplace and those employed within it. An alternative approach is put forward inspired by feminist research into the 'life trajectory of the commodity', which incorporates the full totality of capitalist social relations into a broad and wide-ranging study of the different modes of existence taken by value both inside and outside the workplace, in production and circulation. Alongside this primarily theoretical project, some concrete recommendations are made for how this might pan out in practice.

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## Introduction

In this paper, I address the lack of intercourse between social research and the conceptual framework provided by Marx's theory of value. This is attributed to the difficulty of dealing in the ephemeral, abstract existence possessed by the production and circulation of value. It is wagered that many attempts at Marxian social research are hamstrung by the limitation only to research that presents itself immediately to the observer – monolithic amounts of 'surplus labour' extracted from the worker, rates of exploitation, instances of class struggle, etc. It is suggested that one can better understand the specific role that labour takes in capitalist society not by means of a study of work, workers or the workplace, but by means of an approach which studies these things in their location with the circuit of capital as a whole.

It may be said that the research of value can tell us more about labour than the study of labour itself, in some ways. Value is determined on a continuum, a procession of modes of existence of which labour and production are merely one. At different times, it appears as commodities, at others, money, in production, consumption and circulation. Labour has an integral role in the production of value, but only on the basis of the way in which its concrete existence is abstracted from in and through the exchange relation. This relegates the study of concrete labour and the conditions that surround it to a fairly peripheral and incidental status vis-à-vis the study of value.

Hence, just as the study of value can tell us more about labour, the study of labour is necessary to that of value. Obviously, this is conditional upon the judgement that it is important to study value in the first place. Where the question of 'why study of value at all' arises, it might be answered that value is what lies behind and is expressed in its phenomenal forms of wealth and power, and the concentrations of these that govern social relations of class domination, for instance. It is the validation of labour as value-producing through the exchange abstraction that marks it out as productive, specifically *capitalist* labour, and brings into existence with it class subjectivities tied to this labour. Yet value is a social form, and its study transcends work, workers and the workplace in order that it may reflect a renewed understanding of their properly social role, abstracted from in exchange, back upon these categories.

## The conceptualisation of the problem

Treated as a means of *researching* work and workers and their position under capitalism rather than a principally *political intervention* in these matters, the tradition of workers inquiry exhibits both failings and pointers in the direction of such a study.

In a 1981 paper on value theory and social research, Erik Olin Wright identifies the relative isolation of Marxian value theory from the ‘concrete investigation [...] of social life’. The two meet only implicitly in the wide body of Marxist-influenced workplace studies. The issue of how the two might be reconciled is the central problematic of this article. Wright contends that

Debates on the labour theory of value are usually waged at the most abstract levels of theoretical discourse. Frequently these debates are preoccupied with questions of the appropriate methodological stance toward social analysis, epistemological disputes about what it means to ‘explain’ a social process, and mathematical arguments about the merits of competing ways of formally deriving certain categories from others. Rarely are the issues posed in terms of their implications for the concrete investigations of social life in which social scientists would engage. (1981a: 36)

According to Wright, the Marxist analysis of labour and value provokes researchers to look closely at the labour process, due to the central role played by the ‘socio-technical conditions of production’ in determining the value conferred upon the commodity. In this way, a simple picture of the inputs and outputs of production is inadequate; rather, what happens in between becomes central (Wright, 1981a: 63). The labour theory of value ‘systematically direct[s] research towards questions of the labour process and its relationship to classes’ by situating the ‘conceptualisation of classes in terms of exploitation based in the relations of production’ (Wright, 1981b: 130-1). This could be used as an explanatory factor for both class-struggle and labour-process streams of empirical research. In the seminal workplace ethnographies published in the UK over the 1970s and 1980s, examples such as Ruth Cavendish’s *Women on the line* (1982) and Huw Benyon’s *Working for Ford* (1984) focused on the everyday conditions of work and the struggles between workers and management. The former possessed the virtue of linking what happens in the workplace to wider set of social positions and practices constituted on the basis of gender. In the USA, labour process researchers, such as Michael Burawoy in his study *Manufacturing consent* (1982), assessed the particular practices of control, discipline and domination exerted by management upon their workers.

The most notable among attempts at fully-fledged social research within the Marxist tradition are those carried out in Italy over the course of the sixties and

seventies under the banner of the 'inquiry'. It will be argued here that such approaches are deficient where the study of the theory of value is concerned. Whilst providing valuable insights into the quotidian conditions of work in contemporary capitalism, and compelling evidence as to the veracity of the Marxist concept of exploitation, such examples as those presented by the Worker's Inquiry tradition bear only the slightest proximity to the conceptual framework of the theory of value, with its explanation of how individual labours are rendered social by the system of commodity exchange. These examples suggest that instances of class conflict and domination provide a far more observable set of phenomena for research than do the categories of Marx's theory of value. The theory of value and its attendant categories (such as abstract labour) are only ever at best *implicit* in such research, but 'rarely is it explicitly incorporated into the *conceptualisation of the problem*' (Wright 1981a: 65, emphasis added). In light of this, this paper is an attempt to explore how the theory of value can be *conceptualised as a problem* for social research to investigate. This is principally a question of what might be the appropriate *object of research* for an empirical study of value, one which demands what might be called a 'social' inquiry rather than a 'worker's' one *per se*. We will first outline in brief the conception of value theory henceforth utilised.

## Outline of a theory of value

In conceptualising value theory as a problem to investigate it is first necessary to outline an interpretation of the theory of value with which to proceed. This interpretation has its roots in the mature economic works of Marx, but differs in important ways from orthodox, traditionalist approaches to his output, redressing the disproportionate emphasis placed upon the value-producing properties of labour in favour of a perspective which foregrounds the abstract process of *social validation* which renders labour productive of value.

In this paper the theory of value will be characterised as an attempt to explain how commodities are commensurable in a society organised around commodity exchange. The key device through which commensurability is explained is considered to be the social validation of individually expended concrete labour-time as social *abstract* labour-time, which is both presupposed by and expressed in the money form. In the wake of selected value-form critiques of traditional Marxism, we set out an alternative position that emphasises both production *and* circulation as parts of a totalising process of value determination.

Michael Heinrich (2012: 53-55) suggests that rather than a property produced at some point in the production process with which the commodity is endowed,

value is instead something ‘bestowed *mutually* in the act of exchange’. Marx himself points towards this mutual constitution of value when he suggests that outside their exchange with one another, the coat and linen have no ‘value-objectivity’. It is only the relation between the two, in which the labours that produced them are equalized and abstracted from, that can endow them with any such objective value. A product of labour on its own, then, is neither value-bearing nor a commodity. The product of labour is only such when it enters into exchange. However, whilst value is not determined prior to exchange, it can also not be said to originate ‘coincidentally’ solely through the exchange act itself. Rather, Heinrich reconciles productionist and circulationist approaches to value by moving the emphasis away from a preoccupation with the ‘*individual* labor of the producer and the product’ towards a relationship of validation whereby individually expended labours are brought into relation with (and reduced to a fragment of) the ‘*total labor of society*’. Neither exchange nor labour is therefore seen as producing value, but rather exchange is seen as mediating the relationship between individual and social labour, bestowing value upon abstract social labour-time through a process of social validation. Thus, Heinrich renders nonsensical the dispute over whether production or circulation ultimately determines the creation of value. As he asserts, ‘[v]alue isn’t just “there” after being “produced” someplace’, but is a ‘social relationship [...] constituted in production *and* circulation, so that the “either/or” question is senseless’ (*ibid.*: 52-54, emphasis in original).

The idea of value as being the product of a social validation of labour enacted through exchange will be harnessed in the foregoing synthesis in order to articulate a distinct position which orients itself towards an explanation situated in both production *and* circulation as opposed to one or the other. The idea of abstract labour as a category actualized through the ‘social validation’ of the commodity moment will play a central part. The conceptual apparatus through which this is to be understood will be outlined before proceeding. This apparatus revolves around an interpretation of value as an abstraction, which is essentially *emergent*, reliant upon a dialectic of potentiality and actuality.

Riccardo Bellofiore follows Lucio Colletti (1973; 1989) and Claudio Napoleoni (1975) in suggesting that the abstraction of labour is a mystical, metaphysical, mental abstraction that takes the form of a *real hypostatization* taking place *in reality*. The abstraction that takes place in exchange is merely ‘the end-point of a *process* of real hypostatization’ that involves the whole capitalist cycle, including production (Bellofiore 2009: 180, emphasis added). At its most basic and earliest level, this can be exhibited in the fact that ‘*on the labour market*, the worker has to be seen *as an appendix of the commodity he[/she] sells*, labour power’. This leads Bellofiore to posit that ‘abstract labour is not a mental generalization but a *real*

*abstraction*. It goes on daily in the ‘final’ *commodity market*, but also on the *labour market* and *immediate production*’ (*ibid.*: 183).

Such a perspective holds abstraction to be a process rather than an instance. As the *Endnotes* collective writes, value is a process which takes different forms at different times – money, labour-power, commodities, and then money again (Endnotes, 2010). This process-oriented conception of value provides a useful counterguard against theorisations which present the production of value in a static, reductive way. Bellofiore and Roberto Finelli associate the theoretical foundations of Marx’s conceptualisation of value in the nexus of possibility, potentiality and actuality presented in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (1998, Book *Theta*: 251-283). In Aristotle’s schema, *possibility* is only the conceivable ‘capacity to be’, *potentiality* achieves ‘being’ in the sense that it is ‘the unfolding of a form already implicit’, and *actuality* is the result of potentiality’s full unfolding. According to Bellofiore and Finelli, labour and value can be read along these lines, with labour power as ‘the potentiality for labour’, of which living labour is the actuality. At the same time, this actuality of labour is *potential* value, of which money is the actuality. Money then stands as ‘potential capital’, which can attain actuality through the valorisation of the labour process by means of exchange (Bellofiore and Finelli, 1998: 55-56).

Rather than the simultaneous ‘performance’ of concrete and abstract labour, it is perhaps better to see the latter as merely *latent* in the former, a mere possibility or potentiality awaiting actualization. As Marx writes, ‘[s]ocial labour-time exists in [...] commodities in a latent state, [...] and becomes evident only in the course of their exchange’. Therefore, writes Marx, ‘[u]niversal social labour is consequently not a ready-made prerequisite but an emerging result’ (1859). It is this latency that constitutes the conceptual thread which situates value at a point of articulation *between* both production and circulation. Rubin saw Marx as situating the exchange abstraction not merely post-production, but as a process which has its traces at every stage of the capitalist circuit (Bellofiore, 2009: 183-4). Following Rubin, Bellofiore discusses money and abstract labour as ‘*diachronic* concepts “in motion”, perpetually *in becoming*’ (*ibid.*: 188). Rubin’s belief in the latency of abstract labour is best summed up where he writes that abstract labour is ‘not something to which form adheres from the outside. Rather, through its development, the content itself gives birth to the form which was already latent in the content’ (Rubin, 1972: 117). Bellofiore sees labour as inhabiting two characteristics in the very same activity. It is both concrete in that it possesses specific properties and ‘*latently abstract*’ in that it possesses the ‘tentative’ promise of producing money (Bellofiore, 2009: 189).

In contrast to productionist and circulationist variants of value theory, this perhaps is a more moderate way of placing abstract labour at the point of exchange – to say that it is only *latent* in production, a dual character of labour that is only half ‘there’ at any one time. In the same way that labour-power is not labour but the potential to be so, so too is abstract labour *not* labour but its residual aggregation. The first ‘non-labour’ is introduced before the labour process, the second arises afterwards. The belief in abstract labour as a ‘type’ of labour incites the expectation that this labour should be responsible for producing something, a misguided expectation that Marx does nothing to discourage with his representation of abstract labour as that element which gives rise to value and acts as its ‘substance’ (Elson, 1979: 148) Marx himself does confuse matters somewhat when he writes of abstract labour that it is at once ‘quantities of homogeneous human labour’ (1976: 128) and ‘human labour pure and simple, the expenditure of human labour in general’ (*ibid.*: 135). The two accounts are marked by differing temporal perspectives, the first conveying abstraction as a retrospective summation of the labour that has taken place, the second suggesting that this abstraction functions through the expenditure of general human labour on the job. The first places an emphasis upon abstract labour as the aggregation of abstract labour-time *ex post*, whereas the second places an emphasis upon abstract labour as something with a concrete, active existence. It is the former, *ex post* appreciation – henceforth referred to as one of ‘social validation’ – which proves adequate to a conception of abstract labour as latent.

This latency is evinced in the means by which abstract labour is measured, as an average established after production has taken place. Abstract labour cannot be counted on the clock, like the hours expended in acts of concrete labour. Rather, abstract labour is not expended at all. Instead, as Heinrich asserts, abstract labour is a ‘*relation of social validation* that is constituted in exchange’. In this process, ‘privately expended concrete labor’ is validated as ‘a particular quantum of value-constituting abstract labor’ (Heinrich, 2012: 50-51). Therefore, the determination of value is considered to be subject to a process located within the entire circuit of production and circulation. Such a ‘circuitist’ position holds that value is determined not solely in production, but through the social validation of expended labour, which takes place in circulation. There the one cannot be said to possess any determination without the other, with production and circulation consisting as ‘moments of a whole’ (Clarke, 1980: 9). This whole is the capitalist circuit.



## Researching value

To summarise the above account, in foregrounding the process of social validation by which labour is rendered productive of value, the theory of value given here has placed an emphasis upon abstract labour rather than concrete as the key guise in which labour assumes importance in the capitalist mode of production. In this conceptualisation, once a product of labour is confirmed as a commodity possessed of value and exchangeability, the *concrete* specificity of individual labours is *abstracted from* in order to smooth out the former's differences and constitute pure, undifferentiated homogeneous labour expressed in exchangeable commodities. By means of this process, the labour which went into a commodity's production is *validated* as a portion of the total abstract labour of society, as *productive* labour which has helped bestow value upon a good or service so that it can stand as a commodity in a relationship of equivalence and commensurability with the other commodities of the market by means of money.

Hence, abstract labour does not take place at all, but is an invention of the process of abstraction that stems from the concrete, private nature of the labour that takes place in capitalist society – it becomes social and abstract only after it has occurred. The only labour that takes place is concrete, and, by extension, the study of concrete labour in and of itself offers little in the way of understanding of the true function of labour in the production of value, and inhibits an ability to interpret what is specific and notable about the existence of capitalist labour itself. Rather than constituting a set of observable and researchable practices that allow us to get to the bottom of value-producing labour, concrete labour comes to take a role in the production of value only by means of its mediation through the immaterial process whereby value is assigned to a quantity of abstract labour.

Thus, research geared solely towards concrete labour, its conditions and the experience of it can touch upon only part of the reality of labour under capital. Research must instead be geared towards the social totality in which abstract labour is brought into existence. The 'commodity moment' marks only the resolution of a process of abstraction that begins with the inception of the production process. The expectation of monetary return which guides business activity already gives a tentative, latent form to abstract labour, and lays the foundation for its social validation over the whole course of the circuit of value creation. It is the crystallisation of abstract social labour-time in the form of money that marks the endpoint in what is in effect a *process* of social validation that begins in an ideal form as soon as bank finance sets the ball rolling. Whilst one can accept that the material paraphernalia of working life – wages, timesheets, performance indicators, targets, commission and, perhaps most of all, the clock – can all be seen as agents of this process of abstraction that are

actively lived and experienced by workers (and it is towards these dimensions that my own research is directed), there remains a sphere of determination which exceeds these easily experienced and observed manifestations of social validation, taking on both empirical and non-empirical reality in the social totality at large, in money, commodities, circulation and consumption- namely, in the circuit of capital as a whole.

## Modes of existence

We will begin our attempt to sketch a conception of an adequate object of research by establishing some theoretical foundations. Richard Gunn differentiates two modes of theorising, *determinate* and *empiricist* abstraction (1992: 23). The simplest way to sum up what Gunn means when he poses empiricist abstraction against determinate abstraction is that the former refers to a mental category, such as ‘production’, which abstracts from and irons out the differences between all the different modes of production to create one which functions as a synonym for all, whereas the latter refers to an abstraction that has a real existence, such as the abstraction ‘labour’, which may well function as an empiricist abstraction, taking all the different kinds of work and abstracting from them for ease of presentation, but also has a social form that arrives with the development of the exchange relation, in which different and multifarious labours are abstracted from in the shape of value (see Gunn, 1989: 19-21). Whereas empiricist abstraction relies upon a set of *external* relations, determinate abstraction describes a situation of *internal* relatedness strung together by the totalizing modes of existence of social phenomena. In this internal relatedness, A might be B’s mode of existence (or ‘form’), with B also as A’s mode of existence. Furthermore, C might be B’s mode of existence, and D the mode of existence of C whilst also having a separate mode of existence as A. This ‘criss-crossing field of mediations’ constitutes a totality, no part of which persists on its own (Gunn, 1992: 24).

The internal relatedness described by Gunn is not defined by mere *relations* between things, nor *equivalences*. Rather, what faces us are actual *samenesses* complete *identicalities*, in which things stand as modes of existence of one another (*ibid.*: 24). This has implications for social research. One that may be inferred from this explanation of determinate abstraction is that research objects are essentially *elusive*, present only in the totality of relations, appearances and modes of existence itself. The mode of existence, for Gunn, conforms precisely to that Aristotelian notion of process which we earlier attributed to the production of value. For Gunn, ‘actuality and activity are the same thing’, and to *be* is to *do* (*ibid.*, n. 14: 38). The mode of existence, then, must not be seen as a passive or

static 'being', but an active 'doing', in which 'existence' is read as existence or ek-stasis or ecstasy, i.e., in an active way, in which 'nothing static [...] inheres' (*ibid.*: 21).

For Gunn, such 'existence-in-practice' is the hallmark of determinate abstraction, and 'mode of existence' the true object of the study of 'form' (*ibid.*: 23). As such, a clear link can be drawn between the study of value as a social form and the idea of value as a process of possibility, potentiality and actuality- a mode of active existence. Furthermore, such a form is not only marked by its active existence as a process, but through its constitution as 'an internally related 'field'', in which 'anything can be the mode of existence of anything else' (*ibid.*: 23). In these two aspects – what Gunn calls 'unfixity of form' (*ibid.*: 32) and internal relatedness – is presented the real problem which faces researchers who venture into the study of value theory and its categories: the mode of existence.

Thus, in the course of its becoming, value can be seen as subject to a constant procession of such 'modes of existence', of which internal relatedness and unfixity of form are the chief features. In the first, *internal relatedness*, all things appear as everything else. In the second, *unfixity of form*, each manifestation of form is fleeting, fugitive and elusive. These issues present obvious problems for social research geared to the investigation of the value form. The conceptualisation offered by Gunn would seem to suggest that what is needed is a social research which rather than avoiding or attempting to reduce the internal relatedness and unfixity of the phenomena which it studies, is geared towards the investigation of modes of existence as an object of research.

We might phrase the sequence of these modes of existence in the following way. Labour is significant in capitalism by virtue of its abstraction and validation as value-producing. Hence, to investigate labour under capital, one must look to value. Value and its categories are elusive, and its investigation always points towards another place. For instance, value theory might direct the research towards the other commodity in which the value of a given commodity is represented. Furthermore, the social labour-time necessary for a commodity's reproduction of course pertains to that amount of labour time necessary to expend in order to be able to create the means by which the commodity may be purchased or exchanged for. This implies that in order to judge socially necessary labour time, one must look at another commodity, and for that, another, and so on and on endlessly. The commodity only possesses value insofar as it is drawn into a relation of equivalence with other commodities- or indeed the universal equivalent of money. In order to research labour-time, for instance, we must first look not at the commodity produced in that labour-time, but another commodity, or, indeed, money itself. This demands a holistic approach to research which

encapsulates both production and circulation. This means that it cannot follow previous Marxist social research in limiting itself to the workplace, instead situating itself in the whole totality of capitalist social relations.

As the description of the different stages that value takes in the process of production and circulation which forms its central movement displays, value is an elusive category to research, constantly withdrawing from quick and easy observation. A social, all-encompassing investigation of the totality of relations is needed in order to capture some impression of the 'modes of existence' that value assumes in society. The law of value cannot be researched without consideration of exchange, abstraction and circulation. What is needed is a research approach which does not limit itself to the labour-process or the realm of production, but can appreciate the capitalist circuit in the round.

Therefore, many examples of Marxian research into work and the labour-process are deficient for the purposes of an enquiry into value and its categories. Often this is attributable to the simple fact that their object is typically class struggle and its transparent, observable instances. Turning our attention towards worker's inquiry we find many such problems. However, whilst providing a useful case study for delineating some of the problems faced by a social research approach to value theory, the history of 'workers' inquiry' in Italy also points us towards a potential way out.

### **The workers' inquiry: 'sociological-objectivist' and 'political-interventionist' currents**

The 'workers' inquiry' is perhaps the most notable strand of Marxian social research, specifically for the fact that it originates with Marx himself. However, it was the Italian autonomists who provided the necessary update to the inquiry template, and, in the process, its popularisation. Scholars and activists grouped around the journal *Quaderni Rossi* eschewed the remote engagement of the questionnaire in order to insert themselves within industrial workplaces (often as workers) and perform research from *within* and in conjunction with the object of their research, the workers themselves (Brown and Quan-Hase, 2012: 489).

These attempts to infiltrate the factories and their workers had historical foundations in Mao's clarion call 'No investigation, no right to speak!', which inspired Maoists in the West to send 'moles' into factories in their home countries. At the same time, they rubbed shoulders with militant Leninists who had entered workplaces in order to whip up revolt under their exclusive leadership (Aufheben, 2004). Within these two earlier instances, Maoist and

Leninist, can be traced the basis for a split between two tendencies in the *Quaderni Rossi* group.

On the one hand, the *Quaderni Rossi* grouping arose from young elements of the Italian socialist and communist parties who, Wright tells us, sought to ‘apply Marx’s critique of political economy [...] to unravel the fundamental power relationships of modern class society [...]. In the process, they sought to confront *Capital* with “the *real* study of a *real* factory”, in pursuit of a clearer understanding of the new instances of independent working-class action’ (Wright, 2002: 3). This gave rise to what is referred to as a ‘sociological-objectivist’ current who wished to simply understand and analyse working conditions employing interview techniques inspired by industrial sociology (Aufheben, 2004). This understanding and analysis could then be turned towards the effective political activity of the organisations pitched in on the side of the workers (Thorpe, 2011). Panzieri (1965), a key representative of the current, suggests that such research provides an empirical bulwark against over-optimistic portraits of class power at any one time. In this way, it mirrors the Maoist invocation of investigation before action.

Whereas the sociological-objectivist current characterised the workers only as an *object* of research, the second ‘political-interventionist’ current saw the worker as constituting a joint subject-object who effectively participates in the performance of the research. The political-interventionist tendency also displayed scepticism about the sociological-objectivist current’s use of industrial sociology, which was seen as a bourgeois tool of the capitalist academy and of utility only in so far as it provided a first step in researching the field before the jointly-constituted co-research of worker and researcher could begin (Aufheben, 2004). Rather than merely understanding or analysing the situation, research in the political-interventionist vein was conducted from a strategic and tactical standpoint of encouraging workers to come to (correct) consciousness and participate in the class struggle through their own self-activity and self-understanding as co-researchers (Thorpe, 2011; de Molina, 2004). As such, it compares to the earlier militant interventions carried out by Leninists who inserted themselves artificially in potential sites of workplace revolt.

### From workers’ inquiry to social inquiry

As Brown and Quan-Hase suggest, the one similarity that persisted between Marx’s inquiry and that of the autonomists was the strict location of such studies within the ‘factory as the central site of study’, not only sociologically but physically. Whilst principally a matter of convenience in that factories

concentrated workers ‘in geographically specific locations [...] working en masse at regular and predictable hours, and on jobs that could be observed or described first hand’ (not to mentioned compared), it could be claimed that the narrow focus upon such workplaces is also attributable in part to the ‘workerist’ ideology popular on the Italian left at the time, and exhibits many of the pratfalls of Marxian research I have highlighted in the preceding discussion of the role played by labour in the production of value.

However, an alternative trend to that of the workerist tendency in the inquiry tradition provides valuable pointers for potential ways forward. By the end of the sixties, many of the representatives of this workerist tendency ended up in the organisation *Potere Operaio*, which took the political-interventionist current to its logical conclusion by dispensing with inquiry entirely in favour of struggle and intervention in the factories through rank-and-file committees. However, inquiry was rejuvenated at the end of the seventies with publications such as *Primo Maggio*. The new spirit of inquiry developed partly in reaction to workerism. Negri had posited the new *operaio sociale*, ‘a new proletariat disseminated through society’ through capitalist restructuring and the ‘massification of abstract labour’. The study of this new class subjectivity, defined by its activity in the social fabric at large rather than the traditional workplace, necessitated an inquiry ‘obliged to follow the workers outside the factory’ (Aufheben 2004) in their roles as agents of consumption and circulation as well as of production. The necessity to turn outside the workplace into society is one that still confronts Marxian research today.

In the investigation of the *operaio sociale*, co-research came to play a central role. This co-research is described by Negri as ‘involving building a description of the productive cycle and identifying each worker’s function within that cycle; but at the same time it also involves assessing the levels of exploitation which each of them undergoes’ (Negri, 2008: 162-3). As such, co-research retains a focus on exploitation within the realm of production whilst seeking to situate this experience in the overall processes of capitalist valorisation. It resembles what today is known as participatory action research, expanding ‘the scope of research locales’ into other areas of society such as the school and the community.

As Brown and Quan-Hase suggest, this expansion, like earlier developments in inquiry method from Marx to the *Quaderni Rossi*, demonstrates the way in which ‘it is the problems presented by the contemporary labouring context that force us to once again change our strategies’ (2012: 490-1). Furthermore, new understandings of value, forged through the immanent critique of work on the topic in the Marxist tradition, should also provoke us to consider new strategies for research. Not least among the novelties of any new strategy must be an

approach that does not reduce all Marxian research to a study of the workers who bear the brunt of capitalist production as has the workers' inquiry tradition, but rather seeks to open a window upon the system of commodity exchange to which capitalist production stands in service. This latter aim requires a radically new conception of the object of such research, the broader social context of which is only hinted at by the developments in autonomist inquiry achieved by *Primo Maggio* and their investigation of the *operaio sociale*.

Within this more outward-facing conception of the inquiry is contained an attempt to embed work and those who perform it within the wider totality of production, circulation, consumption and the circuit of capital. Hence, one can see within the inquiry tradition a potentially convergent path from that of a study simply of the conditions and subjectivities of production, which, rather than limiting itself to the workplace, extends its reach into a more *social* path of investigation – a *social* inquiry.

Whilst there is a clear chronological development that leads from the workers' to the social inquiry, there is no simple fixed point at which the 'factory went social' and the inquiry adequate to it became social in turn. Even in the new kinds of work to which the moniker 'immaterial' has attached itself, fairly traditional techniques of inquiry remain. A notable example is that of Kolinko's call centre inquiry (2002). Despite the stated recognition that '[w]e cannot only focus on call centres because these - like any sector - can only be understood by looking at capitalist cooperation', in *Hotlines*, the isolated workplace is the singular focus of the inquiry. Rather than the inquiry building into a wider conceptualisation of the position of call centres in the circuit of capital, the external context in which call centre work is situated is largely considered only as preliminary preparation for the real business of the research itself. In spite of paying lip-service to a theorisation of the broken boundaries between the formal realm of production and the valorising forces found in society outside the workplace (*ibid.*, n.4: 193), Kolinko's inquiry stays squarely within a traditionally workerist paradigm.

Elsewhere, contemporary inquiry has become endowed with a more 'social' quality in response to the perceived development of 'cognitive capitalism' and the hegemonic position assumed by immaterial labour in capitalist society<sup>1</sup>. De

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1 The importance of ideas around cognitive capitalism and immaterial labour to the development of the inquiry tradition was helpfully pointed out by the second anonymous reviewer, along with the challenging suggestion that the theory of value given in the paper conforms to an outdated model of factory production. However, rather than ignoring the important ways in which work has changed, I would argue that what the paper does is to implicitly restate the continuing relevancy of a theory of value to models of production subsequent to what we think of as the formal 'factory'

Molina (2004) suggests that the eminence of knowledge and the exploitation of the common in new immaterial forms of production require a mode of inquiry geared towards the mapping of ‘cartographies’ of the manifestations of valorisation in society. This largely corresponds to the argument made here, albeit for the weight of the emphasis placed upon the novelty of the present condition. The theorisation of the law of value given above privileges an explanation oriented around the social validation of abstract labour rather than the expenditure of concrete labour. Put simply, any and all labour may be reconciled with the former, whatever the distinct guise or form taken by the latter. Therefore, against accounts such as that of Hardt and Negri (2001: 292), which would suggest that any proper theory of value is compromised by the immateriality and immeasurability of the new forms of production, the alleged advent of immaterial labour does not compromise or render dated the theory of value given above. What this suggests is that the insistence of de Molina and others upon the imperativeness of social inquiry in the context of specifically contemporary conditions of capitalist production is misleading. No ‘new facts’ are needed to guide us from the traditional workers’ inquiry to that of the social. A fully ‘social’ inquiry has always been necessary, because capitalism is and has always been subject to a process of immaterial social abstraction, of which cognitive capitalism is as much a piece as any other previous appearance of the same system, and which can only be fully appreciated by means of a perspective that treats all society as a factory in which valorisation is achieved.

The implication of all this is that, against the more workerist approaches found within the inquiry tradition, the position of work and workers in capitalist society – and by extension its link with value, that key principal towards which all critique of capitalism must direct itself – cannot be researched solely on the basis of work, workers and workplaces, without consideration of the process of exchange, abstraction and circulation which truly renders work and those who perform it an important and significant phenomenon, by means of the role played in the determination of value and, thus, the form of appearance value assumes by way of wealth and power in capitalist societies. An inquiry directed towards anything else more limited than this gives an incomplete picture of the position of the worker under capital.

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model, in spite of claims to the contrary based upon the supposedly revolutionary newness of immaterial labour. In what follows, space demands that only a very brief summary is given of a more extensive and nuanced argument concerning the resources via which a theory of value oriented around the social validation of abstract labour both accommodates and neutralises critiques informed by the attribution of a kind of disruptive novelty to the immaterial. I hope to flesh this out further in a forthcoming paper.



What is needed is a research approach which does not limit itself to the labour-process or the realm of production, but can appreciate the capitalist circuit in the round. This entails a research which has as its object the totality of capitalist social relations. In the concluding part of the paper, I will sketch out an example of the research practice that this necessitates, reflecting upon some of the ways in which the initial threads of such an approach are promised in existing research programmes derived from feminist approaches which follow the 'life trajectory of the commodity' through society, as a medium through which the social relations that constitute the value-form – production, circulation, consumption – can be captured as an object of social research which gives over to its essential unfixity and endless interrelationality rather than coming up against these qualities as obstacles.

### **The life trajectory of the commodity: An example of a properly social inquiry?**

By way of illustration, there is one body of literature in social research which seems to be able to grasp production as a process unlimited to the workplace and to appreciate the internal relatedness of the totality of social relations, to the extent that working tasks cannot be considered in and of themselves without reference to the commodities they create and the way in which they fit into the total labour of society. This body of literature is associated with a feminist understanding of social phenomena as criss-crossed with relations of gender. The gender-oriented approaches detailed here illustrate a broad, all-encompassing and essentially *processual* understanding which incorporates commodities, labour and economic relations as parts of a totality. Whilst this tendency, exemplified here by the theoretical contributions of Miriam Glucksmann on the 'total social organisation of labour' and the empirical research of Cynthia Cockburn and Susan Ormrod, does not possess or provide all the answers we are seeking, it can be seen to point us in a number of worthwhile directions.

In her understanding of the organization of production, Glucksmann is interested in the way in which interconnections exist within different types of work activity, and between work and non-work activities outside the formal confines of the workplace. In an attempt to provide the necessary 'equipment' for a 'new sociology of work' adequate to contemporary capitalism, her 'total social organisation of labour' schema defines four dimensions. The first is 'across the processes of production, distribution, exchange and consumption'. The second is 'across the boundaries between paid and unpaid work, market and non-market, formal and informal sectors'. The third is 'the articulation of work activities and

relations with non-work activities and relations'. The fourth is 'differing temporalities of work and the significance of temporality across the other three interconnections' (2005: 19). Glucksmann suggests that temporality is the 'golden thread' that connects the first three dimensions, 'denot[ing] the organisation of time in durations, cycles, synchronies, sequences and rhythms, and their articulation' (*ibid.*: 33).

Glucksmann emphasises the 'overlapping and inseparable' quality of these linkages (*ibid.*: 19). Rejecting the notion of a 'circuit' of production and consumption for its implied linearity, Glucksmann suggests instead that we adopt a conception of *overall process* as the means by which the interlocking mechanisms are expressed (*ibid.*: 25). As examples of the way in which the internal relatedness of economic processes can be appreciated with an overall approach, Glucksmann writes of the complex ways in which the 'provision' of ready-made food is intricately linked to the productive role of women in society and the way in which commodities such as washing machines were turned from industrial use in laundrettes to instruments of female reproductive labour in the home. She suggests that 'ever-extendable' examples such as these demonstrate the way that they cohere only through a process consisting of 'a particular configuration of production, distribution, exchange and consumption', from which no element 'can be properly appreciated on its own' (*ibid.*: 28).

Glucksmann's earlier study *Women assemble* (1990) attempted to put these principles into action. With a focus upon the role of technology as a factor in a social process encompassing production, circulation and consumption, the study focused upon assembly-line production and the way in which it not only positioned women as the users of technology as part of the production process but also the purchasers and users of the commodities produced when they reached the realm of circulation. It is such a perspective, with its object as commodity production and consumption considered *in the round*, as a totalising social process, which might be most adequate for research into the theory of value.

Cockburn and Ormrod cite Glucksmann's earlier work as an influence upon their own inquiry into the social interaction between, and dual constitution of, gender and technology (1993). In this piece of research, Cockburn and Ormrod studied the path a specific commodity takes through society, in this case the microwave oven. From design, through production, distribution, marketing, selling, consumption, use and obsolescence, Cockburn and Ormrod analyse the different dimensions of the way gender is inscribed within and constituted in conjunction with the commodity. Although, as the authors acknowledge, this treatment might seem to unduly reify the commodity itself, the analysis of this

commodity as the product of a complex system of social relations insures against such a pratfall. Further, unlike other studies that reify not so much the commodity itself but a specific, isolated *aspect* of the commodity's production—such as research which confines itself solely to the labour-process in a formal workplace with no consideration of the wider economic apparatus in which such a labour-process is situated – Cockburn and Ormrod's study of the microwave oven, through the conduit of the conceptualisation of a commodity as subject to a process which encapsulates multiple different social modes and activities, is distinguished by its emphasis 'not on any one moment in the life of a technology (design, diffusion etc.) but rather to trace the whole life trajectory of an artefact' (1993: 3). The motivation for this overall view of production and circulation consisted in the fact that extant approaches to the social study of technology had emphasised only the initiation of technology in production, where the engineers and scientists participating were overwhelmingly male. By extending 'the scope of the technology world' beyond 'the initiatory moment' and into consumption and use', the study could account for women's engagement with technology in a more explicit way (*ibid.*: 9-10).

Cockburn and Ormrod criticise approaches focused only on one or the other aspect of the 'innovation' and 'impact' of technology. Where a focus on 'innovation' ignores the way in which the social role of technology is partly constituted after its production, one occupied only with 'impact' reifies the particular technology in question as something that appears entirely unproblematically as somehow 'given' in society (*ibid.*: 11). Research into value is faced with a similar conundrum. A focus purely on the labour that takes place in the production of a commodity misses the important way in which this labour is only rendered a productive component of the total labour of society by means of an abstraction located in exchange and merely latent during production. Meanwhile, a focus only on the 'commodity-moment' in which the instantaneous validation of concrete labour as abstract takes place misses the parts of the process which necessitate and presuppose this occurrence. Cockburn and Ormrod's emphasis upon the 'life trajectory' of the microwave oven provides a possible template for a circuitist, processural research approach aimed holistically at both production and circulation which might circumvent these dilemmas.

Cockburn and Ormrod perform this analysis of the 'life trajectory' of the microwave oven by exploiting the commodity's ability to 'provide [...] a rationale for, and [give] coherence to, a sequence of contacts and case studies'. These 'linked case studies' thus give a picture of a series of interlaced 'phases in the life trajectory of the artefact, involving an overview of a wide network of actors and agencies' (*ibid.*: 3-4). This meets the two criteria implied by the preceding critique

of value and the possibilities of social research. On the one hand, the processual nature of the research is susceptible to an understanding of *unfixity*, the movement of possibility, potentiality and actuality which defines commodity production and exchange, and an appreciation of the fleeting and fugitive nature of economic categories within the constant transition and overhaul which marks this process. On the other, the incorporation through the medium of the commodity of a wide network of social relations represented in a range of case studies encourages recognition of the radical *internal relatedness* of the capitalist totality.

Any such programme of research which uses the commodity as its basis poses a number of serious difficulties. The study of the commodity can be problematic – not least for the fact that a commodity is only a commodity in relation to the wider world of commodities, and only has value in so far as this value is expressed in an equivalent commodity, inviting an endless inquisition into a seemingly infinite procession of ‘modes of existence’. It is by virtue of its lack of an explicit commodity-analysis that Cockburn and Ormrod’s study of the microwave oven leaves only *pointers* towards possible directions rather than a template. Whilst a research approach geared towards unfixity and internal relatedness can *open up upon* modes of existence as an object of research, these modes of existence are nowhere more profound, mysterious and *real* as with the world of the commodity and the production of value of which it is the agent.

One of the chief problems of the more myopic treatment of the commodity circuit that may follow from a life-trajectory approach is that it may unduly reify the commodity and its social position. In the same way that a myopically labourist study of valorisation would simply reflect the fetishisation of labour in capitalist society, an approach inspired by the life-trajectory method might perform the same mirroring of capitalist social relations<sup>2</sup>. Cleaver (2000: 76-77) asserts how the strands of post-operaist thought and workers’ inquiry inspired by conceptualisations of the social factory sought to undermine such fetishisations by compromising the clean separation of productive work from non-productive leisure, of commodities from the underlying class struggle from which they are forged. The ‘social’ inquiry provides a basis for both the recognition of the importance of the whole circuit of capital in the process of valorisation – and the way that this can be traced through the travel of the commodity through society – whilst endowing any study of this movement with an understanding of class and social reproduction and the struggles that pertain to them.

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2 My thanks to the first anonymous reviewer for usefully reminding me of this.

Looking for evidence of this mode of research and analysis in the inquiry tradition, perhaps the closest recent parallel we might identify with reference to this radicalised 'life trajectory of the commodity' approach is that exhibited in the Uninomade Collective's inquiry into the logistics sector (2013). The study of logistics is the study not only of an isolated sector, but also the study of commodities and their valorisation in a much wider sense. An inquiry into logistics invites scrutiny of the movement of commodities in society, and the unfolding of their valorisation at the different stages of this movement. The case of logistics provides an exemplary focus for such a study, bringing into perspective one of the chief means by which the valorisation of commodities is made possible, namely via the lubrication of the structures which bring goods to people and people to goods.

## Conclusion

The central issue with which we set out to engage was how the theory of value could be conceptualised as a problem for social research to investigate. This conceptualisation theorises the determination of the value-form as subject to an 'internal relatedness' whereby the various different parts and components appear as the 'modes of existence' of one another, and by an 'unfixity' whereby these modes of existence persist on a perpetual continuum of becoming. As such, the value-form is defined as a fugitive, fleeting and elusive object of research which withdraws from easy analysis. This conceptualisation of the value-form constitutes the theoretical foundation of our reflections upon how social research into value theory might function in practice. We would suggest that it is these 'modes of existence' which are ultimately revealed to be the correct object of research for investigations into the theory of value.

It is recommended that the difficulties presented by the fugitive, fleeting and elusive nature of the mode of existence can be overcome by a programme of research inspired by feminist approaches, which rather than focusing on either production or circulation as the locus of capitalist economic processes, seek instead to appreciate the entire circuit as an *overall process* from which no one part can be isolated. This provides a tentative template for enquiry geared towards a positive understanding of the internal relatedness and unfixity that characterise the modes of existence through which the value-form appears in society. It is in such a way that the theory of value can be conceptualised as a problem for social research to investigate.

The workers' inquiry tradition has tended to fall short of this model of social research, subject to a narrow preoccupation with the workplace. However, some

later strands inspired by the theorisation of the ‘social factory’ can be seen as providing the initial germ of a basis for future research into value, calling into dispute the reification of the formal workplace in favour of an outward-facing position that encompasses the process of valorisation in the domestic, cultural and educational realms. Alongside such contributions, inquiries into certain key areas of capitalist activity, such as that by the Uninomade Collective into the logistics sector, also provide the basis for a deeper and more extensive exploration of the interrelational and unfixed procedures of valorisation. The later trends in the Italian inquiry tradition point towards the kind of social, all-encompassing research of the totality of capitalist social relations that is needed in order to capture some impression of the ‘modes of existence’ that value assumes in society.

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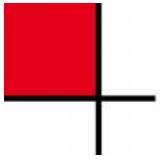
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## A workers' inquiry or an inquiry of workers?

Christopher Wellbrook

### abstract

This article considers the issue of workers' inquiry in light of the qualities and features of working class scholarship within the mass labour movements of the early twentieth century. A clear analysis of the conditions that have shaped and changed the role of socialist intellectuals reveals the weaknesses of existing academic radicalism, and the diminished capacity of radical research to cultivate cultures of class consciousness and solidarity. The ethics and practices that defined the educational and research activities of traditional worker-intellectuals provides the outline of an alternative model of scholarship in the form of a reflective community of worker-organisers. Such a community could prove both a useful resource for the initiation of workers' inquiry as well as a potential source of Left renewal.

### Introduction

In Volume 1 of *Capital*, Marx quotes with approval the account of a French workman, returning from San Francisco, who passed through almost every trade that was made available to him. The workman commented that he had changed his occupation 'as often as his shirt' becoming in a short time a miner, typographer, slater, plumber amongst other jobs. Following this experience, and to Marx's interest, he was surprised to find that he was 'fit for any sort of work' and as a result felt, 'less of a mollusc and more of a man' (Marx, 1867: 534). It appears strange that Marx should comment so favourably on the precarious nature of the workman's life. Yet in spite the indignities of constantly searching for new work there was clearly something valuable in the pursuit of such a varied life. The way the worker had come to appreciate the diverse capacity of their own



powers struck Marx as a richer, and perhaps more human, experience. It was a small glimmer of socialism buried beneath the proletarian experience.

The implications of Marx's, admittedly rather cursory, example are a little nebulous. The experience, however, was an important one not only for migrant workers of this period but also socialist organisers and activists. Lacking the support and stability enjoyed by academics today, worker intellectuals necessarily had to adopt an integrated approach to work, scholarship and organisational concerns. Circumstances demanded that they be intellectuals, researchers, writers, orators, organisers and activists all rolled into one. The same conditions drove the creation of self-sufficient sources of working class support and solidarity which were to play an instrumental role in cultivating the growth of mass movements. The labour organisations of this period are characterised by the growth of a distinct, proletarian counter-culture that worked to cement socialist principles in communities and workplaces as well as acting as an independent sphere of debate, social criticism and research.

The decline of mass movements and increasingly comprehensive access to both basic and higher education has meant the gradual eclipse of this form of socialist scholarship. The activity and attitudes of worker-organisers of this period, however, still offer a distinct model of worker-led research, or 'workers' inquiry', worthy of re-consideration. Such practices not only present an alternative to a reliance on professional research expertise but also address the limitations of academic radicalism in light of current challenges for the Left. Rising levels of education and better access to information has diminished the value of academic expertise as a tool for political mobilisation. Workers are increasingly both educated and politically literate. Meanwhile cultures of working class solidarity have continued to decline. Collaborative inquiries conducted by a community of worker-organisers present a potential tool in the development of the expertise necessary to re-build working class power. Historically where such communities have existed they have played an empowering role enriching both the organisational and intellectual capacity of working class movements. There is a compelling case for individuals who share socialist goals to cultivate such communities as a potential source of Left renewal.

### **Critical research: A brief overview**

The decline of mass, socialist movements across the West has meant that voices from inside the academy have increasingly become core intellectual representatives of the contemporary Left. Historically this is a break from a tradition in which contact with the ideas, debates and discoveries of the workers'

movement were largely delivered via the oration, pamphlets and newspapers of socialist organisations and their worker activists, most of whom were self-educated. Tom Mann, 'Big Bill' Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn were the Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek and Antonio Negri of their day. This transformation of the socialist intellectual from an organic, activist to a formal, professional figure has been a slow process following changes to the university and its social role. Improved access for those of lower economic status and a rising tolerance of critical research practices have allowed academics to offer public support, social criticism and pursue the production of new knowledge in the service of struggles for social justice. This gradual professionalisation of socialist scholarship has had implications for the way intellectuals relate to both political organisations within the tradition and the wider working class. It has, in particular, driven changes in critical research as academics have attempted to systematise a new form of connection between the paid researcher, the class and communities of struggle.

The first 'wave' of socialist intellectuals to emerge from the academy followed the rolling out of social welfare systems across the West in the post-war period. This was at a time when orthodox Marxism was the hegemonic doctrine of the global communist movement. As a result the relationship of most intellectuals, professional or otherwise, to both these organisations and the workers' movements was expressed in terms of their role as representatives of Soviet ideology. Practically, the stigma associated with being an outwardly revolutionary, public figure meant a strong dependence on communist parties, also tied to Moscow, as a resource to support collaboration and study in an otherwise hostile academy. As this hostility eased, however, the academy increasingly presented an alternative resource for intellectual work and space free from the requirement to operate within party discipline.

The result was a growing political distance for a new wave of Marxist and radical intellectuals from the ideologies of the established communist organisations. Events such as the Hungarian revolution of 1956 are frequently cited as a watershed moment for the various heterodox intellectual projects of this period. The violent crushing of the workers' councils by Soviet troops alienated many Western Marxists and provoked a deeper questioning of established party wisdom. But a break with the old ideas was also prepared by a growing consensus that orthodox methods were failing to serve as a useful tool for research and study. The rationale that drove groups such as the British Communist Party Historians and the Italian "workerists" over this time was an awareness of a working class distanced from socialist ideas and increasingly dominated by the ideologies and practices of mass consumerism. To these particular problems the rigid and economistic theories of orthodox Marxists

offered few solutions. Neither did they have much to say of the emerging struggles around gender, sexuality, race and the environment.

The challenges, however, went beyond simply shedding the stale and increasingly redundant orthodoxies. A post-war system of European states broadly orientated towards social partnership and welfare provision fundamentally changed the political terrain in which socialists operated. Revolutionary unions and socialist organisations entered a period of sharp decline – a tendency that has not really halted - compared to the levels of mass participation of the early twentieth century. The independent educational institutions that were a feature of these movements disappeared with them leaving a decreased capacity for a socialist culture within working class communities. Where left parties and unions retained large memberships they were broadly integrated into the political establishment abandoning commitments to revolutionary social change. The traditional model of the self-educated, worker-intellectual of the old trade union and socialist organisations was made redundant by comprehensive access to education through social welfare. Radical thought found its home within a more accepting academy, but the scope for putting these ideas into practice was limited by an increasingly conservative working class and a shrinking worker's movement, both in its size and also in terms of its capacity to develop organisers and activists within working class communities.

Access to new, socially-orientated research methodologies within political science, history and sociology presented to academics a means of tackling these challenges. Critical research offered opportunities to reconnect intellectual activity with the lives of working people as well as a potential tool for rebuilding the foundations of socialist consciousness that had declined with the mass movements. LeFort's article 'Proletarian Experience' and the work of his group *Socialisme ou barbarie* outlines most clearly the theory underlying this new method. He and his group noted the appearance of a new 'worker sociology' within the academy that had increasingly concentrated on 'social relations within production and...their practical intentions'. He saw the appropriation of this method, and its application in the form of critical research, as a means of augmenting and improving the theoretical framework of Marx in a way that sought to reveal valuable insights to workers. The desired outcome was that the researcher and the participant could re-assert the need for social change and together chart out paths for political action. Marx's 101 questions submitted to *Revue Socialiste* in 1880 concerning the conditions of work and the organisation of industry in France were held as an important prototype of such a 'workers' inquiry'.

In contemporary terms the declining influence of Marxism has meant that many of the motivations that sparked interest in workers' inquiry are much less attractive to contemporary academics. Instead there exists a loose, international community of radical scholars working with a broad interest in social justice and using a range of methods developed from the same base of socially-orientated research. Further changes in the university structure have meant that the interests of critical researchers have in some cases been institutionalised as new fields of study, for example in the case of social movement theories. That is not to say that these have altogether lost a radical agenda, a continuing focus has been on challenging hierarchies within knowledge production, ensuring greater representation of minority groups and attempting to match scholarly demands with a desire for social action. Such a search has, at points, re-sparked interest in the original conception of workers' inquiry. This is a model which undoubtedly remains appealing because, in spite of the many efforts to democratise and make research more participatory on the part of radical researchers, an essential 'structural separateness' between academics and workers remains (Wright, 2002: 24).

The starting point for most scholars concerned with this issue is to attempt to unpack the particular identities and relations of power that exist within knowledge production. It is assumed the frequent failure of radical research to galvanise political action is because research methods are not sufficiently liberating or fail to live up to egalitarian principles. Consideration has not been given to what can be learnt from the practice of socialist intellectuals before this developed into a largely professional role. From a period in which research, study and education were conducted in the mass, labour movements and socialist organisations active within them. The practice of self-educated, worker-organisers during this phase of the workers' movement reveals an entirely different approach to the production of critical knowledge. Worker-organisers not only operated independent from, what they considered to be, the bourgeois education institutions of the time but also adopted a much more integrated perspective on research, study, working-life and activism. Understanding the conditions that gave rise to these practices and the ethics which motivated them not only offers a new perspective on critical research but points to a wholly distinct model of radical intellectual activity.

## Education, research and social change

It is not possible to talk about research within the workers' movement in the same sense that it exists in the world of professional study. The publication of periodicals, debates, studies and research experiences were an organic and

integrated part of much wider practices involving a cross-section of activists, organisers and rank-and-file members. Pedagogy, debate, study and research practically co-existed within the educational activities of most labour organisations and as a result it is best to characterise the practice of research as an interconnected activity within the provision of socialist education. There was, of course, a lack of infrastructural support for the kind of specialist training required of professional researchers. However, as I argue below, such an integrated approach was not only a practical concern but also built from a natural understanding of the limitations of research alone as a tool for political mobilisation. That is not to understate the importance of both education and research. Worker-run educational institutions were an important means of overcoming barriers to access to even basic levels of education throughout this period. Research, likewise, could arm organisers with the strategic knowledge to concentrate their efforts and provide a clearer understanding of their constituencies. That such barriers no longer exist for the overwhelming majority of Western workers is an important discontinuity between the material conditions facing socialist intellectuals in the early twentieth century and today. The fact that radical academics, while not sharing the organisational experience of traditional socialist intellectuals, rationalise their activity as a method of specialist intervention is an important point for reflection in a period where access to education and information has never been easier while working class organisational capacity is in decline.

That the development of an independent, socialist base of knowledge should be identified as a priority from the birth of the workers' movement is not surprising. Early agitators understood that ignorance allowed capitalists to promote their own values, sew divisions and antagonisms and obscure the exploitative nature of the class system – what Gramsci outlined as the power of bourgeois hegemony and the utility of 'common sense'. An example of the importance of this issue as a strategic concern for early organisers is illustrated by the question raised by Bakunin to the readers of *L'Égalité*:

Will it be feasible for the working masses to know complete emancipation as long as the education available to those masses continues to be inferior to that bestowed upon the bourgeois, or, in more general terms, as long as there exists any class, be it numerous or otherwise, which, by virtue of birth, is entitled to a superior education and a more complete instruction? (Bakunin, 1869)

His subsequent demand for 'complete and integral education' on behalf of the socialist organisations fits within a strong tradition within the working class movement. The Paris Commune had as its first act the establishment of an educational commission to provide all children with such an integral education. These proposals were no doubt heavily sponsored by the Proudhonists who

would have been inspired by Proudhon's belief that in the future society, 'the industrial worker, the men of action, and the intellectual will be rolled into one' (Edwards, 1969: 87). The need for a working class system of education likewise featured strongly in the thought and activities of Marx and was established as a central plank of consciousness-raising activity for the International Workingmen's Association. Of the three stars that composed the famous globe of the Industrial Workers of the World – claiming an estimated 40,000 workers in the US at its peak – two were devoted to the principle of schooling the workforce in socialist methods: agitation and education. Within the mass movements of the early twentieth century this tradition flowered into an increasingly global spread of worker-led, counter-culture in the form of libraries, social centres, modern schools, 'anarchist' Sunday schools, educational and cultural associations, publishing houses and print shops. Such initiatives not only sought to subvert the control of information by the capitalist class but challenge more fundamental representations of the individual's role within society. As long as the production and circulation of commodities was presented as the only natural and legitimate state of affairs the real, creative powers that lay behind the human economy would remain buried in social thought. Even the critical social sciences would be squeezed within the limits of the need to, at all times, reproduce value.

For Marx, Bakunin and others this was the essential value of historical materialism, a method of study that cut through these false representations and highlighted the social forces that determined the organisation of societies. It challenged the supposedly natural qualities of the existing order by establishing both the class interests behind them and their changing, historical character. It is also possible to see from the same line of reasoning how a critical appropriation of the research methods of social science, putting them at the service of workers needs over capital, later appeared as such a natural tool of intervention for radical academics. If the basis of social conformity was in an acceptance of the appearance of capitalist relations, outlining the essential relationships that existed underneath would seem to provide the first step towards acting against them. In many ways perhaps even a prerequisite of the development of any socialist consciousness. As Mattick, Jr. (1986: 115-6) succinctly puts it:

Those who wish to control their social (or their natural) conditions of life need to understand the situations in which they find themselves and the possible choices of action within these situations.

Yet while the representation of 'society' can act as a constraint that denies certain forms of action it is equally important to note that such a representation is simultaneously a reflection of real mechanisms of discipline and control within class society. Before the rise of the bourgeois class in Europe is a particularly

bloody history of primitive accumulation that violently removed the peasantry from access to common land and property and forcefully integrated them into the capitalist market. The manipulation of wage rates, the industrial reserve army, technological advancement, the movement of industry and the repressive forces of the state likewise form an arsenal at the disposal of the capitalist class to ensure the discipline of the workforce and the maintenance of the class system. The relationship at the heart of capitalist system is defined at root not by adherence to specific ideas but of particular relations of ownership. The means of production are at the disposal of social and political elites giving them control of the reproduction of economic life and compelling the rest of society to enter into wage relationships to ensure their survival.

Knowledge alone of these things, no matter how sophisticated, does not change the essential relationship between workers and capitalists nor does it affect the mechanisms by which the market ensures that value continues to be produced via institutional systems of violence and control. The overcoming of these conditions, therefore, is not a question of undermining the dominant representation of society – addressing questions concerning knowledge and knowledge production – but those related to the organisation of social forces within capitalism. As Mészáros (1970) argues, if one realises that the ultimate grounds for the persistence of alienation in the history of ideas lies in the ‘nature of capital’ it becomes only possible, ‘to envisage a transcendence (*aufhebung*) of alienation, provided that one is formulated as a radical...transformation of the social structure as a whole’.

This is the misplaced nature of a model of critical research that concerns itself primarily with hierarchies of knowledge and systems of knowledge production. Ideas certainly do play a role in ordering and structuring social relations to capitalist norms. But the fact that individuals in capitalist society ‘relate to each other as “social representatives” of different factors of production’ (Rubin, 1928: 21) is not solely the outcome of, even socially conditioned, attitudes. Even the most radically minded worker is still compelled to participate in a system of exploitative material exchanges as a result of the economic constraints forced upon them. Moreover as capitalism has advanced it has become increasingly sophisticated at adapting to social and cultural challenges to elite power while preserving the essential exploitative relationships that continue to produce value. In contemporary terms, as Foucault (1978: 353) notes, ‘a condition of governing well is that freedom, or certain forms of freedom, are really respected’.

On this particular issue, from his early to his more mature writings, Marx was absolutely consistent. The problems faced by the workers will not be resolved by even the most incisive analysis but only by the direct, social organisation of

labour. Marx would have considered Marxism ultimately subordinate to the more pressing issue of the need for the amalgamation of labour and the organisation of its co-operation and defence. In his words, 'The philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it' (Marx, 1845).

Interconnectivity and better access to education makes this basic standpoint ever more important. If intellectual intervention did play at least a part in the success of the early labour movement it is an increasingly redundant practice in an information age. For many of the key figures of the early socialist movement the organisation of labour *was* fundamentally an intellectual question. The avant-garde had as its responsibility to *both* educate and organise the workers teaching them of their 'historic responsibility' and evaluating strategic points for intervention. Such a vision was framed not only by the ideologies but the social conditions of the late eighteenth and early twentieth century. Around 1900 many parts of Europe achieved mass literacy, it is now the case that over 99% of European populations can read and write to a basic level. Scientific training is also far more accessible in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In the UK it is estimated that 45% of the male adult workforce and 55% of the female will enter further education and leave with a degree (Coughlan, 2013). In some European states the figure is much higher. Many will be taught radical ideas and research methodologies as a result of this training. Can the obstacles facing an almost wholly literate, educated and increasingly networked workforce be characterised as 'ignorance' in the same manner that Bakunin did in the middle of the nineteenth century? Of the challenges that a young, European worker may identify as facing them in their current working life they may talk of powerlessness, poor pay, of inability to find stable work, environmental degradation, racism and discrimination, erosion of social security and perhaps even a lack of community. It is unlikely that education, or at least inability to access information, would feature strongly amongst their concerns. The powerlessness of workers in the face of the latest assault on living and working conditions derive centrally from changes in the economic landscape – from opportunities opened up to elites by an increasingly global chain of production and the continuing collapse of organised labour. The retreat of socialist ideas is certainly an outcome of this broader assault but it would be wrong to talk of this as a primary force behind these changes.

What does research and a critical research agenda have to offer within this context? It has to be acknowledged that research itself involves separate and different objectives from the immediate realities of working life. An increasingly stratified workforce and a largely dislocated sense of working class identity bring into question the representativeness of any particular worker's voice. The novelty and influence of inquiry-based publications like 'The American worker' were that



they brought worker experiences to a space in which these had largely been marginalised. Today social media provides a platform for speaking and sharing the experiences of work across sectors and geographical barriers in ways far more networked, de-centred and organic than academic practices of research, editorship and publication. The space and potential for sharing working class perspectives, where internet access is available, is in theory effectively limitless. In these circumstances it is possible to argue that the particular specialist training of a social scientist may be able to bring a systematisation of these ideas that a less sophisticated practitioner may lack. Even so, what does this really offer participants, even in the most activist orientated models of research inquiry, other than an alternative narration of the largely fixed circumstances that they continue to find themselves in?

### **A reflective community of worker-organisers**

Challenging the value of academic-led, critical research is not to deny the worth of expertise or specialised study. As Bakunin argued, ‘in the matter of boots’ it is often necessary to ‘defer to the boot maker’. Rather the issue that is being highlighted is what *particular* expertise is capable of making a critical impact within movements for social change at this point and whether such expertise can or should be reduced to a range of research methodologies or inquiry interventions on the part of academics. Neither is this an issue of the place of intellectuals and intellectual activity in relation to the workers’ movement. There exists a popular myth of a gulf between the supposed everyday concerns of working folk and allegedly abstract and self-indulgent concerns of intellectuals. This is crude at best. It is also particularly unrepresentative in respect to the best practitioners within the socialist tradition. For many of the key figures of the mass, labour movements the role of thinker, organiser and worker were practically inseparable. There are many possible examples to draw from but a particularly illustrative history is provided by the life and experiences of the writer and organiser Paul Mattick, Snr.

A Spartacist at the age of fourteen Mattick, Snr. received his political education through the communist circles and workers’ councils that arose during the German revolution. Most of Mattick’s life in Germany was spent working in factories and later as a toolmaker where he carried out organisational and agitational work for the left communist groups. In the 1920s he moved to the US and joined the Industrial Workers of the World attempting to unite the various German radical circles operating in Chicago. He wrote and researched throughout this period maintaining correspondence with many intellectuals and authors. He published on varying issues including Bolshevism, political economy

and organisational methods, providing a particularly sophisticated analysis of Marxist theories of crisis. This was alongside making his living as an industrial worker, family life and devoting time to the organisation of worker solidarity and support for the unemployed. In an illustrative example of the integrated nature of his political and intellectual interests he describes the activities of his immediate circle during the height of the Great Depression:

There were many acts of spontaneous solidarity. Our group often organised dinners. We cooked collectively in vacant stores, often having appropriated the food without paying for it, and then we gave it away to the unemployed. At night, strangely enough, we continued with our 'Capital' study groups. During the year when I was teaching one of the courses the number of students rose from 80 to 120. (Quoted in Pozzoli, 1976)

This practice of organisational concerns existing alongside theory, research and education is characteristic of the working class organisations of the period.

One of the most longstanding initiatives of this type, the Work Peoples' College in Duluth, Minnesota – founded by the Finnish Socialist Federation in 1907 and later heavily used by organisers of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) – offered a mixed curriculum of skills that would be useful to organisers and workers in industry (such as public speaking, mathematics and literacy) alongside more intellectual concerns (including economics, history and philosophy). In both cases the stated aims were to equip students with the skills so that they could, 'carry on an organised class struggle for the attainment of industrial demands, and realistically a new social order' (WPC, 1923). Altenbaugh (1989), for example, highlights the utilitarian qualities of public speaking courses where the lesson was designed as a role-play of picket line oration. As well as improving the union's intellectual and organisational capacity the college clearly also played an emotional role in investing students in union culture, as Ollila (1977: 106) notes, the most important learning which took place could be described as 'experiential' in the sense of emotional commitment, comradeship, and a faith that 'the world would soon be ours'.

Certain topics on the College curriculum – those relating to worker experience, labour history, 'industrial geography' – clearly stem from the same priorities that later motivated academic interest in worker inquiry. The schools intake of largely industrial and agricultural workers, as well as the open and co-operative pedagogy practiced, would have made students well placed to reflect and further research on these issues.

The above approaches built from the understanding that effective organisers were not just developed theoreticians and social scientists but drew from a range

of critical and practical skills in order to refine their organisational activities. The issue of working class research and intellectual intervention was holistic in this sense, wrapped into the broader responsibilities of a worker-organiser and their commitment to self-education. Underpinning the philosophy of the College curriculum was the understanding that social change involves building a confidence and capacity to organise, not just clarity of understanding of the workings of the capitalist system or an intellectual orientation towards revolutionary ideas and sentiments.

Programmes of political schooling, like those of the Work Peoples' College, are tied to a specific phase of the workers' movement and, in the case of Mattick particularly, a European communist movement that placed high value on theoretical education and debate amongst party sections. He, like many other intellectuals of his generation, joined academic life in the 1970s with the increasingly radical orientation of university campuses providing opportunities to work and lecture in both Denmark and Mexico towards the end of his life. From a contemporary standpoint it makes little sense to argue the case for initiatives that were born from the specific cultures and conditions facing these mass movements. The more relevant question is as to what lessons can be drawn from this more integrated approach to education, research and political activity in light of the challenges of present circumstances?

Within the Left too often questions of organisation have been straight jacketed into questions concerning revolutionary leadership, the avant-garde and the relationship of political parties to mass movements. These are reference points that are not only increasingly anachronistic in our present political and economic context but lack utility when concerning more pressing concerns of declining class solidarity within workplaces and across communities. A distinction needs to be drawn between these theoretical concerns and the development of a practically-orientated, effective organising method. The value of the above approaches is in terms of the model that they offer to practitioners in search of such an organising method. A reflective community of worker-organisers who involve themselves in the day-to-day issues of workplaces and communities, seek to reflect and share their common challenges and concerns and as a result develop systematic methods for improving their activity has the potential to revitalise a Left, particularly in the English-speaking world, that has lost connection with its basic constituency. An integration of both intellectual and practical concerns could take the form of a kind of self-inquiry initiated by organisers seeking to develop best practice and sharing with others common issues and concerns across industries and geographical areas. The focus of such rounds of self-inquiry would not be exclusively to produce or spread dissident knowledge

but aid in the refinement of practical-operational concerns that feed back into organiser practice.

In the early twentieth century worker-organisers relied on the infrastructural support of union branches, education centres and *déclassé* intellectuals as well as access to municipal services such as public libraries and archives to aid them in the development of their method. The technology available to us now means that the previous support offered by mass movements has the potential to be replaced by the networking and information-sharing powers of the internet, increasingly open access to academic literature and book piracy. That's not to say that the relevant skills and knowledge-base can be developed on an entirely independent basis, as is implied in the above passage the model is based upon a supportive and reflective community of worker-organisers. Rather it is to note that the resources for developing such a community in the changing environment of knowledge acquisition, storage and production could be as limited as access to a networked computer and a printer.

Inquiry interests may well cover many of the common questions raised through the traditional workers' inquiry – what are the common perceptions and experiences of workers? How do these manifest across industries and sectors? Where do workers find they have most and least economic power? The consequence of an increasingly private and service-orientated job market in central economies is similarly likely to feature heavily in any organisational experience. The way that these investigations could be structured means potentially going beyond the limits of the relationship of a researcher to research subject and the fixed, temporal qualities of an inquiry. Extended practice would also allow for a degree of practical experimentation as well as tackling the psychological challenges associated with organising, issues that are very hard to capture through a more traditional research intervention. Such an independent body of knowledge could prove invaluable for a generation of social justice activists and labour organisers who are finding that increasingly the existing models – the centralised and bureaucratic institutions of the old Left as much as the campaign-orientated, networked activism of the turn of this century – are failing to provide substantial guidance in the face of austerity.

The traditional models of worker education offered their participants a means of practical improvement, intellectual challenge, friendship, solidarity and a vibrant organisational culture. Where successful these initiatives were also integrated and stable components of broader communities. While many workers can now access a better quality of education through public institutions – although many of these are now increasingly under attack – the capacity for building solidarity and mutual support that an engaged community of worker-organisers could offer

has the potential to act as an important motor of Left renewal. Workers everywhere are facing an assault on their working conditions, what they lack is not necessarily an understanding of their own situation but a confidence and the support to challenge their circumstances.

### **Final remarks: theory and practice**

‘Ignorance never yet helped anybody!’ was the irritated response of Marx in 1846 to the accusation of the German communist Weitling that he and Engels concerned themselves with obscure matters of no interest to workers (quoted in McLellan, 1973: 157). What then of the status of theory in respect to the kind of practices outlined above? Is abstract thinking a distraction from the more pressing and practical intellectual concerns that arise from organising?

Marx argued that theory was an essential component of the development of the communist movement. But too often this position has been confused with a more traditional claim of the social sciences that by virtue of method and training it is possible to access, generalisations applying across cultures, yielding knowledge fundamentally different from that possessed by cultural insiders (Mattick, Jnr., 1986: 36). In other words, social scientists are able to generate questions and insight that participants, by virtue of their status as insiders, will lack. Undoubtedly there are aspects of Marx’s writings that run close to this idea. He was motivated by the belief that an understanding of the inner workings of capitalism would produce a more systematic understanding of the possibilities and limits of political action as well as informing a more constructive communist programme, hence his period of intensive study in the British Library. He also felt that engaging in more systematic and scientific study would yield insights that a worker simply experiencing capitalism could not. The significance that the role of intellectuals and the party programme played within much of the Marxist tradition from the Second International onwards can be attributed to this basic outlook.

Yet within his theoretical writings the value of his method is far beyond that of a particular standpoint as a social scientist. Theory is favoured as an approach because certain lines of inquiry are so systemic they require a level of abstraction to yield appropriate results. The empiricism of social research is inadequate for the kind of deep, social logics that Marx wishes to understand. Undoubtedly history does play a prominent role in Marx’s study, but it is poorly characterised as an approach that searches for generalisations on the basis of a survey in the vein of a traditional social scientist. Rather the novelty of his method was in adopting a very specific approach that did not look at individuals or social groups

but considered first the totality of social relations in which these things were situated. The categories of 'Capital' are not drawn from points of contrast or the observation of social or historical generalities but through seeing society first only in its operation. Only at this abstract level was it possible to grasp those essential qualities – class, labour, value and production – that structure its specific, historical features. Just as the 'apparent motions of the heavenly bodies' were 'intelligible only to someone who is acquainted with their real motions' (Marx, 1867: 433) so it was necessary to see through the immediate appearances of capitalism and grasp the essential relations that structured it across time.

What then of the status of this knowledge in relation to the kind of practices discussed above? Behind much of the early interest in the adaptation of Marx's original workers' inquiry was a perception that abstract categories drawn from Marx's works had been changed into iron and immutable laws. As a result they had lost their relevance as a useful framework for study and research. Inquiry was, in this sense, seen as a remedy to these static categories developing ideas that were relatable to workplace experiences and highlighted working class initiative. Looking to Marx's own method suggests that the issue is not necessarily the abstract nature of the thinking but how and to what purpose it is applied. Marx shifted between different levels of analysis throughout his lifetime adapting it to varying contexts. Extensive philosophical works exist alongside speeches to the International Workingmen's Association, correspondence with other intellectuals and revolutionaries, journalistic treatments of the issues of his day and, of course, the highly focused and research orientated style of his proposed workers' inquiry. There is not necessarily disunity in such an approach. Acknowledging the distinctions between both theoretical and applied approaches to research and the unique benefits that each generates is the grounds for the kind of integrated method that stood as the best practice of traditional worker-organisers. It is likewise important to appreciate that a theoretical orientation will have practical implications and should not be written off as abstract or removed from everyday concerns. By understanding the law of value, for example, it is possible to explain in a more comprehensive and sophisticated fashion the limitations of worker owned co-operatives or peoples' banks as strategies for social change. Likewise a close understanding of the conditions of organising derived from everyday experience will help inform more general questions concerning class consciousness, composition and movements within the economy. The benefits follow from the integrated way that this knowledge is applied informing a general unity of theory and practice.

## Conclusions

When Bakunin (1869) talked of a full, integral education as a 'life of thought as well as of work' he was not only describing the qualities of the worker-intellectuals he saw around him but of the personality that animated a future society, a society of 'complete and integrated individuals'. In this sense the kind of qualities that are identified with traditional worker-organisers are not just practical and useful for advancing social change but are tied to the socialist values that animated them. They can be characterised as prefigurative, as building (as the IWW puts it) the values of the new world in the shell of the old. This builds from a vision of the future which anticipates the full blossoming of human potential whether it is in physical, creative or intellectual endeavours. As a result exemplary socialists of this period were critical, educated, self-reflective and well attuned to their social and economic circumstances. This was while effective organising demanded a critical and investigative mindset and an ability to adapt to shifting patterns of employment. Good organisers were, in essence, able researchers and constant inquirers. They were an exemplar of the kind of qualities desirable to the future society.

The life and experiences of Marx's French workman, cited at the beginning of the article, were familiar to the roaming delegates of the IWW at the turn of the twentieth century. Largely self-educated and practically minded it was said that they could carry a union branch in their hat or satchel as they organised amongst a highly mobile and casual workforce of industrial and agricultural labourers (Bird et al., 1985: 8). Their legacy was noted by one of the early pioneers of worker sociology, Carleton Parker, who found in his 1920 survey of Californian casual labourers that almost half he spoke to 'knew in a rough way' the philosophy of the IWW as well as being familiar with its songs (Parker, 1920: 189). The experience of these organisers and the many others that composed the most active sections of the international working class movement throughout this period have, unfortunately, been largely lost to history. What they have left are valuable sketches of a distinctly working class method of organising, research and reflection.

It makes little sense to try and fill roles formed in the context of mass movements drawn from conditions of over a hundred years ago and involving tens of thousands of workers. Present circumstances do, however, call for some honest appraisal by the Left. This means a reassessment of theories derived from the conditions of the late nineteenth to early twentieth century against the conditions of the workforce of today. It also means thinking beyond the well established roles – of workers, academics and specialists – that have animated discussions within the Marxist tradition for so long. On a more practical level it

means thinking more systematically about how organisers reach out to workers and communities in a constructive fashion in spaces where the Left has largely retreated. In this article I have aimed to contribute to this process by laying forward a modest proposal on the basis of some of the best practice of the old labour movement. I believe the opportunities for pursuing these given the growing informational and networking resources at our disposal has never been better. Such a method could act as an important force for Left renewal as well as enriching our collective understanding of our present circumstances and effective tools for social change.

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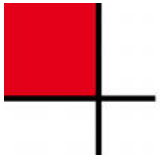
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# Practicing militant inquiry: Composition, strike and betting in the logistics workers struggles in Italy

Anna Curcio

## abstract

This paper, focussed on what we can call a cycle of struggles in the field of retail logistics in Italy, is the result of a process of political inquiry. That is to say the result of a process of knowledge production that has put analysis of the struggles together with moments of political organization. It analyses the specific context of production in retail logistic at the age of just-in-time capitalism; the labour composition and the race management that organize labour; the production of an autonomous and resistant subjectivity, capable to overthrow race hierarchies and other capitalist dispositifs of control, as well as to relate to 'its' trade union in a pragmatic manner that we could define as 'the workers' making use of the union. In the conclusion, it considers the political betting at stake within these straggles.

Rethinking the strike, bet on generalization. Here is what we learned from a cycle of struggles in the field of retail logistics in Italy, and specifically warehouse workers at cooperatives managing and organizing the sorting and transport of goods for major brands such as IKEA, the national Coop<sup>1</sup> and for large-scale distribution companies such as TNT Global Express and SDA Express Courier<sup>2</sup>. These struggles, taking place over the past few years, began simultaneously in the Po Valley that is an extraordinary hub for transport of goods by road. Between

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1 A big supermarket chain in Italy originally founded on cooperatives principles and now completely devoted to profit.

2 An international express and mail delivery services company and Italian-based international delivery service company, respectively.

2008 and 2010, strikes and blockades took place, first at Veneto and Lombardy, then at Emilia Romagna where the first one of the logistics workers' insurgencies took place in 2011.

Following five years of standoff between workers and companies, workers' struggles in retail logistics in Italy have achieved a minimum of dignity at work, previously erased by a long period of deregulation of employment in the cooperatives and laws affecting labour mobility (and control) on a European and national level. In the cooperatives working as subcontractors in warehouses of global firms, circa 98% of workers are migrants, meaning a system of blackmail and exploitation, allowing for long shifts and disturbed patterns of work, was more easily implemented.

In cognitive capitalism<sup>3</sup> and at the age of 'just in time', acceleration and linearity in circulation of goods, services, information and data flows are a privileged space for capitalist valorisation. Processes of racialization are also prominent grounds for the contemporary capitalist accumulation. In cooperatives that manage and organize the retail logistic warehouse workers in Italy, these two aspects are inextricably linked, generating a specific and explosive mixture, which produces an increase of speed in goods circulation, as well as brutal extraction of surplus value and workers exertion (Chignola, 2012). Therefore, in such a working environment, the weapons available to workers are attempts at breaking of the racial segmentation organising labour within warehouses and blockading the circulation flows necessary for the just-in-time capitalism. Using these, logistic warehouse workers have been able to produce effective material and damage the public image of big corporations in the industry.

A one-day blockade at the IKEA store in Piacenza 'means that goods are not loaded onto trucks. These do not arrive on time for the ships, producing a delay in deliveries at destinations in Eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. A one-day blockade blows up the organization of the entire process, and in order to restart it companies must wait at least ten days, meaning a big economical damage, as well as an incalculable damage to their image', the national leader of the grassroots union SI Cobas that supports the struggle said. 'In a warehouse where fresh food is stored, a four-hour blockade means 2-300.000 Euros lost' he added. At any rate, to get an idea of the large damage caused by workers picket-lines and blockades we only need to look at the ritual brutal attacks by police against the workers in struggle.'

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3 Although usually based on hard physical work, we look at the logistic industry following the hypothesis of cognitive capitalism, since its main source of valorisation are based on acceleration and linearity of the processes of goods circulation that are strongly linked to knowledge production.

In short, as workers repeat, the strength of these struggles lies in having learned ‘who hurt bosses’, that means in having broken the symbolic level of the strike – such as to merely stay at the gates with some flags – making it a concrete weapons in the struggle – that is to say to add a commodities blockade to the job abstention. For warehouse workers, the strike did not simply mean a day off work and some flags hung on the gates to the warehouse. The strike is real, in the sense that it aims to (and) interrupt the entire process of production and distribution. In this regard, the knowledge workers acquired while working in the warehouse has been decisive. It is the basis for the construction of the struggle, - a chain dynamic of blockades that follows the traffic of goods by holding up the most significant hubs at various stages process.

### **Politics of workers’ inquiry**

This paper is the result of a process of political inquiry within the logistic workers struggle – a common process of knowledge production and organising between the UniNomade collective (supported by the use of a web radio called Radio UniNomade) at first and by the Commonsware project later and workers involved in the struggles in the north of the Emilia-Romagna region (especially Piacenza and Bologna) during 2012 and 2013. Speaking schematically, we, as militant researchers, have knowledge related to analysis of capitalist transition and transformation of forms of production, such as the cognitive capitalism hypothesis (Vercellone, 2006, 2007) and use of race management in the capitalist mode of production (Du Bois, 1935; Roediger, 2008; Curcio and Mellino, 2010). Workers, however, hold the internal knowledge of the production process, as well as the various forms of exploitation. Thus, the process of militant or political inquiry included two different subjects, positioned at different points of the knowledge production process, practising together a common production of knowledge, based on its distribution and well beyond the distinction between the researchers and the workers, where the former are the subject and the latter the object of research. In the spirit of the Autonomous Marxist approach, we attempted to activate a process of con-research (Alquati, 1993; Roggero, 2011). While we helped in the inquiry and analysed the struggle, we actively contributed to the struggle itself.

No distinction has been made between moments of struggle and moments of investigation. We did not create elaborate questionnaires or interviews in order to collect information from workers. Rather, we actively participated in the construction of picket lines and blockades; we took part in assemblies and workers meetings, as well as produced, together with workers, moments of close examination for activist and mainstream media. In this sense, we used our

knowledge of value within the struggle; we measured and, where necessary, recalibrated our hypotheses as result of an open exchange of discourses, practices and imaginaries together with the workers. Every moment, every step in the construction of mobilization required cooperation between different knowledges, placed variously within the production-cycle. Both militant researchers and workers have gained from this exchange and cooperation. While we were investigating and organizing struggles we have seen, and probably contributed to, the formation of strong political subjectivities among workers, many of them for the first time involved in a struggle. At the same time, facing the materiality of the struggles, as militants we learned to put our certainties in question, testing the performative ability of our practices and discourses 'on the ground'. In this sense, we created a process of co-research that has been conducted in a collaborative and self-reflexive way.

Thus, our presence on the picket-lines in the Po Valley, close contacts with workers and the moments of more comprehensive discussion that we built together with them and the union delegates, functioned on two levels: the common production of knowledge about the industry and the social composition of the work force, and the construction of organizing processes from a common condition based on precariousness. In this sense, we could also see the participation of students and precarious workers on the picket lines not only as a simple act of solidarity, but as recognition that the struggle is for all and of all. However, this is not to say that students, warehouse workers and other precarious workers share identical forms of life and exploitation, but rather to stress a cross-social participation in a context in which – although segmented on the inside – potential for generalization and recomposition remains present.

Therefore, political inquiry is not militant crystallized knowledge or learning, but an open process situated within the struggle – and the logistical workers' struggles are still on-going. Thus, this paper can only address some of the theoretical and political approaches through which can get to the heart of the process. The aim is to draw lessons or more general details concerning the difficult terrain of workers struggle within contemporary capitalism. The specific context of production in retail logistic, labour composition, production of subjectivity and the relationship with the union are discussed in this paper.

### **Cooperatives in logistics industry at the age of just-in-time capitalism**

The logistics workers struggles of the past few years are located around Milan, Piacenza and Bologna, and Verona and Padua in the northeast of the country, in the heart of the Po Valley. These nodal points of the goods circulation are also

directly connected with the harbour of Genoa (in the west side of the country) and Venice (in the east one) that manage the whole movement of goods to and from the Middle East and the North Africa. Therefore, it is not by coincidence that a global distribution giant as IKEA located in Piacenza its largest department store in Europe, and the German group Hangartner recently purchased the logistic centre of Verona from which passes all the import / export of fruits and vegetables among Middle East, Spain, Latin America and North Europe.

Within this specific geographical location, both cooperatives in the logistic industry and global brands of the large-scale distribution have found a powerful dispositif of valorisation that is founded on acceleration and linearity of the processes of circulation of goods. Thanks to this, the industry has not been affected by the current economic crisis. Rather, intermodal transport connected to export largely helps to support the feeble Italian GDP in the time. But unlike other European countries where logistics operators invest in computer systems, warehouses machines and network, in Italy the large-scale retail chains prefer to use the cheaper migrant labour managed by a cooperative system that runs outside labour regulations. As research conducted by the Polytechnic of Milan and the University of Castellanza show, also companies that produce sophisticated warehouse management systems are cut off from the market by a system of organization of intermodal transport at the national level that 'prefers to have recourse to cooperatives that employed immigrants rather than to invest in technologies' (Bologna, 2013: 2). Thus in Italy the gains of the accumulated surplus largely depend on the exploitation of low-skilled (or paid as such) labour force, usually migrants, whose labour is managed in a deregulated, illegal system.

Looking at the banners workers bring to the picket lines, the cooperatives that employ them are shown as dispositif of slavery and as mafia system. At the IKEA in Piacenza a banner read: 'IKEA CGS + coop = MAFIA' (where 'CGS' is the acronym of the consortium of cooperatives that manages the warehouse labour in the Piacenza IKEA store: Consorzio Gestion Servizi – Consortium Services Management; 'coop' being abbreviation for cooperatives). In this sense, talking about mafia is not a metaphor; it reflects the real-life money laundering by the cooperatives and the ordinary use of violence, such as mafia gangs that target workers involved in the struggles. Another banner at the TNT warehouses read: 'Warehouse workers coop. = slavery'. As workers have explained, in the logistics warehouses the acceleration of the pace of work has been aided by close control and the person in charge shouting, 'do this, do that', perceived as the modern day equivalent of the whip in the plantation system (Arafat Interview by Curcio and Roggero, 2013).

At the TNT warehouses this acceleration of labour means 200 workers now do the job of 500, largely reducing the cost of labour. Under these conditions, in the past five years, TNT got the best result of productivity in Italy while workers endured faster pace of work, have been subjected to threats and intimidation, and felt increasing physical ailments: hernias, joint problems and postural disorders, often not recognized as work-related injuries. At the IKEA centre in Piacenza, in June of 2012, the 'rows' to unload were increased from 12/13 to 35. Also, the increase in productivity did not translate into any wage increase. When workers went on strike to protest against this, many saw their daily hours strongly reduced, with added days of enforced rest at home and a wage of only few hundreds Euros.

Usually, workers employed by cooperatives<sup>4</sup> are not subject to protection and labour laws since cooperatives have a non-mandatory application of the CCNL (the National Collective Labour Contract that, in the Italian Public Law manages the employer/employed relations in any sector and industries<sup>5</sup>). Within cooperatives, workers are employed as associate-worker. This means they are both workers and members of the cooperative. As members they have no labour rights since they take the full risk of the job upon themselves, however as workers they have no access to company's profit. Furthermore, as members of the cooperative they have also to pay up to five thousand Euros – in the form of deductions from payroll – as a percentage of the share capital of the cooperative. This means the workers are effectively paying for taking charge of their own exploitation. According to these features of the employment towards cooperatives system, companies could dramatically reduce the cost of labour and benefit by tax incentives related to social security, which concern the system itself. Furthermore, on the financial edge, cooperatives – and especially the great trusts of cooperatives that follows the capitalist requirement to concentrate the commanded labour – function according to the well-known model of the fly-by-night company. For tax purposes, they appear and disappear quickly (Bologna, 2013). As a worker explains: every two years these companies change name in order to do not pay social security and scrub workers, or they rely owners of 80 years that can not be prosecuted (Arafat Interview by Curcio and Roggero, 2013).

At the same time, the labour management within each warehouse is centred around a person in charge or 'corporal' who sets work-shifts on the basis of

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4 And it is worth noting that this affects workers across all sectors, not just the logistics industry.

5 The CCNL is a contract of employment stipulated at the national level jointly by trade unions and employers, predetermining the regulation of individual employment relationships and some aspects of their mutual relations.

precise hierarchies organized according to the criteria of docility and obedience. These are achieved through blackmail and the construction of fear – mainly the fear of losing the job and with it the resident permit since the large part of them are migrant workers – and by racially dividing workers and producing hierarchies and separation between ‘Italian’ and ‘foreign’ workers. However, these hierarchies are not fixed, but follow the labour composition and workers availability to meet (or not) the demands of corporals. Each week the corporals fix weekly hours for each worker determining in turn, their salary (within the cooperative system workers are paid by the hour). Often, as form of retaliation for their union activities, active workers (regardless of their nationality or colour of their skin) find themselves receiving significantly fewer hours of work, or temporarily suspended.

### **Labour, racialization and composition of struggles**

As already mentioned above, in Italy, logistics operators prefer to increase profit through exploitation of (proposed) unskilled labour rather than by innovation and automation of the industry. For this reason, over 98% of workers employed by cooperatives in retailing logistics industry are migrants. In Emilia Romagna, where the inquiry I am referring to was based, a large part of workers come from North Africa (Egyptians, Moroccans, Tunisians), with others from Eastern Europe, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. A lot of them, especially among North Africans, were recruited in their home countries by work brokerage companies acting in a legislative vacuum guaranteeing a good income from their activities. These workers are mostly men but there are also some women; for the most part they are young, often graduates or enrolled at an Italian university, among them there are also some who were born or grew up in Italy, the so-called ‘second generation’ migrants.

In the retail logistics industry, labour composition, while coupled with the aforementioned blackmail, pertains as well to the particular system of control and management of migrant labour in Europe. In Italy, management and control of labour mobility has resulted in tying of the contract of employment and the residence permit together (established in 2002 by the Bossi-Fini law). This links the labour with the right to remain in the country, exposing migrant workers to many forms of possible exploitation. This measure is linked to a systematic process of racialization that points to the hierarchical construction of the labour market or, in the words of Frantz Fanon (1969), to the subordination of certain social groups by others. Nowadays in Italy, as well in Europe and more generally, of course, within capitalism, migrants, far from being excluded from the labour market, are fully included, however, in its lower rungs, where labour protection



and employment laws are scarce or not-existent, wages low and potential for blackmail high. This is the situation, in recent years, in the cooperatives serving as subcontractors in the retail logistics industry. Beginning in the 90s, in conjunction with migration becoming mass phenomenon in Italy<sup>6</sup>, workers' rights and labour protections, as well as the wages, have decreased in the industry as result of employment of migrant workers. As a retired Italian worker said:

During the 90s to work in the warehouses of the logistics of distribution meant a very well paid job. The high wage (around 3.5/4 million liras – around 2.000 Euros) was an incentive for an extremely tiring work that no one wanted to do. But nowadays, over twenty years later, as there was the option of hiring migrant workers that are forced to do any kind of job just to be able to stay in Italy, wages have dropped dramatically. Thus today an average salary is equal to approximately one third of the one of the 90s (around 7/800 Euros).

Inside the warehouses, racism and processes of racialization, function as an 'internal supplement' of labour organization. That is to say racism works to produce internal hierarchies and play workers against each other in order to stop forms of solidarity and processes of unification (Roediger, 1999). This is not, of course, a feature of the labour organization within the warehouses in the retailing logistic industry. Racism is – and has historically been, at all latitudes: in Italy, Europe, United States and wherever there is capitalism – a *dispositif* of labour organization. We can further say that racism and capitalism are historically and intrinsically linked to each other. Since the dawn of capitalism, they have supported each other, and the history of capitalism, together with the development of global commerce, slavery and colonialism, is marked by a 'racial division of labour' (Quijano, 2000). A precise functioning of race within capitalism that describes what Cedric Robinson (1993) defined 'racial capitalism'. From this perspective, race – which is a social construct that informs racism, and not, of course, a biological attribute – becomes a verb: to racialize (Curcio, 2010), functioning as *dispositif* for the organization and management of the labour market in its national or transnational scale. It is a *dispositif* able to follow the capitalist transition and to adapt itself to the different and successive phases of accumulation (cf David Roediger, 2008 on 'race management'). In this sense, as Critical Race Theory brilliantly shows, race and racism reveal strong ability to assume new and different forms over time, and so target new and different subject or social groups. However, they always maintain the function as *dispositif*

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6 The history of Italian migration is pretty different from other European country since it is not connected to decolonization processes started at the end of the War World Two but it follows the globalization process.

of hierarchization and segmentation of the labour force (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001).

Race and racism working as *dispositif* for the organization of the labour market, is exactly what happens in the logistic industry in Italy – and rest of the world – where race has now, in all respects, become synonymous with migration (Balibar, 1991). On the picket line at the IKEA store in Piacenza, one of the workers spoke explicitly of racism as a previously unknown ‘disease’ provoked by employers. He says: ‘In the warehouses, ‘corporals’ say to the Moroccans they are better than Tunisians, to Tunisians that they are better than Egyptians or Romanians. They aim to put Italians against foreigners, Egyptians against Moroccans, remarking: ‘if you’re good I’ll pay you more, do not meddle with the struggles, and so on’ (Radio UniNomade, 21 December 2012). In producing differences and separating workers from each other, the aim of warehouse’s management is to extract as much labour from the workers as possible, stressing their need of extra money and better condition of labour or the fear of being fired or having their working hours and wages reduced. In the meantime, in the warehouses strong lines of incommunicability or at all hostility are built up, putting workers against each other in order to put each worker at most concentrated on his work.

Thus, at the beginning of mobilization process, this labour force segmentation in the warehouses was the first issue to overcome. As a worker from Egypt explained:

We had meetings with the Indian and the Chinese, we felt the difference with the Arabs but I said to people convened at the meeting: ‘forget where we come from. Here we are, all workers and all of us are exploited. This is the only thing we have to think about. (Arafat Interview by Curcio and Roggero, 2013).

Following this approach, labour fractures built along the race line were overturned and largely destroyed within the struggles. What workers did was unification in place of capitalist attempts to fragment the labour force, showing how race difference could work toward the production of the common (Curcio, 2010). That is to say: they re-composed what capital has divided, they worked on the composition of the labour force taking power as workers. First of all they learned to look at each other not as enemy or adversary but as workers subjected to the same system of exploitation. And instead of fighting each other they started to solidarize driven by the belief that they have a common goal: to improve their working conditions. Then, when following meetings and common discussion they were able to trust each other, they were also able to put their fears aside and begin to fight. Where capital resorted to race and racialization, they

produced links and connections building a common ground of confidence, bravery and boldness that started to jam the capitalist valorisation of race differences up. In other words, the composition of the struggle beyond different national belongings has been possible focusing on the common condition of workers subjected to control and exploitation. And the commonality built during the struggles produced a strong and concrete alternative that changed everyone. To recall the words of a worker from Morocco employed at the TNT in Piacenza: 'I never thought that I would trust an Egyptian': a state that put on view the ability of this struggle to defeat racism as capitalist disposition of labour force divide.

Thereby, one of the weapons in the hands of the workers was the ability to overthrow capitalist labour force hierarchization by race and bring to the fore the common state of labour and exploitation. 'We learned that if we are divided the master will control us. Now we were taught this lesson [...] if they touch one of us it will mean they touch all, and together we will stand' said a worker, echoing the 'An injury to one is an injury to all' slogan from the IWW: a sign of the subversive cooperation that allowed logistics workers to win the battles for the improvement of labour conditions.

Moreover, this subversive cooperation concretely deprived racialization disposition of its meaning, interrupting one of the main grounds of capitalist valorisation in the logistics industry. According to this, to fight against racism could be possible only where struggle against labour exploitation and for a radical change take form - this is another important lesson from these struggles. Workers know that fighting the blackmail of a residence permit linked to the employment contract means at first to fight in the workplace against exploitation. Workers know that racism can only be destroyed through fighting exploitation. And it is on this ground that logistics workers struggles bet on generalization [of the struggle] that would involve others: young and precarious workers, as well as students, all fighting together against precarity. What is at stake in these struggles is the possibility to improve everybody's labour conditions despite the crisis. The organization and management of labour by the cooperatives system, together with its forms of exploitation and devaluation of labour, is in Italy a reality for many precarious workers and students. Thus, to challenge this system in the retail logistics industry also means to fight for better condition for precarious workers in general. Therefore, student and precarious workers stand on picket lines together with logistics workers not simply for solidarity, but also for themselves.

## The production of subjectivity

‘Our first problem was to unite all workers in the warehouse and defeat the fear to receive low wage or lose job,’ said a worker explaining how struggles began at the TNT warehouses in Piacenza. In the power to defeat fear, we can catch the struggles ability to transform workers subjected by capitalist command in autonomous and resistant subjectivity, capable to overthrow hierarchies and other capitalist dispositifs of control. We can take the capacity of struggles to become effective, producing material damage to companies and cooperatives. Workers know that to fight and block the goods circulation from warehouses gives them the strength to reach improvement in wage and labour condition, and this functioning as virtuous ground for the production of subjectivity.

One after another, in the warehouses where blockades start, workers have seen their claims recognized: possibility to unionize, application of the CCNL, and reinstatement of suspended or fired colleagues. But as they also remind, thanks to the struggles they ‘got dignity for the job, which is even more important than money’ (Arafat Interview by Curcio and Roggero, 2013).

Around the issue of dignity, it is worth highlighting the key roll Arab uprising have played in this struggles. Workers that experiences the radical change unleashed by the uprisings in their own or neighbouring country are today largely aware that if was possible to demand dignity, dethrone the dictators in Egypt or Tunisia and open up a process for change in the whole society, a radical change could also occur at the workplace. For this reason workers at TNT in Piacenza explicitly talked about the revolution:

after thirty years, in Egypt Mubarak was thrown out, it was something that anyone could imagine before. Similarly, anyone was expecting our struggle at TNT. For this reason we talk about revolution. For us this was like in Egypt: the revolution of TNT.

The production of subjectivity in the logistic workers struggles combined different experiences gained during the struggle. At first, workers that were tired of the false promises of the trade union confederation (Cgil, Cisl, Uil) and especially in relation to struggles, considered by workers too much symbolic (‘They give us the only chance to stay with some flags in front of the gates of the warehouses’), decided to bring a real damage for the companies. They identified the weak points at the cycle of production / distribution in the industry in the moment of circulation. They start ‘to hurt bosses’ (a claim continuously repeated by workers) by interrupting the circulation of goods. This was their main weapon. The form of struggle they chose was indeed appropriate since it caused great damage, in the economic sense, but also to the public image of the

companies, pushing them to meet workers' demands. They were able to identify the more effective form of struggle, since during working time they accumulated specific knowledge about the cycle of production and distribution, meaning it was possible to block the warehouses exactly when large amount of goods were being delivered. In this way, the mobility of labour and goods became mobility of conflicts, rooted in the interruptions to capitalist valorisation.

Furthermore, tired as they were with the less than useful relationship with trade unions, workers decided, while supported by a grassroots union, to be autonomous in their organizational practices. This meant a specific form of relationship between workers and grassroots union, where workers largely held the reins of the struggle. A last feature emerging from the production of subjectivity in the logistics workers struggles was their use of media and social media, especially since media mainstream did not report strikes and picket lines. The grassroots media production by was a chance to circulate information and analysis. Moreover, social media has been used as a tool for communication and circulation of information about workers' struggles across the national borders. For example, the news about strikes and blockades at the IKEA storage in Piacenza have travelled from Italy to Sweden and Turkey, until reaching North Africa, creating a stir in places where IKEA was planning to open new markets. This offered a possibility of reproduction of struggles and of a change of power balance in these areas to the workers advantage. Therefore, these struggles were of a transnational importance.

Finally, discussing the production of autonomous and resistant subjectivity within the logistics workers struggles it is important to mention how important was the workers' higher education, especially in relation to their 'bosses'. As one of the workers said:

Bosses usually try to make us uncomfortable by playing on their social position and their qualifications, but all of us are graduates. If I am the warehouse worker and he is director of company, this does not mean that he is better than me. This only means that unlike me he is related to a powerful social network that allowed him to reach this position. So, he does not intimidate me. This only increases my anger and hatred.

### **The workers' use of the union**

At the beginning of summer 2011, dispute began at TNT warehouses in Piacenza, when a small group of about twenty workers (despite there being in total 380 workers) started to mobilize demanding better working conditions. As they explained, the process starts as community organizing, going door-to-door,

explaining the issue. In a few weeks, an opportunity for a strike arose. And it became clear that self-organization of workers was not enough. Mohamed Arafat, one of the leading figures of the mobilization, explained that the workers quickly realized they needed union support in the bargaining process and started to look for a union. In July, Arafat explains:

We met SI Cobas. And at once we explained that within a week we'd arranged to stage a blockade. They were available. We started, and we won. (Arafat Interview by Curcio and Roggero, 2013)

What is particularly important in the relationship between retail logistics workers and the union is that since the beginning workers chose to be independent in terms of organizational practices. While migrant workers are sceptical regarding the ability and willingness of trade unions to support them (including leftist union Cgil), warehouse workers at TNT in Piacenza – and in other warehouses – chose to organize with a small grassroots union, one that could best meet their needs. Workers said:

A union available to support us in the struggle by strikes and picket lines. A union that could be able to support workers in really affecting the interests of the employer.

Amongst migrant workers, trade unions (and especially Cgil, Cisl and Uil) are perceived as little more than agencies for the renewal of residence permits, reuniting families, bureaucracy. They are not seen as organisations that would fight for workers' rights. Therefore, in order to fight in the retailing logistic warehouses workers started to look for, and finally found in the two grassroots unions supporting struggles: SI Cobas in Emilia Romagna e ADL Cobas in Veneto, a union ready to put its work at the service of workers - a flexible infrastructure enhancement of the autonomy of the workers.

After winning the fight against TNT, mobilizations supported by the grassroots union SI Cobas quickly moved to other warehouses managed by the consortium Gesco North: Gls, the Antonio Ferrari group, Bartolini. Then struggles spread in the rest of northern and south-central Italy (i.e. the SDA of Rome). Particularly significant, even outside Italy, was the mobilization launched in June 2012 at the IKEA warehouse in Piacenza, which supplies North Africa and the Middle East. As with the TNT warehouses, mobilisation started with a small group of workers. Then, when the first blockades started to bring visible improvement in labour conditions, the process extended to involve a large proportion of workers, employed by several cooperatives working as subcontractors for IKEA. This first struggle led to the signing of an agreement for the implementation of the CCNL,

respect for workers dignity and the union, and a reduction to the pace and the workload that increased exponentially in the crisis.

However, just a few months following the signing of the agreement, ‘cooperatives tried to return to pre-strike situation: they decided to almost triple the hourly average of pallets [...] and then in October they suspended 90 workers that resisted the new pace of work’ (Arafat Interview by Curcio and Roggero, 2013). The fight became radicalised. Arafat explains:

every day, from October to January, we blocked the warehouse demanding reinstatement of the suspended workers. On November 2nd, at gate 9, police intervened with extreme violence, leaving 20 wounded and 30 complaints.

The echo of this intervention spread struggle beyond Piacenza. On December 18th in Bologna, students, precarious workers, political collectives and social centres organized, alongside workers from Piacenza and Bologna and delegates from Si Cobras, a picket line at the IKEA shop just outside the city. Although the police attacked the demonstrators, many IKEA clients expressed solidarity with the workers, acknowledging a common condition of precarity (Radio UniNomade, 18 December 2012). Then, blockades and picket lines at the IKEA warehouse in Piacenza were repeated during Christmas and until early January, when IKEA accepted to reinstate suspended workers. Nevertheless, as a union delegate said:

[...] the game remains open. Every workers achievement is followed by the employers reaction that aim to recover what they had to concede to the struggles.

## The political betting

What we observed during these struggles was the space of political subjectification opening up among warehouse workers. It was expressed by their political voice and a growing organizational ability and power to manage political disputes. As already highlighted, what made struggles so incisive, was the knowledge of specific cycles of production and distribution. Strikes and picket-lines have taken place on such days, so as to maximise damage – [to...] ...really touch the interests of the owner, so that they cannot reverse the damage we do.’ At the same time, the union structures that supported workers have enabled building contact among different warehouses located in different cities, coordinating among them in order to cover every possible weak point of the cycle of production and distribution. Thus, when unions called for a general strike for the renewal of the CCNL, this is method of coordination was already rehearsed. On March 22nd, during the first general strike in the industry and on May 15th,

during the second general strike, the movement of goods by road in north and central Italy was almost entirely brought to a standstill.

Another feature of these struggles is the possibility to be able to bet on a more complex plan of mobilization capable to go beyond the strictly trade union claims, opening up a more general political plans. This is not only because to fight for better working conditions in the warehouses means also to fight against both the legislation that regulates the mobility of labour and the rampant racism in the country. A larger space of political mobilization around the retail logistic workers struggles came also from the workers wide and active participation in numerous initiatives against fines and restrictive measures that judiciary gave to union leaders, as well as from their participation in the May 1st march outside the traditional trade unions demonstration, from the many assemblies at universities or social centres they participated and from the meeting and discussion with students and precarious workers they attended. Last but not least, these struggles have brought back on the political agenda a possibility for something that we long forgotten: the victory.

Does it mean the circuits of political recomposition are already deployed and running? Certainly not, but the powerful and concrete allusion at the problem of generalization of struggles coming from these victorious ones – the workers awareness that to stay in a single industry does not much in the long run, and the students, precarious workers and political activist who participates in the picket lines say ‘this fight as our’ – is the cornerstone to develop and advance in common.

Furthermore, within a period characterized by fragmentation of conflicts that exploded in the crisis, militant inquiry aims to identify trends and possibilities within the existing struggle. Taking these trends and possibilities as already realized is a shortcut, however not bothering to identify these means giving up the production of the common. Therefore, the tiring dispute between the pessimism of the intellect and the optimism of the will results in a unique effect: a blurring of the militant reason.

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## A note from the translator

Sebastián Touza

Chanting 'All of them must go!', on December 19th and 20th, 2001, massive demonstrations forced the resignation of president de la Rúa in Argentina. A new protagonism, which included unemployed workers movements, human rights organizations, factories running under workers' control, and neighborhood assemblies made clear that neoliberal policies were no longer viable in the country. The English reading public got to know the work of Colectivo Situaciones through their books and articles analyzing the 2001 revolt, the movements that became visible through it, and the reorganization of institutions that followed the 2003 presidential election in which Nestor Kirchner, a former Peronist governor of the province of Santa Cruz, was elected.

It soon became clear that Kirchner's ability to listen to the struggles and movements that preceded him was allowing him to rebuild credibility in the institutions of representative democracy eroded by the movements. His government clearly shifted away from the path followed by the Argentine democratically elected administrations of the previous two decades. It rejected the Washington Consensus, revised the privatization of public companies, established programs to help those affected by the devastating policies brought about by the previous neoliberal administrations, committed to bringing to justice those responsible for the state repression of the last dictatorship, and wrapped policies in a narrative that rescued the values of the revolutionary generation of the 1960s and 1970s. At the international level, it aligned itself with the governments of Venezuela, Cuba, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador and Uruguay. Many members of the generation that awoke to politics in the struggles against neoliberalism gradually became part of the Kirchner government's support basis. In 2007 Cristina Fernández, Kirchner's wife and former senator, was elected to succeed him. By this time the new post-neoliberal period was in the process of

becoming a form of 'neodevelopmentalism', an updated version of the developmentalist policies promoted five decades earlier in Argentina by Peronism and other parties: state intervention in the economy, Keynesian counter-cyclical measures, a boost to construction and public works to encourage job creation, expansion of mass consumption to low income sectors of the population previously excluded from it, promotion of the national industry (mostly cars and consumer electronics), and exports based on agribusiness (particularly for the production of genetically modified soybean) and large-scale mining to take advantage of the international boom of commodities.

Arguably, this article, written in the late months of 2012, belongs to a different period both in Argentina's political life and in the work of Colectivo Situaciones. In 2011 president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner was elected for a second consecutive term with 54% of the vote. The death of her husband Nestor a year earlier significantly increased her popularity and launched into politics a new generation of activists. During Cristina Fernández's governments, groups of capitalists whose interests were being regulated and taxed, such as big media corporations and big landowners, reacted and launched a ferocious battle to erode the government's legitimacy. This, and the government's strategy to respond to the attacks, led to a confrontation in which it was difficult to escape being on either one side or the other.

Like few groups of activists in different parts of Argentina, the members of Colectivo Situaciones have pursued the sometimes difficult task of creating spaces that escape this and other either/or dualisms. Their activities have involved the expansion of projects and the extension of the networks of people they work with. Some of them have been involved, for example, in the relaunch of *Crisis*, a key critical magazine of the 1960s and 1970s ([www.revistacrisis.com.ar](http://www.revistacrisis.com.ar)). Others created *Lobo Suelto!*, a blog that publishes articles on current issues by both real and fictitious authors, as well as pieces on philosophy and art ([anarquiacoronada.blogspot.com.ar](http://anarquiacoronada.blogspot.com.ar)). As a collective, they share with other groups *La Cazona de Flores*, a social center based in Buenos Aires that has organized different kinds of activities, from movie nights to lectures by the likes of Antonio Negri, Sandro Mezzadra and Jacques Rancière ([casonadeflores.blogspot.com.ar](http://casonadeflores.blogspot.com.ar)). The Cazona also hosts *Tinta Limón*, a press run by the members of Colectivo Situaciones and friends, *Todo Piola*, a cultural magazine run by former juvenile offenders that reflects on being young amidst urban poverty and state repression, along with projects by migrant groups, and some other militant research groups and collectives.

In previous articles Colectivo Situaciones has discussed challenges faced by activists in this period. In 'Politicizing sadness' (2007), they analyze the new

mechanisms of legitimacy that characterized the period, not yet completely understood by militants that continued to stick to specific formats of practice and that tended to normalize criteria that were once effective in struggle. In 'Disquiet in the impasse' (2009), they elaborate on the conceptions of time, discourse, work and popular consumption that define the current historical moment. They define the present terrain of struggle as impure, many-colored, ambivalent, and promiscuous. A patient political craftwork is needed to overcome the either/or polarization that has become established as common sense. None of this has prevented, however, the rise of new struggles.

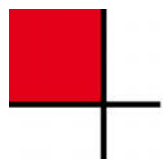
The following article was discussed by members of Colectivo Situaciones with North American activists during a tour through cities in the United States and Canada. It analyzes their own practices of militant research, a concept and practice discussed by the collective in 'On the researcher-militant' and 'Something more on militant research'. This article could be considered a third installment of the series, but is actually more than that, since it refers to militant-research with movements that are different from the ones analyzed before by the collective in that they were formed during the rise of neodevelopmentalism as a form of 'governing the crisis'. The specific problem dealt with here is how the subjectivities set in motion before, during and after the 2001 revolt remain in the background of the construction of a new governance in Argentina.

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# Crisis, governmentality and new social conflict: Argentina as a laboratory

Colectivo Situaciones \*

## abstract

The dynamics of politics and social movements have changed significantly in Argentina since the 2001 popular uprising. While the governments of Néstor and Cristina Kirchner have sought to establish a 'new governmentality', which in many cases has involved alliances with social movements, the governance of territories throughout the country remains fragile because the aftermath of 2001 remains as an underground current. The state and capitalism have been reinvented through policies on social rights, social welfare programs, the extension of mass consumption to the poorer sectors of the population, and the rise of forms of popular entrepreneurialism. The most visible social conflict now takes the shape of struggles against the expansion of highly profitable genetically modified soybean crops and large-scale open-pit mining projects. Conflict manifests itself, as well, in different forms of organization to resist drug dealers in the popular neighborhoods of large cities. Amidst this complexity, militant research explores different ways of problematizing the new governance and activating the new social mobilities.

## 1. On political dynamism

To say that Argentina is a laboratory is a way of accounting for a permanent and open series of social conflict dynamics in constant and problematic dialogue with a new form of governance.

In the last decade, these dynamics have been linked to the development of the crisis that stamped its signature on the political system in terms of structural fragility and a demand for innovation. The latent condition of the crisis leads us

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\* Translated by Sebastian Touza and Veronika Miralles-Sanchez.

to think of this decade as ten years of 2001.<sup>1</sup> 2001 is, then, an active principle, almost a method, a way of seeing what is happening as it develops. In this sense, the crisis, with its multiple meanings – instability and creation, worry and uncertainty, openness and change of the calendar – becomes a premise. This happens both when the crisis is visible and when, as in these times, it runs as an underground current in a so-called ‘normal’ society or in a ‘real’ country.

However, the dynamic of conflict has acquired a new feature in recent times. On one hand, it imposes itself as an overflow: a dynamic of cracks and unforeseen openings that do not recognize the modalities of social movements or other organized forms of protest.

Faced with these situations, autonomy has the option of either preserving itself or, on the contrary, acting as a premise and a horizon in which to promote a dialogue that is both sensitive and permeable to diverse problems that are not exhausted by ‘neodevelopmentalist’ discourse. From racism to informal economies; from land occupation dynamics to migration dynamics; from the biopolitical techniques of states to political propaganda; from media codes to urban codes; from underground forms of labour and overexploitation to the precarization of the right to housing.

We believe that political research becomes *subrepresentative*. On one hand, the presence of facts and experiences make themselves present as power (*potencia*) to dissolve the space of State and media representation. As long as truth and justice go hand in hand, research supposes an ethics against the criminality of power. On the other hand, they simultaneously persist as resources for an imagination needed to understand the deepest layers of that which we can assume to be true.

Research deals with fragments that are situations: they are both universal and concrete cases at the same time. Universal in that they speak about something that manifests itself in many other situations, and concrete in that they happen as dated episodes, within a context, and underneath an extremely empirical appearance, they harbour an urgent question. The concrete universal is a portion of reality about which it is possible to say that ‘everything is there’ and it always refers to a praxis that does not need to be related to an abstract totality. The fragment is worldly, that is, an invitation to carry out the practices of a world.

Therefore, the fragment can open a sequence of politicization, which begins with a taste for the episode or case; continues with militant research; and ends with

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1 For an analysis of the revolt, the characteristics of these movements and some moments of the reconstruction of the political and economic scene, see 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup>: *Notes for a New Social Protagonism*.

expressive problematization, in other words, the problem of writing, or more so, the discourse of images.

## 2. Resistant subjectivities: The origin of the crisis

In our country it is evident that the dynamics of politicization have changed a lot since 2001. We said that we take 2001 as a breaking point, as the epicentre of the crisis and as a key to interpret an era. That political moment was not spontaneous, but rather, it casts a backwards light on the struggles that developed 'inside and against' the infamous decade of the neoliberal boom.

In Latin America, the nineties were the decade of growth for both neoliberal policies and the production of subjectivities in resistance. These subjectivities were different in relation to those that modern political theories referred to; they differed in their organizational rationality, that is, in the logic of the political party, of union bureaucracy, etc. The rising social movements thus produce a radical destructuring of the most classic political specialization, and force us to think less linearly, and to experiment with other organizational dynamics.

If during what we call the 'de-instituent' phase, social movements attacked the neoliberal state constituting practices capable of confrontation in areas such as the control of money, or bartering; of counterviolence, as in road blocks; and of political command over diverse territories, as in assemblies; social movements, if we can still call them that, currently confront new dilemmas about whether to participate or not (and when, and how) in what could be called a 'new governmentality', thus expressing the distinguishing features of a new phase of the state form and requiring us to problematize the concept of social movement itself.

As long as the new governmentality consists of an expansion of its capacities to incorporate much of the dynamics represented by the cycle of social protests peaks, the question comes up about the production of subjectivities under these new conditions. They could sum up the crisis in this paradoxical statement: 2001 no longer exists, and at the same time, it is everywhere.

In this way, the political conjuncture brings together a way of governing the crisis, and at the same time, the fight between some movements for the expansion of decision-making structures, and a broad discussion on the 'way out of neoliberalism', which can be understood as a passing from the absolute power of the market to a paradigm based on the State in some sectors, as well as a reorganization of neoliberal premises under a postneoliberal order.

### 3. New governances

We will try to characterize this new phase that opens with the governments that emerged in many Latin American countries, which mark a (relative but important) level of rupture vis-à-vis those strictly neoliberal governments of the past decades. The qualification of these governments is not homogeneous: it varies in relation to the criteria they bring into play and the concrete policies that are taken into account. It could be said that one of the most difficult questions at this time is how to build an 'autonomous' perspective capable of carrying out a solid and nuanced characterization of these governments without falling into Manichaeism and reductionist apriorisms (such as 'populism' and liberal-republican perspectives).

A starting point to reflect on these questions is in the relationship between those governments and the processes of production of subjectivities, because that relationship is subordinated to a novel pragmatics in which movements and the state have a broad range of positions at their disposal and a great capacity to combine them. This relationship ranges from the fusion between movement and institutions, to open confrontation, including different processes of cooptation or subordination and virtuous circles in which movements take beneficial advantage of the situation.

What remains clear is that these governments seek to govern these movements directly. For most movements this meant a whole series of complex dilemmas and a permanent obligation to announce their stances on official policies: those who think they have to include themselves in the governments, those that think they don't have to, those that melt away, and those that remain standing even if in a nostalgic way.

The disorientation produced at first by the weakening of the autonomous positioning of the social movements brought us, after a workshop we carried out many years ago, to the formula of 'politicizing sadness'<sup>2</sup>, which points to the need to confront the difficulties we felt in trying to 'interpret' the insurrection as an event in terms of a 'new governance'. The impossibility of elucidating this situation in classic terms of 'success' became evident upon consideration of the dimension of governmental recognition of many of the struggles from previous periods as a key to measuring the success of official policies, and in terms of 'failure' by considering the aspect of capture and subordination that these processes often entail. From the very beginning, we tried to take on the obstacle

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2 See our article 'Politicizing sadness'.



imposed upon us: the enormous difficulty of transcending the simplification that reads this complexity in terms of cooptation versus heroic marginalization.

During the first government of Cristina Kirchner a conflict developed between much of what in Argentina is generically called 'the countryside'; it had to do with an official policy that increased taxes to grain exports (2008). In the short term, the polarization of the political scene implied a harsh defeat for the government (also in the parliamentary elections of 2009), but in the medium term it became a binary mode of the politicization of society. During the years 2009-2011 a series of official measures, popular and democratic in character, brought the government to a resounding victory in the presidential elections of October 2011, securing the reelection of the president.

This political polarization, exacerbated during recent years, increases the pressure to sustain a simplification based on an exclusionary dualism, which is brought to the fore when dealing with problems across different territories<sup>3</sup>. In this way, for example, one is either sensitive to the struggles surrounding the new neo-extractivist economy, or one believes in the dynamics linked to a rhetoric of the expansion of rights and social programs without critically considering what we could call the 'economic basis' of this model. The challenge is to articulate (and not to confront) that which each territory states as its democratic and vital feature.

The potential richness of current processes is actually played out in the possibility of combining the different rhythms and tones of the politicizations, in the capacity to articulate what today appears as disjunctions between countryside and town, interior and capital, and adopting premises that are transversal to the struggles over the reappropriation of natural resources, as well as in the different

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3 While the government usually occupies one of the poles, the other has been changing depending on the main conflict at the moment. It has been a challenge for many movements to offer alternatives in this context. The position of government supporters vis-a-vis these movements has ranged from indicating the pointlessness of alternatives ('to the left of the government there is only the wall', they say) to accusing the movements of making things easier for the right. A central component of the government's economic project is to tax soy and mining exports. The struggles of aboriginal peoples to stop deforestation caused by agribusinesses that want to expand the soybean frontier to the north and the activities of movements confronting mining corporations such as Barrick Gold have been featured by media belonging to the Clarín Group (largest media corporation in Argentina, forced to sell some of its assets by the media reform law). Since the confrontation between Clarín and the government has been one of the most prominent, supporters of Kirchnerism have seen the portrayal of struggles against extractivism in Clarín media as a proof that dissent coming from the left helps the right. Tr.

processes of enhancement of public services, production, and social networks as sources of the commons.

These combinations help us appreciate the immediately *political* quality of struggles that show a colonial and racist thread in the exclusionary redistribution of territorial, legal and symbolic power in shantytowns and factories, in workshops and neighborhoods, reaching workplaces in the guise of legal and under the table employment, stable or precarious positions, etc.

#### 4. Production of statehood

Arguably, the new statehood in Argentina – and perhaps in Latin America – can be characterized succinctly by the following features: a new legitimacy for so-called ‘progressive’ governments achieved through a specific mode of insertion in the world market, increasingly sustained by a discourse on technological development; a growing importance of popular consumer culture linked to a decisive reconfiguration of the world of work; the role of social policy as a means for sustaining consumption and governing social organizations; and the rhetoric on human and social rights, increasingly mixed with the discourse on national sovereignty.

In this process of production of statehood, State structures harbour multiple contradictions, imposing new issues on the political agenda, reestablishing hierarchies and foreshadowing different rules in social policy, increasingly central to economic dynamics and to the mechanisms of government, particularly in a scenario of global crisis.

Inside these processes, and simultaneously, *new state functions* have arisen that correspond to specific institutional structures that take on a growing importance in countries like Argentina. For instance, institutions that govern economic interdependence and insertion in the global market are important because they constitute a point of conjunction through which the specificity of Latin American capitalism is articulated to the unifying logic of global capitalism.

Alongside the growing complexity of the figure of the State, new tensions and even real fractures arise within its structures, between, on one hand, the political processes that are promoted and, on the other, the discourses through which the government seeks to secure its own legitimacy.

This new situation brings us to the need to deepen the analysis of the relationship between contemporary capitalism (which is both one and multiple) and the new role played by the state in many ‘emerging’ countries (not only in

Latin America). For this to be possible, it is equally necessary to abandon a certain ‘metaphysical’ way of understanding the State as if it were an eternal and immutable essence. This is particularly evident in the debate around the ‘return of the state’. In this context, the strong presence of the ‘sovereignist’ and nationalist discourse as organizer of the ‘neo-developmental’ scenario, which emphasizes citizenship, science, and national industries, and coexists with, and is reinforced by, increasing global interdependence.

This, in turn, imposes a model of ‘open institutions’ – which is what we are really interested in. These institutions are built on a principle of permanent improvisation in terms of its performance and its efficiency parameters. New structures, capacities and legitimacies take shape around specific competences, configuring – as we pointed out – an institutionality based on ‘projects’.

## 5. Government and subjectivity

When we talk about the new modes of government we not only talk about new ways of producing ‘statehood’, but also new mechanisms to regulate *subjective production*, which we could define as follows:

- 1) Complex treatment of social movements, which, on one hand, includes and combines negotiation, subordination, recognition, and reparation, with, on the other hand, the creation of parallel structures and more or less direct confrontation.
- 2) Symbolic centralization of state action and dispersion of collective networks: there is also a combination of funding for movements and individual assistance. But a mixture of these modalities also happens inside the movements themselves. On one hand, it is dealt with one on one, instituting command structures known as political patronage, which manage the individual and the negotiated incorporation into social benefit packages run by State agencies such as municipalities, and the Ministry of Social Development and Labour<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, there are complex channels of collective bargaining and institutional dialogue, which range from access to resources to direct management of a social project.

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4 The Kirchner administrations have introduced several programs with the goal of achieving a more equal income distribution by helping people ‘find a way out of exclusion’. These include the Heads of Households Program for the unemployed and the Universal Allowance per Child, aimed at assisting poor families in the completion of their children’s primary and secondary education. There are also government programs to help people buy or build their first house, scholarships to finish university education in public institutions, funds to help cooperatives, etc. Tr.

- 3) Knowledge production as a form of government: social benefits packages are means for making the popular world intelligible; a world that has been deeply changed by mutations that have taken place since the nineties and the crisis of 2001. It is a form of recording and classifying modes of living that can be considered to exist neither within the world of formal employment nor within the classical canons of state administration. For this to happen, it was necessary for the state to add to its staff many public servants originating from the movements and the social sciences. Their knowledge of the groups and their operative, territorial, and organizational knowledge are at the base of a new interlocution (but also of a system of exclusion).
- 4) Security policy: territorial knowledge and control made viable through social benefits packages foster a knowledge of groups and movements that no law enforcement agency can compete with. The recent appointment of the man who has historically been responsible for negotiating with social movements as Deputy Minister of Security is a clear statement on the realistic reformulation of the concept of security itself.
- 5) Social benefits packages as producers of a new form of citizenship: part of the requisite of the packages consists in a form of legal registration of the 'beneficiaries' living in zones in which informality is prominent; in return, schooling, vaccination and obtaining personal IDs are mandatory for them. However, here we see another novelty at work: classic state institutions cannot answer the massive demand that arises from these mandatory benefits. To do this, the state often uses the help of autonomous initiatives in order to make up for the lack of an institutional solution. For example, the increase of school registration, after this became a requirement to obtain the benefit of AUH (Universal Child Benefit), forced the state to use the self-managed 'popular high schools', which practice popular education in factories run under workers' control since 2001 and, simultaneously, to acknowledge the latter's existence by funding teachers' salaries, outside the collective agreements with teachers' unions.

This brief map of how social policy works allows us to highlight a key point: the dominant rhetoric that says that employment is back coexists with subsidies – granted using this language from the world of work – and they are strictly intended to fuel consumption. In this regard, what kind of scenario is configured by this model for funding consumption?

If one analyzes the government rhetoric, the idea seems to be a sort of 'politics in two phases': first, the 'take-off' of consumption, fueled to a great extent through

benefit packages and subsidies; second, the generalization of employment, imagined according to a classical industrial and 'Fordist' modality.

It seems to us that this is not the tendency underway within the Argentine labour market and that it would be more realistic to think about the second phase differently: it is a heterogeneous and precarious proletarianization, not a 'waiting room' for Fordist full employment, but rather a dynamic that would enable the provision of individual credit. This projection of debt presupposes and is correlated with the compulsion of work, regardless of how it is defined and regulated. If this hypothesis is viable, the expansion of 'popular' consumption would paradoxically announce an intensification of the processes of the capitalist exploitation of social cooperation in its most diffuse and varied forms. The rhetoric of rights, today widespread in Argentina, therefore goes hand in hand with an increasing financialization of the popular world.

## 6. Capitalism for all?

As we just pointed out, the 'reinvention' of the state in a country like Argentina is played out, first, in the production of mediation vis-à-vis the global market. But in the so-called 'emerging' countries, this mediation is, in turn, linked to immense social activity, both self-managed and informal, with increasing presence in the economy, which at the same time helps develop the economic power of those enterprises and captures them. But, in the so-called emerging countries, this mediation is linked to an immense sector of self-managed and informal social activity that has an increasing presence in the economy, which simultaneously fosters and absorbs their economic power. The world of the informal and self-managed economy looks vigorous, healthy, and fluid, while at the same time it is subordinate and hyper-exploited.

The rise of a 'popular' capitalist world is tightly connected to the capacity to recover experiences and practices of self-management capable of dealing with non-state social relationships, transactions, and policies in an increasingly heterogeneous society. This capacity is regenerated again and again from below, in a close relationship with the market.

This universe of informal practices has an increasingly important presence and is explicitly recognized inside the national economy. At the same time, it constitutes a 'mirror' in which to read some general tendencies that are redefining 'work' in Argentina, both in terms of its characteristic precarity and its capacity to manage and negotiate its relationship to a rapidly changing world.

These innovative features form the basis of the extension of exploitation to increasingly broader aspects of life.

## 7. The new social conflict

The *new social conflict* is the most visible and reliable marker when it comes to understanding the current pattern of the exploitation of the commons, as well as the limits to the democratic potential that can be attributed to state regulation.

By 'new social conflict' we refer to a series of violent episodes, which range from the eviction of peasant farmers from their land to extend agribusinesses, the displacement of communities as a result of investments in large-scale mining and oil extraction, but also the proliferation of criminal incidents linked to the generalization of drug-dealing businesses in popular neighborhoods with the complicity of sectors from the police, the judiciary, and political powers.

The *new social conflict* is the embarrassing reversal and the dark flipside of the neo-developmental mode of accumulation, at least in two fundamental aspects: on one hand, it is part of the material makeup of modes of living and of the exploitation of the commons with which government practices are inevitably articulated and, on the other hand, it shares the emphasis on values concerned in the rhetoric regarding growth and the expansion of consumption, conceived from a perspective of generalized commodification.

This 'flipside' weakens the rhetoric of 'inclusion' in two fundamental aspects: it reveals the regime of merciless expropriation of the commons on which it stands, and it erodes the very imaginary of a social space founded on the validity of the equation between wage labour and citizenship to which it would be worthwhile to belong.

This new social conflict is no longer traced precisely on the diagram with which we went through the crisis of 2001: as a struggle between the state and social movements. Rather, this conflict arises from the new conditions of a relaunched capitalism and new modes of production of statehood and instruments of government.

These conditions are tied together, mostly, in the articulation between large-scale global deals and an innovative popular entrepreneurialism: these are formidable revenue-generation mechanisms organized around different forms of public revenues (which have little to nothing to do with the industrializing ideology of the national and popular model). But these are also savage modes of exploitation

of the commons and of introducing a dimension of terrorist violence in the governance of territories.

There is no doubt that these entrepreneurial activities, so different from each other, also share some important features such as resorting to illegality, their power to reorganize or enhance the value of territories – often on the periphery – and their network-like organization, reproduced from above, but also from below.

After two decades of uninterrupted accumulation, these new structures of economic power now have a significant destabilizing capacity, and they have the security forces at their disposal, as the case of Paraguay shows<sup>5</sup>. Their remarkably state-of-the art commercial structures contrast with the conservative and despotic content of their political modalities.

The new social conflict also extends to the world of work, in so far as it shows us how to understand the link between super-exploitation, consumption, and production of new modes of life that we see developing in the world of industry and services (ranging from workshops to the logic of transportation). In both cases, increasing state regulation does not significantly alter, but rather puts down roots, in what we could call a popular neoliberalism set up for new modes of governance.

We argued that the new social conflict is not a traced copy of an always-current model of the modes of politicization that brought the government and social movements face to face during the crisis of 2001. As we have seen, to a large extent social movements are now part of the government, altering the relation between governance and territory. However, the activation of social organization against expropriatory and terrorist violence has not stopped, renewing the need for militant research and the production of knowledge and organizing endeavours that measure up to the circumstances.

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5 Fernando Lugo was the president of Paraguay between 2008 and 2012. He was considered a representative of the Latin American 'turn to the Left' in his country and was the first president of his country that did not belong to the Colorado party in over 60 years. Lugo was impeached and removed from office after he was considered responsible for an armed confrontation between landless peasants and the police in Curuguaty. The policies introduced by Federico Franco, the president appointed by the congress, favored corporations such as Rio Tinto Alcan and Monsanto. In most Latin American countries Lugo's impeachment was considered a coup d'état. As a result, governments removed their ambassadors from Asunción and Paraguay was expelled from both Mercosur and the Union of South American Nations. Tr.

## 8. The perspective of militant research

Militant research worked as a way of identifying the subjects of the crisis and the radicalness of their practices and discourses: including the unemployed workers movement and their assembly-based organizing, the street justice dynamics of the escraches or public shaming of perpetrators of genocide during the dictatorship, the peasant movements, the self-managed education projects, etc<sup>6</sup>. The premise of this phenomenology was a mode of producing, traversing, and resignifying the crisis. These were some of the key figures that organized a political sequence linked to social movements and to the hypothesis of social change propelled by transversal grassroots counterpower.

What does a perspective of militant research mean, when, as we pointed out, the idea itself of social movements no longer functions as a key to reading the complexity of social conflict?

- Not to abandon what that 'crisis' offered as novelty: the untimely upsurge of what many theoreticians have called 'biopolitical struggles'. What does this mean? That the dynamism of the political world revolves around a virtual map of production centered on life, understood as the interconnection of singularities. And that the governance of the social takes this problematic field as a priority, although from an administrative perspective of life itself within the population (majorities, the labour force, etc.). But it also means that the governance of the social sphere must be carried out from the foundation set by the cycle of social struggles that, since the mid-nineties, confronted neoliberalism (precisely that mode closest to divesting life) with a set of images, movements, practices and discourses that conditioned the emergence of the current government (as part of the so-called progressive governments of the region). Since then, issues as relevant as food sovereignty and the problem of political representation and participation; the use of natural resources and collective intelligence, of forms of life, work and leisure have not stopped being intensely contested issues.
- If 'social movements' no longer look as they did in the old days and instead they tend to be part of these fragile mechanics of government, militant research finds itself forced to change in at least two different and simultaneous directions: toward the problematization of the new forms of governance and toward the activation of what we could call the new

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6 Escraches as form of protest are discussed more extensively by Colectivo Situaciones in 19 & 20 and *Genocide in the neighbourhood*. Tr.



*social mobilities*, which in a manner absolutely unlike the movements of the past decade, foreshadow a new map of struggles and languages in their ways of doing and, above all, of problematizing the present.

- Now, as a Collective, we seek to organize mechanisms to deepen this dynamic of militant research around these more diffuse mobilities, with a force of intervention more related to the overflow of government mechanisms than to a stable organization. There are multiple efforts, all of them affected by the spatial and temporal discontinuity of these new forms of collective protagonism. Among the most systematic efforts to build a space/time network of militant research we can name, for instance, the experience of the Cazona de Flores. A house located at the centre of Buenos Aires city, an attempt to weave together urban lifestyles, as well as an opportunity to problematize, precisely, those dynamics of mobility.

We would like to end with a very concrete image of what militant research means for us today. Even though we feel tempted to go deeper into the description we have just made of the new social conflict, which is in fact part of an effort in which we are currently involved, we prefer to refer to a recent experience that has been very enriching for all of us, whose outcome was the writing of a book called *Chuequistas y overlokas: a discussion revolving around garment sweatshops*.

This experiment emerges from the encounter with the Simbiosis collective: a group of young Bolivian immigrants in Buenos Aires who were working in depth on the striking reality of underground garment sweatshops in the city of Buenos Aires. Most of all, they wanted to publicly discuss the mechanism of exploitation and ghettoization in which dressmakers – most of them originally from Bolivia – were immersed. Their work began seven years ago, after a sweatshop caught on fire (and there were casualties).

This adventure led us to recompose the world of social meanings that revolve around this usually underground reality in which the informal economy is tied to a vigorous entrepreneurialism almost always subjected to illegality, the complexity of the immigrant's mindset, the role of racism, but also the perversion of community elements in the spaces where dressmakers socialize and work, the relationship to Argentinean brands, etc.

All of this, which may seem to be a 'micro-scale' phenomenon nevertheless is connected to the operation of an immense illegal bazaar (of textile products above all) called *La Salada*. This extremely dynamic reality, increasingly articulated with the dynamic of government, is rooted in these modes of production that mix self-

management and exploitation. This research opened a line of inquiry we call ‘the capacity of multiform labour’, which is closely related to the forms in which the presence of crisis transforms. We established the connection between this and the economy of land occupations, which in Buenos Aires are increasing in strength, in order to take on a new research project on the tragic occupation of land in the city centre (Indoamericano Park) – via a workshop called Hacer Ciudad (Making the City) that is based in La Cazona de Flores<sup>7</sup>.

These are variations of the power (or potencia) that arises from the multiplicity of forms: on the basis of these experiments or experiences multiple forms are created when it is no longer possible to find a job, or to get money, or to give meaning to our work, let alone to conquer dignity. The multiform is powerful (or potente) because it is a living experiment. It innovates beyond morality, the state, and the norms at the same time that it accounts for its own mutations. Under these conditions, the multiform is also ambivalent and does not have a predefined meaning (let alone the meaning of social movement). It is this type of dynamism – or new social mobilities – that today pose challenges to territories and to the practice of militant research itself.

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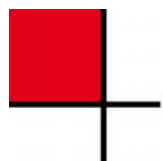
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7 In December 2010 around 1500 families from nearby shantytowns occupied a piece of empty land in the south of Buenos Aires city where a park had been projected but never built. The squatters were evicted two weeks later with the promise of being included in the national government housing programme. During the squat three people were killed and several more injured in clashes between the occupants and people from the neighbourhoods that surround the Indoamericano Park. The conflict brought about a series of issues related to neodevelopmentalism, including extant poverty, lack of appropriate housing, land rent speculation, gentrification, along with racism (many of the squatters were immigrants from Paraguay and Bolivia) and jurisdictional disputes between the city government (headed by the neoliberal Mauricio Macri) and Cristina Kirchner’s administration. A group of activists, including members of Colectivo Situaciones, joint efforts to analyze these issues in *Taller Hacer Ciudad* (Making the City Workshop). The result was a book titled *Vecinocracia: (Re)Tomando la Ciudad*. Tr.

Colectivo Cultural Simbiosis and Colectivo Situaciones (2010) *Chuequistas y overlokas: A discussion revolving around garment sweatshops*. Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón & Retazos.

### **the authors**

Colectivo Situaciones is a group of militant researchers formed in the late 1990s. They have worked with different social experiments and movements involved in what they call the 'new protagonism' that became visible in Argentina during and after the popular uprising of December 2001. Their book on that revolt, *19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup>: Notes for a new social protagonism*, was published in 2011 by Minor Compositions.



## Workers' inquiry in praxis: The Greek student movement of 2006-2007

Angelos Evangelinidis and Dimitris Lazaris

### abstract

The history of the militant research tool in Greece is connected with the development of class struggles in the country. Workers' enquiry became known to the Greek scene relatively recently, compared with the rest of Europe, and the first attempts of its implementation began only in the last few years. Additionally, only a few groups of the domestic antagonistic movement go through the process of planning, engaging and implementing a workers' enquiry as this requires careful study, consistency and accuracy; which, in turn, requires a long-term commitment, especially in terms of movement-time. The aim of this paper is to present the history of workers' enquiry in the Greek territory, its findings and some thoughts about the utility of workers' enquiry as an analytical tool. The collection and analysis of interviews showed that the struggle wasn't aimed, as it was presented in the media, to a return to the Welfare State, but it was a radical struggle against the curtailment of liberties inside the university. The analysis also showed, that through this struggle a new political subject is emerging that shows differences from the traditional political figures. In addition, innovative forms of action and new political behaviours make their appearance. Finally, the use of the tool of workers' enquiry showed a series of political advantages: creating bonds between political subjects and subjects for the struggle, the connection between the militants, the exchange of experiences, the deepening over the contents of the struggle itself.

### Introduction

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the study of Italian Marxism – workerism – inside the antagonistic movement of Greece. Numerous translations are published that refer to the 'Years of lead' and many discussions are taking place in an effort to analyse both its theoretical legacy and its failure,

with a glimpse into the future from the scope of the present. During the last few years we witnessed the publication in the Greek language of the works of Sergio Bologna's *Tribe of moles* (1977), Steve Wright's *Storming heaven* (2003) and Lotringer and Marazzi's (eds.) *Autonomia: Post political politics* (2007) among others. The purpose of this theoretical research is to find theoretical tools and concepts, which are positioned to allow an analysis of the present situation from a movement perspective, through the rich experience of the Italian autonomous movement. A field of movements has been established in the radical political scene of Greece that has been directly affected by the theory and practice of Italian Autonomia, not simply by reproducing them, but by enriching them with new content in connection with the sociopolitical reality of Greek society.

One of the two main analytical tools that the Italian Marxism has provided us was workers' inquiry, as well as 'class composition'. Compared with the rest of Europe, workers' inquiry became known to the Greek scene relatively recently, and the first attempts to implement it began only in the last years. The first acquaintance with the problematic of research for political purposes took place in 2003 on the occasion of a presentation on militant research in call centres in Germany and England by the group Kolinko and shortly later, a small leaflet was published containing abstracts from Kolinko's research and views on methodology, as well as the transcript of the discussion that followed. One year later followed the publication of *The road (the worker, the machine, the city) and the method* (2004) from the group 'Spies club of the 21st century'. The latter publication constitutes a collection of interviews regarding the working conditions of a group of politically active couriers. Although the militants that conducted this research did not have in mind the experience of the Italians communists of the 60s, they had the same purpose in examining the subjectivity of the people working as couriers.

In 2007 a small group of militants, following the footsteps of the workers' inquiry that was reintroduced by Kolinko, conducted what remains until today the most complete research paradigm of a workers' inquiry. In this paper we will present a short review and make critical remarks about this effort, trying to highlight its findings and weak points. This research was published in a book format in 2010 and was entitled *Hear what the students have to say...An antagonistic research about the discourse and action of students in the movement of 2006-7*<sup>1</sup> which was issued under a common signature: 'research team', including

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1 The title of the book comes from a renowned motto of the struggle, which went: 'Hear very well what the students have to say: kick all business firms out of our schools'.

'researchers' and 'research subjects'. In its 120 pages we find a thorough methodology based on the legacy of Quaderni Rossi.

While writing these lines, another workers' inquiry is being conducted from a political group named S.K.Y.A. (Assembly for the Circulation of Struggles) concerning the long term unemployed who worked for a five month contract in the public sector entitled *Workfare: The continuity of unemployment by other means*. Its findings are yet to be published.

### Why militant research?

Workers' Inquiry (*conricerca*, also known as co-research or joint-research) as a research tool has its root in the Italian context of the 50s and 60s, marked by industrialization and mass migration from South of Italy to the North. It was initially developed by Alquati, Pizzorno and Montaldi (Borio et al., 2007). Alquati believed that certain sociological techniques could play an important part in the reinvigoration of Marxism (Wright, 2003). Inquiry intended to establish 'a type of relation, of a method of work of discussion and co-research with the workers' (Alquati, 1961). It is 'the collective, common, systematic, rich and potent research into [a subject's] conditions and modalities of its own actualization' (Armano et al., 2013). As a method, it was an instrument that aimed to construct a new knowledge together with the subjects under investigation from a direct class perspective (*ibid.*) in order to understand 'the levels of awareness and consciousness of the process that implicated workers as productive subjects' (Negri, 2003).

Although the terms 'workers' inquiry' and 'militant research' entered the vocabulary of the antagonistic movement in Greece recently, without, any previous research experience, the necessity of carrying out militant research emerged in political circles of the Left and the autonomous- antiauthoritarian movement together with a steady rise of social and class struggles in the period during and after the Greek student movement of 2006-07.

The movement broke out just a few months after the anti-CPE movement in France, in response to a law that the then conservative government brought to Parliament, which included privatizing education and the intensification of studies. Since the beginning of 2006 and for about a year until March 2007, students were in nearly constant mobilisation, organizing marches weekly, occupying schools throughout the country and attempting to block the passing of the law.

The research was carried out by a small group of political activists called *Nomades Antirois* (Counter-flow Nomads) following an invitation issued to conduct co-research with a few militant students<sup>2</sup>. According to the collective author, as stated in the book's introduction, the use of the tool of militant research was employed so to: a) analyse and understand the underlying reasons for the student mobilisation and b) investigate the characteristics of the collective subject that emerged through the movement (political attitudes and behaviours, discourses and forms of action) c) promote and circulate aspects of the student protests that were not widely known, d) contribute in inventing new theoretical tools for the antagonistic movement through experimentation with the tool of militant research e) create relationships between the militants and the new subjects politicized through the processes of struggle or movement, and finally, f) connect subjects in struggle with each other (in this case, students from different universities of the country). As is noted in the preface:

In order, therefore, to investigate the specific mobilisation and subjectivity expressed in its context i.e. the subjectivity that participated in this mobilisation.... in order to go into a deeper understanding of the causes of this mobilisation, against the dominant performances [...] in order to highlight aspects of this mobilisation we considered important and to circulate them both in the student milieu and in wider audiences. In order to get in touch with the new subject that emerged from this mobilisation, namely the militant students, but also in order to 'investigate the research itself,' that is, to experiment with the terra incognita of social antagonism, we decided to conduct militant research in this batch of students who lived actively through the experience of this movement. (Research Team, 2010: 6)

And continues:

We chose to implement research because we recognize the inadequacy of ideologies, as tools for understanding social movements. In specific, we question ideologies as 'plug and think' tools, which can only be applied to reality in order for it to be interpreted. In a few words: we do research, because we believe that we must invent anew the tools that will serve to interpret and thus to change this world. (2010: 7)

Finally, they present their view that was fostered by exchanging and connecting experiences:

in projects or struggles that we in participated as students [...] which helps to transmit and spread this experience through time. To do this, not from the separate position of the researcher who seeks to restore 'reality itself', but from the position of the active political *subject* that participated in these protests and in

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2 The Research Team consisted of ten people, although many more were involved in various stages of the research process without however remaining until its final completion (2010: 11-12).

struggles in general. Seeking together the ways in which the militants can meet with broader social subjects. (2010: 17)

However the cause of involvement with this research was the mismatch between the duration, intensity and qualitative characteristics of the mobilisation with the contents presented as the cause of the outbreak of the student movement. As it is mentioned, while it was a long struggle, a struggle that lasted almost a year with mass participation across the country and not just in the big cities, the public discourse that accompanied it, beyond the dominant discourse of the government and the media, was 'crammed harshly in the context of traditional hermeneutic classifiers, of all political stripes' (2010: 6). For the government it was a mobilisation against the attempted 'modernization' and 'rationalization' of public-State University, a retrograde mobilisation for the defence of the last remnants of an anachronistic Welfare State. On the other hand, for a large portion of the Parliamentary and extra-Parliamentary Left it was a struggle for the protection of public and free education, i.e. to defend the welfare state. It is in this context that the research project starts. Research conducted in the period immediately after the end of the protests, i.e. in May 2007 and was completed, after a break of several months in the summer of 2009 and published in February 2010. This was, as mentioned by the research team, an experimental project; they had no prior experience using this tool for political purposes (2010: 13).

## The context

On October 2005 the Greek Ministry of Education announced its intention of renewing the 20 year-old law concerning higher education in Greece and implementing the conditions that were imposed by the Bologna Convention. The draft of the bill included many articles concerning the management and the operation of Greek public universities. More specifically, it contained articles towards the abolition of 'University Asylum'<sup>3</sup>, the introduction of the maximum years for studying, the permanent expulsion of students that failed to take or pass exams, the abolition of distributing free textbooks to students, the restriction of the student vote in the university's management institutions, the introduction of the minimum time period per semester, the introduction of a new economical-managerial institution responsible for the financial assets of the university, the introduction of the ECTS credit system, the introduction of a four-year economic planning program by the universities and finally, changes in the way professors

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3 A measure that was implemented after the fall of the 1967 coup d'état that established freedom of speech and political expression on campuses, including the restriction of police entry to universities areas.



are recruited and promoted. In sum, the spirit of the new bill, a typical neoliberal reform, was towards the gradual privatisation of public universities and abolition of free social services (accommodation and catering) provided to students. The new law aimed to dissolve for good any future student mobilisations by targeting directly the way and the means by which they are organized in order to carry out restructuring in education.

Apart from the new bill concerning the functioning of universities, the -at that time- right-wing 'New Democracy' government had decided to promote the revision of Article 16 of the Greek Constitution the following year, which aimed at officially recognizing private higher educational institutions. Article 16 of the Greek Constitution stipulates that higher education is provided free in state institutions, and that private universities are prohibited.

Following the era of the anti-CPE struggle in France, the Greek students started occupying their campuses on May 2006 through mass assemblies in response to the educational reform and denouncing the dismantling of free education in favour of privately-run services. Their main demand was the withdrawal of the new bill. In just a few weeks over 400 departments were occupied and there was subsequently a mass wave of demonstrations in every major city of the country (including those that have not seen protests for years), which often ended with heavy clashes with police forces. For two months (May-June) there was a total blackout in almost all public-State universities, no classes or exams were conducted in that period. These reactions have forced the government to postpone the Parliamentary vote on reforms that were planned for July until the next academic year.

The second phase of this movement started on January 2007 and lasted 12 weeks, until the end of March. This time the main claim of the students was against the revision of Article 16 and the withdrawal of new bill became secondary. The occupations and demonstrations by students started over again and gradually increased in numbers but not at the mass scale as in the previous phase. On February 2<sup>nd</sup>, the social democrat party of PASOK withdrew from the voting procedure of Article 16 under the pressure of the student movement, making it impossible to pass in Parliament. Immediately after that, the government as a response accused the social democrats of hesitating and announced that the new bill would be put up for vote within the next few days. In order to calm student reactions, the new bill had its sharp edges rounded but its core remained the same. The bill was rejected again by both the student movement and the professors' association. From then on, the marches took a violent turn usually ending in heavy street fighting with the police and mass arrests with participants numbering over 25,000 people; reaching its climax on

March 8<sup>th</sup>, the day that the voting was scheduled in House of Parliament. That day, over 35,000 students demonstrated against the reform. It was the biggest demonstration the country has seen for many years and was followed by heavy clashes with the police throughout the city centre that lasted many hours. Although the bill was passed mobilisations continued until the end of March with a steady decline ending them just before the Easter holiday.

## Theoretical tools

This research approached the student movement through the meaning of *Experience*, an analysis of the subjective dimensions of the actions of the students as a collective entity. The concept of *experience* is central to the analysis proposed by the research team. This is a borrowed term from the concept of 'proletarian experience', extracted from an article of Claude Lefort (1979)<sup>4</sup>. The concept of '*Proletarian experience*' as analysed by Lefort in his article (1979), is used however with a different meaning by the research team studying the student movement. We will not dwell here on individual differences, focusing instead on a number of points that we think are of value in the way in which the concept was implemented in this inquiry.

The research team describes in the first part of the book the reasons that led to the use of the concept of experience, stating that this was the most suitable conceptual tool for the nature of their object of study: an analysis of the action, attitudes and behaviours that could neither be reduced in the simple internalisation of rules and roles nor in the sum of rational choices (Research Team, 2010: 16-17). As stated:

Let's look at an example from the results of the processed data: the ways in which students acted were not determined entirely by the political background and the history of their family. Political influence from home may have existed and originally played a guiding role in the spontaneous attitudes towards mobilisation for instance. But explaining attitudes and perceptions under the weight of the influence of family relations (or other institutional factors) would be like acknowledging that there is no possibility of self-motivation and initiative from the struggling students themselves, no possibility of rupture with recurrent (historical) political frameworks for action [...]. For this reason we turned to the given experience of the struggle in order not to overlook the issue of relationships and conditions that shaped them and to highlight the subjective dimensions of action, but not to confine ourselves exclusively to them. (2010: 17)

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4 This article was translated and published in Greek in an effort of seeking conceptual tools for workers' inquiry and was discussed along with other texts. The translator was a member of the Research Team.

The analysis of the ‘meaning of action’ is examined through the circumstances, in different ‘situations of action’ as the authors call it, i.e. the relationships that the subjects have with universities, the institutions and the student movement (2010: 16). The concept of ‘*experience*’ here refers to the subjectification process itself, in a way that a collective subject is formed through the disputed issues raised in the protest (2010: 17).

## Methodological Choices

Starting from a constructivist framework, the analysis of experiences was made with the use of qualitative methods from the social sciences, namely in-depth individual and group interviews as well as the use of open questionnaires. The inquiry borrows (without naming it) some of the principles of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1997). Rooted in symbolic interactionism, Charmaz (2000, 2006) has advocated for a constructivist grounded theory emphasizing on the ‘interpretive portrayal of the studied world’. Unlike traditional grounded theory, Chamaz points out that theories are constructed through ‘a construction-reconstruction of reality’ (2006: 10) rather than being discovered. It should be said however that the research team doesn’t explicitly reference these sociological methodologies but only the militants of the student movement. Despite all that, there is however a sociological background that put forth as issues for discussion with the interviewees posed as problems of methodology. The academic references are transcribed in this inquiry in political terms. As stated:

By the time we started the research our focus fell less on achieving some ideological and political agreements and more on exploratory processes, in the gradual clarification of our political view through the actual process of research and data analysis. So an approach from such a basis meant practically for us the following: Instead of using our political perception as the sole tool for analysis and interpretation of the student struggle, we put the latter in the torment of the assay data that the research itself gradually brought to light. Our main purpose was not to let any political position impose on the data a priori, without at least establishing a comparison and conjunction with it. More specifically, this meant that our opinions evolved gradually during the research in the context of our on-going interaction with the collection of data and creating relationships with the subjects of our research. (Research Team, 2010: 11)

It was a methodology of work that inseparably combined with the working hypotheses, collecting/interacting with data and the development of analyses and conclusions (2010: 15-16). At the various stages of the research, the interpretations concluded by the research team were presented to some students, while in July 2008 a presentation was organized for the presentation of the first findings of the research (2010: 38). As the authors state:

we did not have some prefixed methodology that wanted to test it empirically, but instead and consciously, we felt and believed that the very process of approximation of a hypotheses must go hand in hand and evolve in parallel with the way which we work and the instruments we use in order to answer it and the many methodological choices we made were defined by the immediate condition of the research: the practical and specific problems we faced while involved actively during the process. (2010: 15)

Finally, the inquiry combined individual and group interviews. Individual interviews examined the direction of subjects (life trajectories), who were active in the student movement, but also subjects that disagreed with it and took positions against the protests. On the other hand, group interviews were used to 'outline some of the features of that broader social subject' (2010: 18) of students with criteria of their common bond to the movement (for example students from the occupation of the Economic University of Athens). The authors considered the use of semi-structured interviews and open questionnaires to be helpful in shifting the discussion to the justification of the acts that students narrate and to rethinking the experiences of the movement (2010: 18).

## The sample of the research

The inquiry consists of twenty-four interviews with students from various universities and schools of higher education, mainly from Athens and some from the countryside, lasting from one to two and a half hours of which the twenty were recorded<sup>5</sup>.

The sample was selected through mutual acquaintances with students active within the movement. It was grouped into three general categories: a) students with previous political experience (students of left and anarchist political groups and organisations), b) students with no prior political experience that politicized through the processes of the student movement and c) students who were not active in the movement (not necessarily against the mobilisations, but remained passive). In the first category there were five interviews, eleven in the second and four in the third. Although the research team was supposed to collect a larger number of interviews, due to certain problems in the conducting the interviews, this wasn't feasible<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, if we accept these categorizations that were a

5 The selected transcripts of the recordings can be found in the address <http://anti-research.blogspot.gr> (in Greek).

6 The Research Team critically exposed the reasons for this failure, locating them in difficulties entering the research field after the protests, but also in a series of subjective and objective difficulties (2010: 31-32). Furthermore as stated from the outset, the nature of the research project was experimental and uncertain 'to the end' (2010: 15).

result of the research conducted, the quite limited number of the sample has as a result of the research being oriented on the analysis primarily geared towards the second category (b) and less to the other two, (a) and (c). Also, as the research team itself states, it was not possible to get interviews from members of several left-wing student factions who participated in the protests (2010: 31). This fact leads sadly to a partial picture of student motivation and made it more difficult to answer the central questions of the research.

Moreover, the second category (students without previous political experience that were politicized through the process of the student movement) focuses mostly on students that create a qualitatively important portion (in a sense that highlights the emergence of innovative forms of action), but are a minor tendency of the movement, which later was called the 'autonomous tendency' of the student movement (on the fringes of the left and the anarchist movement).

In our opinion, this is one of the weaker points the research. The problem in setting up the sample has to do with the 'snowball sampling' that was chosen initially<sup>7</sup>; it allowed to overcome the problem of entering the field, but since it wasn't possible for it to be crossed with other sampling techniques, the population of the sample was fairly one-sided in relation to the questions that it wanted to investigate.

## The questionnaire

The research team presented a detailed questionnaire, which was co-formed with some students and finalized after some pilot interviews (chapter 2). The questionnaire consists of three parts: a) profile of the interviewee, b) the student's conditions, c) relation to the mobilisation (including different parts for respondents who participate or not).

Chapter 2 of the book analyses the organization and the political rationale of the questionnaire. The research team gave special attention to the formation of the questionnaire because this resulted in the axes of the analysis presented in the main part of the book.

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7 'The most appropriate way to schedule an interview proved through some acquaintances of the students. Our acquaintances were the ones who brought us into contact with the sample and allowed, essentially, our entry point in the field of research, because they recommended us to others to be interviewed so the range of our options opened widely' (2010: 33).

## Presentation

The size of the sample may have been too small, however the range of issues being discussed with regard to the student movement of 2006-2007 is really great in number. The second part of the book unfolds the analysis, which has been divided into six axes with separate subchapters, each of which discusses various aspects of the students' experience. The organization of the presentation follows a path analysis starting from the description of the crisis of institutions and existing political-organizational forms to the emergence of the subject of student protests.

More specifically, the analysis starts with the description of the student status and relationship of the students with their departments (professors, classes, relationships with fellow students, laboratories, food, housing, technical equipment, etc.) (axis 1). It continues with the discussion on the provisions of the new law (imposition of a ceiling on studying time, the abolition of university asylum, and the privatization of education) that the government tried to pass and was the reason for the outbreak of student unrest (axis 2). Then, it proceeds to describe the organizational forms of this mobilisation, i.e. the collective bodies of the students (the General Student Assembly of each department and the General Coordination Assembly of all departments) and the emergence of new organizational formations by the movement (Axis 3). The next axis (4) describes the original initiatives taken in this struggle by a portion of the mobilized students, while the fifth (5) axis discusses problems encountered during the movement (the role of repression, rivalry between student factions, the role of media, organizational problems, connection with other social subjects etc.), where interviewees are asked to make an overall assessment of the student movement. Finally, the sixth (6) axis goes from the evaluation of the movement in the analysis of new political attitudes and behaviours after mobilisation. The book closes with a chapter of conclusions. This chapter summarizes the conclusions of each axis, proceeds also further in the formulation of the reasons that led ultimately to the voting of the law despite the protests by making some critical comments on the issues raised by the struggle. In the latter part of the findings the research team attempts an evaluation of the same tool of militant research, as implemented in the process of student research<sup>8</sup>.

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8 'Despite the countless problems and difficulties we faced towards the completion of this inquiry, the process of creation changed us ourselves because it changed at the same time the nexus of our relationships. This is perhaps, the most important consignment that left us' (2010: 119).

Because it is not our purpose here to present thoroughly every chapter and subchapter of the book, we will make some critical remarks of the analysis presented concerning the deeper reasons of the student mobilisation.

### The suggested analysis

The research seeks a series of factors that were viewed as the causes of mobilisation through a description of the 'student condition' that the students face. The students of the sample however, do not invoke the – viewed as prominent – reasons of mobilisation, for example the deterioration of the existing technical infrastructure of the laboratories, problems with relationships with their professors, the prevalence of a climate of competition among students to obtain the degree, the problem that some of them face working simultaneously in precarious conditions, and were thus unable to attend classes (2010: 46-50). For example, the result of interviews with students (2010: 47) that came from affluent or lower social classes do not link their participation in protests with obtaining degrees that can ensure a place in the labour market, which was one of the main slogans of the left parts of the movement ('degrees with value').

In our opinion, despite the interesting work on the discourse of the subjects that inform us about a number of important parameters in relation to student status, nevertheless certain objective aspects of this process are not examined from the view of the changes that are imposed by institutional factors and government policies. In addition, the inquiry does not consider the way which these changes are part of a wider framework of international transformations in education (e.g. Bologna process). The research team's stated intention was to remain at the subjective level of editing experience, nevertheless these transformations define the forms of action that are described and define the framework within which the subjective attitudes are shaped. This is because there was already a discourse by the Left parties that examined proportions of the draft bill which the research team believed was missing an analysis of social relationships created in the student movement.

A second point regarding the deeper reasons of mobilisation is that the knowledge of the provisions of the law itself was not particularly widespread among those who protested despite the fact that there was much say about it. *'A pretty impressive remark, compared to the overall knowledge of the law, is that the knowledge of the articles of the law, was not one that lead to the mobilisation of students, but rather the opposite. That means that first comes the mobilisation -for various reasons, among which is certainly a cloudy knowledge of the law- and then, as the mobilisation continues and through the processes of the struggle, they [the students]*

*deepen to the spirit of the law and the strategy of the Ministry'* (2010: 51). Although the settings provided by the law which was to be voted included reduction of the duration of the study time (this meant that students who had not completed their studies after 6 years due to objective difficulties, for example working simultaneously while studying, risked losing the ability to enrol) or buying the needed university textbooks which, at that time, were provided by the State; only a few students raised these issues as a reason to participate in the mobilisations (2010: 54-59). In contrast, a category of politicized students interpreted the Article of the law for the abolition of university asylum as a straight attack against socially fought gains and an attack against the squatted spaces inside the campuses that produced a political discourse and action (2010: 51-54).

In any case, the inquiry shows that the causes for the outbreak and participation in the protest were not univocal, but quite complex. This led the research team to the conclusion that the reasons should not be sought only in the student status, but to the general issues raised concerning the students' social life: 'absence of a collective dimension of things, dominance of individualism, isolation and emotional misery as the central problem, not so much of student life, but in life in general. [...] They fail to understand not only the role for which they were earmarked by the university but also the one the labour market wants from them' (2010: 114). However, the limited sample does not allow for exporting safe conclusions thereon. This is, in our opinion, the reason why the research team refers to various causes for the outbreak of the protest without analysing them all the same. Instead, research is directed at finding a sense of distance from the meaning given to the public and free education by the leftist student factions as opposed to that of the grassroots.

The argument of the research team is that militant subjectivity is formed at a critical distance from the existing organizational institutions of the mobilisation i.e. the General Students Assemblies of every department. The reason for this distance is that the grassroots of the student movement criticized the way decisions were made in the General Assemblies, describing them as the confrontation line between the leftists political student factions rather than a tool of expression of the mobilizing students. The bureaucratization of processes excludes the majority of the base from intervening actively in General Assemblies. So, while voting massively in favour of occupying the schools, most students did not participate to the same extent in their support; on the contrary, 'the dynamic of the demonstrations and growing radicalism could not be expressed within them' (2010: 78). As a result, there was a distance between the content of the movement that came through General Assemblies (e.g. a fight for 'degrees with value') and the content made by the grassroots.



By analysing the subjective experience and the impact of the student movement in political behaviours the research team presents a typology of change in attitudes before and after the movement in different categories of the sample. An analysis that attempts to identify in time the relationship between 'individual behaviours and collective practices' (2010: 110).

So for a group of students with low participation in the student movement, the effect it had in shifting their attitude is detected even at the level of everyday life. In this way, attitudes manifested before the movement only potentially existed. For example, as stated by a student of the Economic Department: 'while I was never a racist if I saw in a bus an old lady insulting an immigrant I would not have said anything, now I'll talk' (2010: 101).

On the one hand, students without previous politicization, derived however from families with political tradition, before the movement had adopted an attitude of distance from political activity on the basis of views that were transmitted to them from the immediate social environment. For example, one student from Media & Communication Department states:

This transfer of experiences and discussions around historical issues of the Left that I heard from a young age at home, obviously influenced me. Another thing was that from a certain age and onwards, I felt that due to the fact that my father had withdrawn from political activity, made me not want to bother with it. (2010: 102)

But this attitude has changed drastically with the effect of the movement, as described by another student from the Economic University of Athens:

Before, I was never in a collective group, I thought that acting individually was the only way to do things. Through the occupations and all that I understood what it means to be together with other people...you reach other levels, get over your fears and all that. (2010: 102)

There was a change that was related to a change in the level of day-to-day relations: 'there was also a need, after the end of the student movement [...] to reunite with people who fought together to do things collectively'.

On the other hand, students with previous political experience who actively participated in the student movement describe the possibilities that were opened for expanding the possibilities of organization, communication and cooperation between student activists from various schools on the basis of specific issues raised by the struggle and not vague ideological abstractions. The creation of this 'sense of community/community belonging' (2010: 105) acquired through the

movement played a decisive role in linking initiatives and organizational attempts created in its aftermath. In addition, another change in attitude at the level of everyday life was the break with a 'certain elitism' (2010: 105) of politicized students towards the rest of the students, a change in the way they see the courses at the university and an enrichment of political experience. Some typical quotes from students: *'I knew theoretically what bureaucracy meant, but when I saw how it works in practice, it formed a better image in my mind'* (2010: 105) – says a student from the Technical University. Another student from the Medical School adds: *'I do not care to change others, but to tell them this is who I am, and now you tell me who you are, to see what we can do together'*. A student from the Economic University of Athens describes:

Before I said, I have to do work, lessons and stuff like that; and now I say I'm going to schools simply for the lessons and I'm not being paid. (2010: 105)

Finally, a category of politicized students did not participate (or participated minimally) in the movement for reasons of principle, accusing the protest as reformist, not having all those revolutionary features that were considered politically correct. Adopting a political attitude of rejection towards the requests and forms of action of the student movement, this category will entrench behind its political identity and eventually retire from the protest. The gathered material from this category of students highlights the self-critical dimension of interviews. Some characteristic excerpts: *'we preferred the security label of anti-authoritarian, rather than collide within our schools with people...'* – says a student from the Architecture school.

Working with a more centralized way of organization, we gathered 20-30 people in an amphitheatre to decide what to do while our schools were occupied, I think that it was bad for the socialization of our discourse and actions. (2010: 110)

Concluding this presentation, the research team describes some general political characteristics of the militant subjectivity of students. Selectively, we will dwell on just a few points. There was a 'weakness' of self-determination in the political activity of students coming from traditional political labels (left, right, anarchist). A weakness that is interpreted *'not as a failure of political expression, but the reverse: a trait indicative of the fact that traditional political labels have ceased, in the minds of the struggling to have the importance they once had'* (2010: 115). The argument of the research team was that the discourse used by those in struggle characterize those who emerge from the student movement and give particular importance not on how one defines oneself, but of what they do and how. Also, another feature is the change of the meaning of political work. Work was situated more at the level of day-to-day relations with various social subjects and on less political

denunciation of liberalism in general. In addition, we note the absence of requests, to change laws, and the emphasis on forms of direct action and marches in the street.

Nevertheless, we should be cautious if and how these characteristics can be generalized beyond a minority tendency of the student movement. At this point it would be interesting to compare and contrast with other categories of students who were politicized through the movement from the base of leftist student factions. This is one of the drawbacks of the analysis suggested by the research team directly related to the way of setting up the sample.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, despite its weaknesses, this militant research is one of the most fertile attempts of analysing the student movement of 2006-7. Undoubtedly, the most important weakness is located to the fact that some of the minority characteristics' trends that took part during the movement are generalized to other parts of the movement without having sufficient empirical grounding. The mistake was not the number of interviews conducted, even Romano Alquati himself argues that statistical representativeness is not a target (1961), but the interviews which the research team based did not foresee to cover other cases like interviews with students that had no politicization and remained as such ever after the struggle or rank-and-file members of the leftists' organisations. So it is not a problem of scope that is resolved by conducting more interviews but a problem of more targeted interviews (like, for example, to Greek students throughout the entire Left spectrum) in order to support better the empirical data and enrich the argument of the distance between formal and informal discourse of this movement. The research team's argument of this 'distance' is based mainly to the mainstream image of the struggle, about which the team is precisely informed because its members actively took part in trends of the student struggle.

On the other hand, if these features are seen through their real contexts, then we are in front of an analytical framework for interpretation and analysis of the behaviours of the political space of the autonomous/libertarian trend in the student movement. In this sense, the primary material of the in-depth interviews on which this inquiry is based, although very limited or inadequate for answering the central hypotheses of this research, does not fall short in heuristic value. But more from that, it contributes decidedly to open a discussion of how the 'objective and subjective conditions' (2010: 119) of politicization and political activity in general, change through social struggles.

This inquiry does not deduce the action of the student subject to its conscience nor to its identity. In contrast, like it is shown in different aspects, its formal conscience and political organisation wasn't necessarily what helped the struggle move forward.

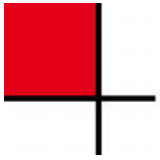
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## The shame of servers: Inquiry and agency in a Manhattan cocktail lounge

Jennifer M. Murray

### abstract

With the history and function of the worker's inquiry in mind, this paper presents the serving women in their own words, describing how the expectations placed on them as gendered affective laborers creates a forced, false, and relentless intimacy with customers that in turn produces a reflexive internal cycle of shameful experience and memory for a group of servers. This manifestation of shame complicates the idea of worker's inquiry because the inquiry itself further triggers the negative emotional cycle. But the peculiar insularity of shame – its potential to facilitate emotional boundaries and defensive strategies – means it can also be harnessed and utilized as a powerful tool for autonomy and emotional emancipation. With the schizophrenic nature of shame in serving work in mind, this research explores the inherent emotional risks for workers in the American affective labor economy, and how small social changes in expectations on the part of consumers of affective labor can greatly lessen these risks. The paper concludes by suggesting that sociologists critically engage with the many manifestations of shame in affective labor to expand and rethink the concept of the worker's inquiry to reflect the emotional needs of the ballooning number of service industry laborers in Western economies.

### Introduction: Shame in The Den

This article explores the function of shame in the affective service economy, specifically in the lives of 12 women working in one New York City bar – The Den. The Den is an upscale bar and lounge located in the lobby of a trendy hotel in Manhattan. Its customers are generally wealthy and sophisticated consumers of affective labour. Den servers can look forward to generous tips, provided they comply with the specific performance of affectivity this customer base requires.

Exactly defining the scope of this affectivity is complicated, but to provide a general outline: the women who serve in The Den are expected to flirt, engage, and flatter their customers; to listen to their stories and laugh at their jokes; to furnish personal details about themselves in response to customers' inquiries; and endure proposition or harassment – harassment often encouraged by the false sense of intimacy this affective performance cultivates – with grace. This nightly expectation for affective performance generates strong feelings of shame in the women who serve in The Den. It is shameful because it compels the women to adopt a performance of emotional or sexual intimacy towards their customers that goes far beyond the customary expectations for polite service. It is shameful because it invites customers to engage in inappropriate interactions with their servers under the umbrella of this expectation. It is shameful because it authorizes customers to, at best, withhold tip money, and at worst, verbally or physically harass their server if they feel they have been cheated out of a part of their produced experience because their server does not perform to their expectation. It is shameful because the entire production of affect underscores the women's negative status as servers – women, who are paid in no small part to reify the perceived class status of others. And it is shameful because it produces in the Den women subjects who lack autonomy over their emotional performativity – who by virtue of being compelled to act with insincerity are in many ways not in control of their own emotional lives. An inquiry into these different facets of shame, and the toll it takes on the emotional health of the Den women, is the focus of this article.

I am intimately familiar with this particular bar – it is one where I myself have worked – but my reason for choosing it as my site of research is not simply for its convenience. The time I spent serving there meant that I was really able to get to know my co-workers: not as subjects, but through the solidarity of experiences that only co-workers can share. This solidarity earned me the privilege of their candour and frankness when describing the experiences that had accumulated in them over their years working in this particular service environment. This is an important point when considering the worker's inquiry as a sociological tool because the circumstances of the Den women's employment do not easily coincide with the original concept of the worker's inquiry itself. As originally designed by Marx, the worker's inquiry was a sheet of questions, to be answered by individuals in the working class to better understand the physical circumstances of their employment (Marx, 1880). This was not a politically neutral undertaking: the goal was unambiguously to promote socialist programs and create better working conditions through solidarity. For Marx and his contemporaries, the idea was to gather information from the factory labourer under the assumption that he was being exploited by the boss or owner. But the case of the Den women is complicated by the fact that it is not the owner or boss

or manager that is the primary source of the women's angst. By virtue of being hotel employees the Den women are in the highly unusual position of being serving people in a union, which advocates on their behalf and largely insulates them from abuse by management. Instead of the boss, for the Den women it is the customer who is the source of the angst and shame they experience at work, the customer who is the exploiter. The issues these women face are therefore quite divorced from the issues faced by the factory workers of Marx's time and are very much a product of the contemporary service economy. Keeping in mind workers like the Den women, who produce an intangible product, contemporary Marxists have expanded the idea of a worker's inquiry to include the figure of the *virtuoso*: a worker who does not produce a physical product, but whose labour rather is focused on idea generation, relationship maintenance, or affective performance (Virno, 2004). For these virtuosi, the physical labour is mental labour, and the intellect or emotion that enters the public service becomes just as mundane as the repetitive physical actions of the factory worker. It is precisely because of this mundanity of emotion and intellect, however, that even a worker's inquiry that includes subjects like the virtuoso is challenged as a progressive tool for workers like the Den women. A huge component of the Den women's expectation for affective performance is interpersonal: customers ask them personal questions, and they are pressured, under the threat of being seen to be rude, to answer them<sup>1</sup>. It is not uncommon for customers to ask a server her age, her birthplace, about her family, about her dating or marital status, where she lives, what she does for fun, what her habits are, or what her goals are for her life. This relentless questioning has powerful shameful effects because the women, who are often pressed, through the leverage of the tip money that is the currency of the affective labour economy, are compelled to answer them<sup>2</sup>. I am not suggesting that a customer's prying and a sociologist's interviewing are the same. But the fact of serving's ambiguously negative status in our culture (serving is literally and figuratively *servile* work, serving is a low-status occupation, serving is for certain classes of people), combined with the stigma and assumptions often attached to it (serving people are uneducated,

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1 In the tipping economy, any aspect of a server's appearance or performance can be a justification for withholding a tip. In serving environments like The Den, especially when dealing with male customers, any reluctance to engage can be deemed 'rude,' and be punished with a lack of a tip.

2 The idea that Den servers have an 'other life' – a presumed other career in acting, singing, etc, that they are using their service work to support, is a frequent subject of prying among customers. Well-meaning or not, this questioning creates shame in the servers by reinforcing the idea that serving is a job only done under duress or by those in transition. If the server in question is pursuing another career outside the bar, the questioning can also shame her by reminding her that this career has not progressed enough yet to allow her to quit.

unambitious, unskilled, and disposable), means that for the Den women any inquiry no matter how well-intentioned, can be shameful. Which begs the question: how does the idea of a worker's inquiry become complicated when not only the circumstances and subject of the worker's employment is shameful, but also when the very fact of asking produces shameful associations with emotional and intellectual mundanity? By virtue of their union status the Den women already have many of the protections from managerial abuse that was the goal of the original worker's inquiry. For them and other workers like them, even those who do not enjoy these protections, the goal should always be to inquire after new sources of shame and exploitation without reifying this shame through the inquiry itself. In this case, my history as a known entity and a co-worker lessened the distrust and shifted the inquiry from outsider questioning and more into the sphere of co-research. But borrowing again from recent Marxist expansions of the worker's inquiry concept, another method might be to turn the focus from investigating abuses to exploring agency; from painful stories to stories of the women undercutting this pain by defying the affective expectations of the job; to stories that emphasize how the women identify and engage with their status as affective labourers by utilizing refusal as subjectivity (Molina, 2005). Our role as sociologists interested in the emotional wellbeing of emotional labourers is to critically engage with the many manifestations of shame in affective labour, and expand and rethink the concept of the worker's inquiry to reflect the needs of the ballooning number of service industry labourers that now make up so much of the American domestic economy. I see the Den women, with their unusual protections from manager abuse and unusual vulnerability to customer abuse, as a valuable source of study in this larger project.

In an effort to explore these issues, as part of my master's thesis work I interviewed my Den co-workers in the spring of 2012. After I obtained each woman's written permission, I conducted taped interviews with 12 out of the 14 women who serve<sup>3</sup> in The Den. These interviews were mostly done in pairs over 2-3 hours, and while I had some general questions I used to start the conversation, our familiarity with each other caused the conversations to flow quite easily once the interview was underway. After I transcribed and examined the interviews, I organized them according to several common emotional themes, the shame that informs this article being one of them. Though I have my own wealth of experience from the time I spent serving in The Den, for this article I rely solely on the testimony of the women I interviewed to support the theoretical hypotheses I put forward here, though these hypotheses remain

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3 The term 'server' here will be used to describe any woman serving customers in The Den; if a specific woman is a bartender or waitress I will identify her as such.



entirely my own. I have changed all names, including the name of the hotel and bar, to protect the privacy of the women who agreed to speak with me.

## Unmanaged hearts

As affective labourers, the personal and social identities of the Den women have been especially conditioned by their experiences with and exposure to the shame that is the focus of this article. Among other emotions, shame is critical to any discussion of service labour because of the internalized specificity of its focus. Whereas its sister emotion, guilt, is characterized by its undermining of what one *does*, the target of shame's emotional assault is instead who one *is* (Sedgwick, 2003: 37). This is particularly true for the Den servers, for whom lines of questioning on this very subject – what they do as an assumed *reflection* of who they are – often provokes shameful feelings. Shame is also critical in any discussion of service work by virtue of its inevitability: shame is intractably linked to *servile* work. With this in mind, we will examine the three most common manifestations of shame faced by the women who work in The Den: shame as *stigma* – shame's effect on social persona and interaction; shame in *revulsion* – shame's ability to both internalize harassment or humiliation and serve as a buffer against this treatment; and shame in *inquiry* – the self-doubt and anxiety that can result from the Den women having to frequently discuss the circumstances of their personal lives with customers. To facilitate this exploration, shame must be detached from its assumed role as universally negative marker of uncomfortable or repellent social interaction, and instead be recognized for its potentially critical mutability (Koestenbaum, 2011: 8-10). The experiences relayed to me by the Den women indicate that there is political and social opportunity in harnessing this presumptively negative emotion to work towards the carving out of new defensive and autonomous subjectivities. In these cases, by embracing their shame as a strategy for managing and exploring these identities, many of the women have circumvented the potential effects of this shame, both social and personal, commonly associated with servers and other expendable labourers. I argue that the Den women's embrace and harnessing of their shame has given them a means to realize their agency and an opportunity to embody a proletarian pride in their lives as working people – to identify with a political class of workers through an active harnessing of refusal as a tool of agency (Molina, 2005:4). These women have come to recognize shame as it can be critically redefined: as an expression of revulsion – not directed towards the self, but towards the shameful situation to which one is subjected. In recognizing this revulsion, the Den women are able to police the boundaries between the self they desire to embody and the affected self that is the embodied desire of their customers. For them, the establishment of this boundary – particularly one

between private and public lives and knowledge – is absolutely critical. But herein lies a wrinkle in the question of shame's potential for emancipatory social projects. What does it mean to inquire after workers when inquiry is an everyday aspect of the affective labour encounters they are expected to provide? How should it change our conception of a worker's inquiry for those workers for whom most forms of inquiry are involuntary and invasive? How does this type of inquiry's relationship with shame for these workers detach it from any semblance of progressivity, and instead ally it more closely with the arsenal of biopower? And finally, how can we carve out space for workers to resist these biopolitical implications, and instead achieve the kind of autonomy necessary, in the words of Arlie Russel Hochschild, to truly be unmanaged hearts? (Hochschild, 1983: 190)

If, according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, shame is the 'affect that most defines the space wherein a sense of self will develop' (Sedgwick, 2003: 37) then it behoves us to explore the complicated role shame plays in creating and maintaining proletarian pride, and how it might further be harnessed for the political purpose of raising the status of serving people. For women like the Den servers, this inquiry must be less a questioning and more a recording and reifying of the strategies of resistance and refusal in the affective encounter – strategies that both protect the women and define them as a political class. With this in mind we must rethink and rework the idea of inquiry as directed at workers – largely by recognizing, not just as academics, but also as customers who naturally encounter serving people on a regular basis, the right to refusal in the service encounter: by allowing the server the dignity of not having to be inquired after in the first place.

### **Shame as stigma**

The most commonly understood definition of shame – as embarrassment, humiliation, and self-flagellation – is also the most commonly expressed manifestation of shame found in The Den. Shame permeates the nightly chatter between servers at work, who pepper their conversations with references to being 'miserable', and dreaming of 'a real job'. When a server complains about poor treatment or a bad tip, her co-workers will often sarcastically remark that the reason it happened is because 'he looked right through you', 'she hates you', or 'you're just a servant, remember?' this banter not only reflects some of the shameful agitation the women feel while on the job, but also helps deflect these feelings through the solidarity the women feel with each other. Most of the women I interviewed also said they were uncomfortable talking about their jobs outside of work – particularly with strangers, but even with friends and family. If

the topic of a server's occupation comes up, she might gloss over the specifics and instead emphasize its resemblance to more sophisticated occupations. Sophia, a bartender, explained:

When I tell people about our job, I always say, 'It's a hotel, it's corporate; we have a 401k, we have benefits, stock options'. I'm definitely defending it.

She maintained that this defence is necessary because of the prevalence of assumptions about serving work: 'Because of the stigma, I have to be defensive'. For other women, exercising their spending power helps to ease any public shame they feel. Working at the Den exposes these servers to an enviable class of clientele – a clientele whose lifestyle can be tempting to emulate. Many women told me they had developed a taste for designer labels or expensive foods that they never cared for or thought about prior to working at The Den. 'We're around high-class people', Carmen, a bartender, said. 'It's hard to hear people talk about travelling, dinners out, clothes, and not want to be a part of that'. The adoption of the demeanour of a certain class can also serve to protect the women from any social shaming they might feel when discussing their jobs with others:

I'll tell you, with friends, talking about working in a bar is easier when you have an expensive handbag on your arm. Like, you may have a real job, but look at this – I wear great clothes, I can go to the greatest restaurants. And look at the photos from the vacation I just went on. – Jean, waitress

While enjoying their hard-earned money sometimes helps insulate servers from the shame they feel about their jobs, displaying wealth can also cause a backlash. The women all had stories of friends or acquaintances' subtle disapproval of their high earnings. One described a friend from home who is always needling her about how she can earn so much being 'just a waitress' – the implication being that it is outrageous for someone who serves to be paid so well. Another told me that her friends seem happy for her, but then wonder aloud why they don't make more themselves, 'because they work in offices, and went to college' (all the Den women have college degrees, and several are in graduate school.) Overall, people tend to react to the knowledge that Den servers make more than many entry-level professionals with discomfort: a sense that it is somehow wrong, that the Den women's earnings represent an inversion of the 'proper' scaling of pay. For example, Penelope, a waitress, told me that customers often comment on her large, gold-coloured watch:

I was wearing my watch, and this woman said, 'Is that a Rolex?' in the most condescending and demeaning way. And it's not, but what if it was? She was so appalled, like 'my waitress has a Rolex?' You know, maybe I do! Am I supposed to wear rags?

Like most of the women I interviewed, Penelope told me that the indignant conversations she endures when she displays wealth as a server greatly contributes to her shameful feelings about the job. 'It makes me feel gross', she said. 'Like, on top of all that we deal with, people expect us to be destitute. Like I don't deserve the money I work so hard for'.

## Shame as revulsion

Another common manifestation of shame in The Den is in the form of revulsion – a repellent reaction to shaming that can be projected or internalized. The behaviour of customers is the primary source of revulsive shame for Den servers. One of the prominent features of the job is the extent to which people make no effort to disguise or conceal their activities, conversations, and opinions from Den servers. Most of the time, this behaviour is limited to the comparatively benign results of people becoming intoxicated: lingering stares, slurred words, sloppy gestures, and crude comments. The shame the women feel at being subjected to this crassness has a strong gendered element: the knowledge of shame's ability to render silent and helpless the person being shamed is often exploited by male customers (Bartkey, 1990:27). By virtue of their uniforms (short and skimpy), their gender (young women serving professional older men), or their status (servile persons), the Den women often fall into the trap of feeling in some way that they invite this treatment: that their demeanour, their carriage, or their persona somehow indicated that they are women who deserve this treatment. When a man announces to his friends that his server is 'sexy', has 'a good ass', or wonders aloud whether her breasts are real, he depends on the shame his comments generate to keep her silent and him unrebuked. This is the internalized revulsion that shame generates, the shame that can be exploited. But revulsive shame can also be externalized – projected back onto the shaming subject in an act of boundary-affirming agency. So while some Den women are left feeling devalued and even devastated after a shameful encounter, others harness their shame outward instead of inward, turning it back onto the person who generated it in a way that insulates them from emotional harm and attacks instead the person who is its source. The following stories from Sophia, quoted earlier, and Emily, another bartender, illustrate these differing aspects of revulsive shame. The women told me their stories together, one after the other.

Emily: One night, I was working, it was really late and I was the closing bartender. And there were all these couples at the bar, having affairs. Men with ring tans, or even with their rings still on, picking up women, making out. And I was feeling really gross about the whole thing, like, is love even real, you know? Can I ever trust anyone in a relationship? And there was one man who was sitting there all night, and kept asking for napkins. He was writing all over them. So I asked him,

‘What are you writing?’. And he said, ‘Well, sometimes when I’m away from the woman I love, I’m inspired to write her letters’. He was this normal, nice person, and it made me so happy, like, here he is not with his wife, writing her letters. There is hope. So at the end of the night, I’m closing out my register, and he hands me a napkin that says: ‘CAN YOU HELP ME OUT? \$1,000’. I tried to ignore it, and get out of the bar. But he intercepted me, and was like, ‘So, can you? \$1,000?’. And I said, ‘I’m not a prostitute’. And he said, ‘Well what about the other girls here? Would anyone be interested?’. And I just shook my head and left. Because here I thought was this actual normal person, and then that happens. And then I just felt like crap, about life.

Sophia: This one night I was talking to a guy, we had this great conversation, nothing sexual at all. It was about sports, stuff going on around New York, about the drinks, whatever. And you know I don’t talk to customers that often, but we talked for a long time. And he made this great impression on me; I thought he was so nice. But then when I picked up his signed check, he had left his room key in it, and a huge tip. So in that case, I didn’t even flirt with him at all. He was married! He had a ring on. Which was part of the reason I felt comfortable even talking to him that long. And me just being nice to him was all it took to make him think he had the green light.

Me: Did it make you feel bad that he would think that about you?

Sophia: No. I was disappointed in him. Because the whole time I had thought he was this great guy, and I had actually thought: ‘his wife is so lucky’.

Emily and Sophia’s differing reactions to the proposition of being paid for sex illustrate the two manifestations of revulsive shame in *The Den*. Emily, like several other women, admitted to me a few times that her treatment by men in *The Den* has at times made her question her demeanour at work – her affective performance of femininity – and whether this performance had indicated that she invited, asked for, or deserved the shameful treatment. Sophia, on the other hand, turned her encounter entirely around – rather than internalizing feelings of shame, or self-loathing, she projected feelings of disgust and pity towards the man who would have bought sex from her. Her comment that she was ‘disappointed’ in him reveals that she felt no qualms about his assumptions. Instead, empowered by the shameful revulsion she recognized as universal, she expressed pity towards him, as well as a bit of woeful sadness that one of the few men she thought was a ‘good guy’ at the bar turned out to be like all the others.

## Shame in inquiry

Making conversation with customers is a large part of the affective service expectation for *Den* women. But as affective labourers, even something as seemingly benign as an act of conversation can become an acute source of shame. This is because these conversations – almost always initiated and usually

directed by customers – venture in topic far beyond the mechanics of taking and delivering drink orders, and are often steered instead into situations that resemble quasi-interviews: quizzing the server about her life, her habits, her relationships, her likes and dislikes. Though often well intentioned, these conversations are fraught for servers because they are compelled to be much more open to complete strangers than would be expected in normal interaction. One of the most common lines of questioning from customers – and the one most troubling to the servers – is on the subject of the server's 'other life' – the presumed other nascent career that compelled her to join the service industry in the first place. This 'other life' inquiry is shameful because of the implications inherent in the questioning itself. Peyton, a bartender, described it this way:

People assume you must be doing something else with your life. Because why else would you have this job? As though no one with a choice would ever do this. Which, like, no one asks that of the data processors, who have equally mindless jobs. So it's specific to us. There's a reason people assume we must be dying to leave.

In Peyton's example, shame is realized and reinforced by customer's assumptions that serving is a job done only under duress, and only for as long as absolutely necessary. In contrast to data processing – another job she sees as dead-end and boring – serving is stigmatized because its workers are presumed to be desperate to trade up and out. Molly, a waitress, said that her customer's comments about her 'future plans', or 'other life', devalued her profession by defining it as the 'thing you do when you have no other choice':

Everyone assumes we are doing something else with our lives, like acting or singing or something. That's why they always ask, 'What else do you do?' And they're just trying to be nice. But really, is this job so terrible that no one could want it who wasn't a desperate struggling actor? What's so wrong or shameful about it?

While the women tended to bristle at the suggestion that they must be anxious to leave The Den, it is true that most of them are pursuing outside careers that they hope will someday allow them to leave service work. But that does not mean they are keen to discuss these careers with strangers, particularly in the context of a service environment. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the women told me that the being subjected to frequent questioning about a presumed 'other life' can actually undercut and erode feelings of confidence in that life. If a woman in The Den admits when asked that she is pursuing another career, her very presence as a server can function as a measure of the progress of that career. In many cases, customers will follow up an 'other life' question with a well-meaning, if somewhat misguided and insensitive, question that serves to expose the status of that life. An answer of 'I'm an actress', might result in the server being asked if

she is on Broadway, or an answer of 'I'm a musician', might result in a query as to which label she is signed to. Having to repeatedly explain oneself and the status of one's career (often already a source of angst) to strangers can, over time, erode a server's sense of confidence in that career. Instead of allowing the server to maintain her personal privacy, to work without being personally interviewed, the questions instead reify and reinforce the shame of her circumstance. None of the women told me they felt inherently ashamed because they were servers. But for many of the women any enjoyment or appreciation of the valuable aspects of being a server in The Den – flexible hours, free daytimes, and generous tips – might in the end be eclipsed by the conversations which serve as a constant, shameful reminder of her status, both in and out of the bar.

Faced with the repetitive intrusion of customer's questioning into their personal lives, many of the women have adopted strategies for protecting their rights to personal privacy. Molly, for example, takes an offensive approach to establishing this boundary:

Sometimes I'll go back to a table, and they'll say to me, 'What's your deal? Where are you from? What do you do outside this bar? What neighborhood do you live in? How old are you? Where did you go to school?'. All these personal questions. So I've started saying, in response, 'And how old are you? Where are you from? What do you do?'. It keeps things in balance. What makes people think they can ask us things like that? I mean, you shouldn't know so much stuff about me, when I don't know anything about you.

For Molly, turning the focus from herself to her customers inverts the traditional pattern in serving work by placing her customers in the emotionally vulnerable position rather than the other way around. She inverts questioning onto her customers as an assertion of her agency and unwillingness to be shamed by her customer's inquiry. Other servers in The Den avoid the entire prospect of shameful encounters in the bar by completely dissociating from the display of affectivity in the first place. For these women, shame is both their acknowledgement of the reality that they could be emotionally hurt by engaging a customer and the motivating factor behind the avoidance that results from this acknowledgement. Penelope explained how her approach to dealing with customers has affected her experience in The Den:

I think, more than often, some waitresses are really nice to their tables, and you have to create a distance instead. It's really sad to say, but if you're really open and friendly to men, you create the illusion that you can be had. That you'll talk to them. That they can grab you. You have to be unapproachable. And several of the waitresses are really sweet, but if you give customers the impression that you are approachable, you'll get taken advantage of. They'll take it too far. You have to show people how you should be treated. It's hard to say this bluntly, and guys often say I'm not nice. They'll say to another waitress 'thank god you're here, that

other girl was so mean', but, you know, you never see me crying at the end of the night.

Penelope was one of the few women who told me that she has very few emotional issues associated with her time working in The Den. She told me she has a comfortable relationship to her job: she comes to work, makes her money, and leaves without taking anything with her but that money. Like the subjects of many sociological studies of serving, Penelope attributes this lack of angst directly to her lack of participation in the economy of affective labour, and the absorption of the shame that is its currency<sup>4</sup>. Her explanation was simple: 'I don't put much in, so I don't get much thrown back at me.' Still other Den women deal with this difficulty by effectively partitioning their lives – making The Den and their jobs there a space that largely does not include outside friends, acquaintances, or romantic partners. This avoidance of combining their work and private lives is not only a reflection of projected shame; it is also because these women feel their serving selves do not accurately represent them as people. Emily said that her self-consciousness about her job has meant she prefers not to discuss it with friends and family, or invite them to visit her at work. 'This job is a paycheck for me', she said. 'It's not my life. I'm comfortable with it'. But if she brings up her job, she said, 'I feel like people start looking at me in a certain light, as a server. And then it's like they don't know me at all'.

## Conclusion: Critical shame

Emily's comment is indicative of the way that shame intersects with the theatricality of affectation adopted by many servers in The Den. And this in turn illustrates shame's utility as a tool to both understand and critically respond to the circumstances of the women working there. Borrowing from Sedgwick, shame in The Den is a schizophrenic influence; shame 'effaces itself; shame points and projects; shame turns itself inside out; shame and pride, shame and dignity, shame and self-display, shame and exhibitionism are different interlinings of the same glove' (Sedgwick, 2003: 38). Taken further, shame becomes a device of critical mutability, of remaking, a way for the servers emotionally troubled by its influence to act themselves into an emancipatory response to it. The goal of any sociological project that focuses on workers like The Den women then, should always be to create the type of serving space that would allow servers the autonomy to control their exposure to shame by freely choosing their level of participation in this performativity. This is not to suggest that shame can or should be removed entirely from the affective service

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4 For other critical work on affective labour, see Paules, G.F. (1991); Gatta, M.L. (2002); and Leidner, R. (1993).



encounter. Shame is inherent in service work, in *servile* work that by its nature places one person, if only temporarily, below another. But we can recognize the importance of shame's positive qualities even as we work to minimize its negativities. As Sophia's example illustrates, shame can also be a reflective and reflexive tool, focusing disgust on the behaviour that generates it, and identifying the shamed person as a member of a public body unified in this disgust. For Sophia, her shame resulted in transference of solidifying empathy for those, like herself, safely inside the circle of those who do not do shameful things. The Den women's stories show us that one often recognizes that she feels something, *is something*, through experiencing this shame. And it is in this ability to help generate feelings of solidarity and strength that shame, as the primary policing force of behaviour, realizes its greatest potential for critical agency. It is imperative to preserve shame in the service encounter as a perfectly imperfect emotion: a conglomeration of conflicting pulls and pushes, motivators and devaluations; one cannot have only some aspects without the others. 'The forms taken by shame are not distinct "toxic" parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised', Sedgwick tells us:

They are instead integral to and residual in the processes by which identity itself is formed. They are available for the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, *transfiguration*, affective and symbolic loading and deformation, but perhaps all too potent for the work of purgation and deontological closure. (*ibid.*: 63)

Trying to separate these aspects will only cause the ontological collapse of the entire metaphysical project: that is why political projects that attempt to harness agency by removing shame are ultimately destined to fail. And we should want it to fail, for in failing to be rendered impotent, shame becomes a critical tool for determining what serving people in an environment like The Den want and need to be emotionally safe. In contrast to the performative personas expected of them as affective labourers, in employing and embodying their shame women in The Den have come to terms with their unmanaged hearts – a self that is authentic, honest, and private. To return to the idea of worker's inquiry, what shame in The Den truly teaches us is that we sometimes must resist inquiring at all, socially or sociologically. Instead, we must empower: allow workers to engage and recognize their shame – privately – and give them the autonomy to respond to it in the manner they choose. Such a project will involve the deconstruction and adjustment of much of the expectations we as consumers have of the affective labour experience. But it also suggests a purpose for the type of worker's inquiry I undertook with the Den women. On some level, everyone is a consumer of affective labour product. If the type of worker's inquiry I advocate is one that emphasizes stories of resistance and agency rather than inquiry per se, these projects will have little effect on worker's wellbeing if we as consumers cannot

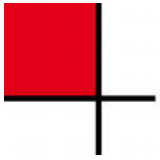
adjust our expectations for service. As the Den women's stories indicate, this adjustment must include a transfer of emotional agency from the customer to the server. This is a project that begins with the most basic service encounter. The task facing those for whom exposure to shame is a reality of their employment – as well as those who care about worker's emotional health – is how best to grasp this agency, to understand and embrace this new conception of shame, as a tool of empowering refusal, before the emotional damage can run too deep.

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## Labour, religion and game: Or, why is art relevant for social science?

Michał Kozłowski

### abstract

This article argues that social sciences established their paradigm through privileging two particular social phenomena – division of labour and religion. In trying to think the two in connection gave birth to modern social inquiry. But there were other decisive moments more often overlooked, such as in the work of Pascal and Marcel Mauss. I argue that art is a social phenomenon that combines the essential moments of constituting the social world under the condition that we analyse it also in a ‘secularised’ manner precisely from the point of view of division of labour, belief, game with occulted rules and symbolic exchange. Art reveals itself as a particularly dense social phenomenon that can shed a light on other social fields.

If one would like to trace back to the beginnings of social sciences he or she should search for the objects or phenomena which first allowed these disciplines to anchor their initial concepts and guide their empirical research. For such phenomena serve both as objects of inquiry in their own right and as openings to investigations reaching far beyond the initial domain. Such phenomena were (which is quite uncontroversial) the division of labour and religion. Certainly the pre-modern and early modern social philosophy looked elsewhere – it derived the *social* from the human nature (like in Aristotle), it tried to ground it in virtue (like Plato) or even grasp it from the point of view of politics (like Machiavelli). But social science (let us maintain for a while this somewhat arbitrary distinction between social science and social philosophy) took, consciously or not, a very different path: it didn’t seek to originate nor to ground its object but rather to describe it. Instead of seeking for the essence of the social being it gradually

exposed its relational and largely contingent character. In this sense Marx, Durkheim and Weber paved the way towards Foucault-style anti-essentialist social science. The question of power no doubt remained the major issue but it was no longer identified nor reduced to political power. Political power tends to be perceived as a specific form of power rather than role model for all forms of power.

As we stated, the privileged phenomena for the social science were (and perhaps remain) division of labour on the one hand and religion on the other. It seems clear that the two are heterogeneous and heteromorphic enough to provide for two different paradigms. To some extent such paradigms were born in the opening of a gap between ‘theological’ (Eliade, Schmitt) and ‘materialistic’ (esp. functionalistic and economical) accounts of the social world. But great sociology, the one of Durkheim and Weber but also the one of Marx, always sought to reintegrate the question of the division of labour and the question of religion within one, more complex, paradigm. Of course this is possible only if we operate a certain ‘secularisation’ of the religious phenomena. Still, religion for Emile Durkheim is a genuine revelation, not in the spiritual sense however but in theoretical and methodological. He testified about the moment when he ‘achieved a clear view of the essential role played by religion in social life. It was in that year that, for the first time, I found the means of talking about the study of religion sociologically. This was a revelation to me. That course of 1895 marked a dividing line in the development of my thought...’ (Lukes, 1973: 271). Robert Alun Jones rightly states that ‘Durkheim insisted that religious experience and practice were far more important than ideas and doctrines, for the reality on which religion depends is not the result of metaphysical speculation but concrete social action’ (Jones, 2005: 94). It is important to note 1895 is precisely the year when *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique* were published. *De la division du travail social* was published two years earlier and *Le suicide* exactly two years afterwards. The ‘religious revelation’ seems to culminate the elaboration of sociologies’ specific method. The ‘revelation’ which some years later lets him formulate the definition of religion that necessitates no transcendence nor deity – ‘A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, i.e., things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them’ (Durkheim, 1995: 44). Religion literally becomes the proper ‘social fact considered as a thing’, the social fact consisting in making ‘sacred objects’, building solidarities and producing sets of non-utilitarian, symbolic practices and beliefs.

But the core issue here is that any set of practices and beliefs cannot be isolated from the realm of economics, production and labour. According to Weber:

For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. (Weber, 2005: 123)

Whether his illustrious account of religious ground of capitalism is accurate or farfetched it is another issue. But there is no question that capitalism is not only about ethics understood as self-reflexive moral conduct but that it is also about the aesthetics of the social hierarchy:

The emphasis on the ascetic importance of a fixed calling provided an ethical justification of the modern specialized division of labour. In a similar way the providential interpretation of profit making justified the activities of the businessman. The superior indulgence of the seigneur and the parvenu ostentation of the nouveau riche are equally detestable to asceticism. But, on the other hand, it has the highest ethical appreciation of the sober, middle-class, self-made man. (Weber, 2005: 109)

The moral economy of the bourgeoisie is therefore based on the vocational character of work that coincides both with accumulation and the efficient exercise of social domination (material and symbolic) over subordinated social classes.

The position of Marx on the issue is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand it seems that it would be the form of the division of labour (the social relations of production), which determines the form of religious life (as ideology) and that this determination is one sided and univocal. After all, both class and capital are produced and reproduced by certain forms of division of labour. But then there are reasons to think that that Marxian analysis of commodity fetishism is something more than a mere metaphor. 'A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' – states one of the most famous of Marx's quotations. Obviously '*theology*' doesn't stand here for a refined and speculative ideology of the free market but it refers to the character of the very relations that the social subjects are involved in. The commodity form, which is the glue of the entire structure of capitalistic production, is itself socially constituted. 'This Fetishism of commodities has its origin [...], in the peculiar social character of the labour that produces them'. What is this 'peculiar social character' of labour other than the set of practices and beliefs that constitute the social relations? In any case the division of labour and religion cannot be separated and juxtaposed as basis and superstructure in Marxist-Leninist metaphysics.

Why and how the division of labour is constitutive of the social structure is less of a mystery. The novelty of Marx's approach consists not so much in arguing that division of labour creates inequality between people but precisely in demonstrating that this recurrent inequality is rooted in the capital – the mysteriously growing social resource which is at the same time the social relation of such nature that it structurally deprives and dispossesses...

But perhaps such a conceptual synthesis between the world of belief and ritual on one side and the one of the division of labour on the other has been already successfully carried out. It happened in identifying and describing famous symbolic exchange. In his pivotal text from 1925 Marcell Mauss pointed precisely at the series of phenomena which integrate coherently belief, ritual and the division of labour into the economy of symbolic exchange or 'dangerous gift economy, encumbered by personal considerations, incompatible with the development of the market, trade and productivity – *which was in a word uneconomic*' (Mauss, 1966: 52). No wonder the perspective of this new economy – freed from the market and the capital – seduced many thinkers from Georges Bataille to Guy Debord with its implicit promises of emancipation. But today we ought to be far more cautious. There are two major problems with the Maussian approach when applied to artistic venture. First, we know today that some (perhaps all) symbolic economies vigorously engender both markets and capitals. Second, symbolic economies as 'total phenomena' have their rules explicit and sanctified. The issue with contemporary art is quite opposite however – the rules are mostly implicit, they are constantly shifting and fluctuating and their sanctification is euphemised and problematic.

Perhaps there is one more trace in genealogy of social sciences, which would let us approach art and art-like phenomena more adequately. In his homage book to Blaise Pascal, Pierre Bourdieu points to the mathematician's remarkable intuition – the one that the social world is essentially a game, set of rules which are at the same time binding, arbitrary and self-evident:

The original investment has no origin, because it always precedes itself and, when we deliberate on entry into the game, the die is already more or less cast. "We are embarked", as Pascal puts it. To speak of a decision to 'commit oneself' to scientific or artistic life (as in any other of the fundamental investments of life - vocation, passion, devotion) is, as Pascal himself was well aware, almost as absurd as evoking a decision to believe, as he does, with few illusions, in the argument of the wager. (Bourdieu, 1997: 11)

The social game is governed by law that is no other than custom, but this 'custom' is very remote from what David Hume has understood as 'custom or habit' – the innocent practicality which only gains with time a formally enhanced legitimacy. It also clearly distinguishes itself from the Maussian 'total

phenomenon' which is congruently and explicitly ritual, mythological, economic, morphological and juridical (Mauss, 1966: 37). The rules of social game are rather about the masked violence producing the universal consent. So it is impossible to grasp the interest of any individual in the game since it is precisely *the game* that decides what is of interest. And even if the game has a legend of its noble origins it is not really nobility that is at stake but spontaneous, immediate and unquestioned binding of its rules.

Custom creates the whole of equity, for the simple reason that it is accepted. It is the mystical foundation of its authority; whoever carries it back to first principles destroys it. Nothing is so faulty as those laws which correct faults. He who obeys them because they are just obeys a justice which is imaginary and not the essence of law, it is quite self-contained, it is law and nothing more. [...] [The people] must not see the fact of usurpation, law was once introduced without reason, and has become reasonable. We must make it regarded as authoritative, eternal and conceal its origin, if we do not wish that it should soon come to an end. (Bourdieu, 1997: 94)

So let us move to art as a privileged object for social science. At this point we can already see why studying and investigating art may be epistemologically central even if we agree that art as such does not occupy a central position in the social world (we remember many from Heidegger to Ranciere have claimed it actually did). Art can provide a paradigm for social theory because it is at the same time a system of division of labour, a system of practices and beliefs and a system specific symbolic exchange played as a social game. One could object that these are components of any social field. It may be so, but rarely if ever we can grasp the mechanisms of social construction, exploitation, domination, real subsumption but also of production, cooperation and hypothetically 'collective creativity' in one relatively small and isolated social field and in such intensity and complexity. Hence the rules of art can be seen precisely as a '*law and nothing more, law which has been introduced without reason and has become reasonable*'. There is a great deal of labour being done within the art field in order to make it regarded as authoritative – it is specifically the labour of reproduction of the field. More importantly, just like in the Pascal's game-example where the game explicitly distinguishes between winners and losers, art is explicitly dealing with different distinctions: between sublime and ordinary, high and low, visible and invisible. But while producing these distinctions explicitly game and art both simultaneously yet implicitly make social hierarchies, divisions of labour and distributions of capital among the players or art workers. This tacit and implicit process should be most carefully examined.

But in order to fully benefit from this social laboratory we must resist the temptation of succumbing to the charm of art as workshop of semantic production, of biopolitics or immaterial labour, we must disenchant its idols –

deliberately ignore what art says, shows or sounds. In other words, we have to remain faithful to the instruction of Walter Benjamin concerning the literary production:

[...] instead of asking: what is the relationship of a work of art to the relationships of production of the time? Is it in accord with them, is it reactionary or does it strive to overthrow them, is it revolutionary? – in place of this question, or in any case before asking this question, I would like to propose another. Before I ask: how does a literary work stand in relation to the relationships of production of a period, I would like to ask: how does it stand in them? This question aims directly at the function that the work has within the literary relationships of production of a period. (Benjamin, 1970: 230)

The question about how art stands within the relations of production requires situating artistic production in the context of larger political economy but it also requires uncovering of its own specific political economy. Then we can further inquire about the relation between art's 'external' and 'internal' political economy.

1) Art is a form of disenchanted religion insofar as it operates the social transubstantiation of the ordinary objects into the objects of art deprived of worldly utility. Two important clarifications: as art has erased the formal necessity of producing objects at all (like in performance or some conceptual art) it confirmed the sanctification it operates can be independent from any material substrate just as divine grace can fill the soul of the believer without any worldly mediation. Or in other words – art has proven to be more powerful than an artwork. If we say art is free from utility it is so in a relative way – of course it is a socially useful to lack utility just as it has been useful to the nobility to deny the utilitarian value of labour or trade. So we can speak here of a useful uselessness (a reversal of Kantian disinterested interest of aesthetic judgement). Not only does art have its ministers, temples, shrines and chapels, it also discretely builds aesthetic community (thus the community of desire) just as 'asceticism was (once) carried out of political cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality'. And it seems art cannot function without a substantial amount of vocational labour, the unpaid and invisible toil of its 'dark matter' (to use Gregory Sholette's expression). In this sense art has also this rare and magical ability that it shares with religion – the one of building the community of the unequal where the strength of a community bond is proportional to the imbalance between its members.

2) Art is a tremendous arrangement of the division of labour. *Tremendous*, because often the nature of this division is entirely concealed. First there is hardly a specialisation in artistic production. There is of course a whole highly specialized proletariat of artistic infrastructure with quite ambiguous status, like



actors or musicians. So rather we should say there is no particular craft necessary for doing art as such – there only remains a peculiar specialisation in art itself and in its awkward rules, standings and stakes. If indeed there is a specifically artistic specialisation it concerns the mastering of the changing rules of artistic legitimacy. As for authors, it comes all to the same thing - they *create* artworks. There is nothing astonishing about sociodicy of the division of labour and its fruits (by virtue, talent, general utility etc.). But authorship is literally masking the fact the division exists. To put it in Bourdieu's terms – authorship legitimates a relationship of domination by embedding it in terms of creative quality that is itself a naturalized social construction. Consequentially there is an artistic specificity of capital and its accumulation. Creativity of *some* still imagined (despite repeated denials) as *creatio ex-nihilo* effectively conceals the labour of *all* those who contribute and expense their labour in the complex social process of valorisation: curators, dealers, art writers, lecturers, gallery workers, editors, assistants and consultants (even if sometimes some of them participate in the splendour of creation). We don't suggest that the author disposes of a magical power to create artistic value – to the contrary, it has been shown how valorisation is social, complex and collective venture. The problem is that collective creativity is still not a socially valid pattern of redistribution of social resources neither in terms of money nor prestige. Such effective pattern of redistribution still needs to be invented. This symbolic resource (always held by individuals never by artworks) in the process of (necessarily exploitative) growth is effectively concealing the social relation that constitutes this very resource – namely the attribution.

3) Art is both about the game and the rules of the game. As we saw according to Pascal the social game in order to be efficient must have rules that are either implicit or sanctified. What is interesting about art game is that visibly it has the two at the same time. What is even more peculiar is that the rules of the artistic game imply changing the rules while playing according to the rules. It is characteristic of the late modern art not to emulate the ideal of art but to contest it. In other words there is constant strife for the legitimacy of the rules of the art game but this strife only brings the solidification of the meta-rules, and reinforces the game as a whole.

It is obvious that none of these features can be exclusively ascribed to the field of art. They are present in other social fields. But the combination and the intensity of the three in the field of art make it more than a study of a particular social practice. It allows for us to use it as the place where essential cognitive categories can be worked out. It shines light on other social facts, notably the relations of labour and class. And this statement remains valid regardless of whether artistic mode of production stands in the core of immaterial labour and at the frontline

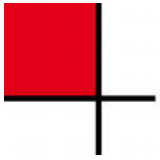
of political struggle. This potential has remained almost entirely unexploited at least until Bourdieu's *Distinction* in 1979. But it could still be moved further and certainly also transversally or beyond Bourdieu's own categories. The good news is that authors including Hans Abbing, Dietrich Diedrichsen, Pascal Gielen or Stephen Shukaitis – each in their own way – are doing research going in Benjaminian direction. Yet, the attempts to extend such approaches to other social facts still remain limited.

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## Designers' inquiry: Mapping the socio-economic conditions of designers in Italy

Bianca Elzenbaumer and Caterina Giuliani

### Introduction

How are other designers working and living in Italy? What do our peers think about their working conditions? In what ways does the profession they chose to practice affect their lives? To what extent are other designers already organising themselves around their rights as workers? These were some of the questions our collective – the Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative (Construction site for non-affirmative practice) – have discussed since our formation during a collectivised residency set up by the design collective Brave New Alps in autumn 2011 at the project space Careof DOVCA in Milan. The residency invited eight recent graduates from Italian design schools who had worked on social, environmental or political issues through their theses, to share a politicised co-working space over a period of two months. The desire behind establishing such a space was to experiment with what might happen when socially and politically engaged designers were brought together in a space committed to an analysis of how the work and working conditions of designers fit into the capitalist mode of production. Given this commitment over a period of eight weeks, besides engaging intensely with each other's work, we followed a series of eight seminars led by the Italian economist Hervé Baron on the social imaginary in capitalism<sup>1</sup>, we met with collectives like San Precario, the Carrotworker' Collective and Serpica Naro to learn about their approaches to dealing with precarious working

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1 Baron, who had been suggested to Brave New Alps by Andrea Fumagalli, describes himself as an economist with a passion for philosophy. In fact, he combines a post-Keynesian approach to institutional economics with the philosophy of Cornelius Castoriadis.

conditions, we organised a series of discussions about the future of small and medium-sized production in Italy (Cantiere, 2011), and, finally, we immersed ourselves in a process of collective writing through which we discussed and formulated our desires, needs, anxieties, doubts, points of orientation and inspiration in relation to producing socially and politically engaged design work whilst having to deal with precarious working conditions (Unità di Crisi, 2013: 346-351). Out of this intense engagement grew the desire to continue to research and work together as a collective beyond that time in Milan. Thus, since we feel deeply involved not only in the making of signs and objects, but also in the creation of relations, processes, languages and collective imaginaries, we decided to launch our collective work by making public our issues and questions around precariousness.

## The process

Driven by a desire to involve a larger group of people in our discussions, we presented our collective and its concerns in an Italian university in December 2011. However, the middle-aged professors dismissed our concerns regarding precarious working conditions and how they influence the choices designers make in relation to the projects they produce, identifying them as an individual rather than a systemic issue, as a personal inability to deal with the market. Rather than accepting such a dismissive position, we wanted to produce more concrete knowledge about our own and our peers' socio-economic conditions. Hence, in February 2012, we began to engage in a process of self-education of how other people, in the past and in the present, have produced knowledge about their own condition in order to then activate that knowledge to challenge and transform that very condition. While engaging in this process of self-education – beginning from a text by Marta Malo de Molina (2004) – and discovering inspiring examples of self-consciousness raising groups, co-research collectives, and participatory action research groups, we realised that, as a collective, we were already beginning to inscribe ourselves in such a tradition. We subsequently came across Marx's *Workers' inquiry* (1880) and were fascinated by how many of his one hundred questions, then formulated to engage French factory workers in an investigation of their working lives, could still now be accurately applied to investigate our condition as cognitive workers. Marx's questionnaire-led inquiry appealed to us as a strategy that would allow us to reach a large amount of designers while still effectively guiding them through a critical questioning of their working practices. Therefore, we decided to base our inquiry on a carefully crafted questionnaire that could trigger reflections on areas of work and life more commonly overlooked by designers. We began by formulating questions that would invite designers to reflect on eight areas: their education and family

background (e.g. *What is your housing condition? What is your father's/mother's profession?*), their working conditions (e.g. *How many hours are you working on average in a week? How do you determine the monetary value of your work?*), the way they encountered internships (e.g. *In the case of an unpaid or underpaid internship, how did you sustain your living costs? Did you ever take on interns?*), their satisfaction (e.g. *Are you satisfied with your work in relation to its aim and the modalities of executing work?*), their working environment and health (e.g. *Do you have physical/psychological problems related to your work? If you have children, how does this influence your working life?*), their thoughts on the figure of the designer in society (e.g. *Do you have any thoughts on the ways designers relate to society?*) and, finally, the way they organise themselves around their rights as workers (*Are you part of an organisation that protects the rights of designers? Do you know of any cases of workers' strikes within the field of design?*). In the course of elaborating the questionnaire through lengthy discussions around the pros and cons of every question, we chose to explicitly position ourselves on the side of precarious designers, given that such a viewpoint is ordinarily lacking in the reports and discourses that are circulated with regards to this sector of the creative industries (Design Council UK, 2010; Berufsverband der Deutschen Kommunikationsdesigner, 2011). This is not to say that there are no critical sociological accounts, but that unfortunately these accounts seldom reach the designers themselves (cf. Gill, 2005; Manske and Ludwig, 2010). Therefore, by producing an inquiry ourselves among our peers, our aim was not only to create knowledge but also to provoke much-needed reflection and critical discussion around the conditions of our profession, which might then lead to co-operations, common struggles and real transformations.

By April 2012, we had finally developed 78 questions and launched our *Designers' inquiry* during the Milan Design Fair as an anonymous online questionnaire. Choosing the context of the design fair to circulate the inquiry was important to us, as the fair constitutes the moment during which you can find the highest concentration of designers in one place around Europe. In this sense, we imagined choosing the fair as being analogous to waiting at the factory gates in Fordist times. Once the inquiry was in circulation, we saw the participation of 767 designers working in Italy within two months<sup>2</sup>.

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2 It should be noted that we define 'designers' within a broad range of overlapping competences related to the field of design, ranging from graphic, web and product design to animation, fashion, illustration, architecture and design research, since, through our own, our peers' and our university tutors' working lives, we are aware that many designers now constantly move between multiple fields of competence in order to make it to the end of the month.

After closing the online inquiry in June 2012, we began to take a series of collective steps to explicate the answers to the questionnaire. These included the organisation of two workshops that opened up the task of rendering the data to people who are not usually involved with the Cantiere. The first of these workshops took place at Careof DOCVA from June 27 to July 1, 2012, and was centred on an initial screening of the data, followed by a brainstorming of ways in which to make strategic use of the data. The second open workshop took place half a year later, from January 25 to 27, 2013, and was centred on the representation and communication of the elaborated results. Here, our focus was on finding a way to communicate the findings that would give space both for the statistics that had emerged and for the personal stories and voices behind them. For us, it was important to open up the interpretation of the data to people beyond the restricted circle of the collective, so whilst these workshops were not necessarily always the most efficient in terms of getting the work done, they were immensely important in involving more people in the production of knowledge and in bringing yet unconsidered angles into the discussion. After the final open workshop, we spent another two months producing a conclusive report which attempts to balance the statistics and the personal voices in such a way that (we hope) it might foster a wide range of discussions and actions amongst designers, design educators and policy makers. We launched the report in April 2013 (Cantiere, 2013), again at the Milan Design Fair, through a series of small actions, strategic mail-outs, radio interviews and a five-pages contribution to the special design edition of the national newspaper *La Stampa* (9 April 2013).

## Outcome

The majority of the designers who responded to the inquiry were between the ages of 21 and 35 (with peak participation from 26 to 30 year olds). They were mainly of Italian nationality and had completed a university degree. At the time of participation, the majority of respondents declared themselves to be working full-time and to not have children. Overall, the eight sections of the inquiry outlined a professional figure that is complex and not easily summed up without leaving out important nuances. However, we can say that 'to do design' emerges as an activity that requires a huge dedication of time and resources, independent of the level of success a designer is experiencing. To work as a designer means to be exposed to precarious working conditions which, for designers in Italy, manifest themselves in, amongst others, unstable working contracts and freelance work, an unsatisfying relation of working hours and pay, a tendency to work in isolation and the necessity to be supported by a family network because the income is not enough to live autonomously. Moreover, it requires enormous flexibility, which translates into a discriminating factor (and a reason to drop out

of the profession) for mothers and those in circumstances that do not allow for this flexibility. There also emerges an almost complete unawareness of designers' own rights as workers and an almost total absence of organisations that would help strategically enforce, protect and extend these rights. However, the inquiry also portrays designers as enormously attached to their work and, although they often dislike their working conditions, as passionately attached to it – to the extent that they would not change their choice of profession.

The various sections of the inquiry brought to the fore many details that are worth outlining. With regards to *family background*, the typical designer depicted by the inquiry comes from a middle class family unconnected to the so-called creative industries, and very rarely has a migrant background. From the parental professional profiles, one can deduce that, in order to progress in their profession, only few designers can count on strategic relationships or on tools (such as workshops or studio spaces) deriving from their background. However, the housing situation of designers in Italy remains particularly tied to the conditions of their family of origin or of their partner: in fact, 39% live in homes owned by their parents or partners.

In relation to their *working conditions*, the majority of respondents manage to work in their individual field of expertise, although 58% do so as freelancers without a contract. For more than a third, it is necessary to supplement their income by carrying out other jobs. Among these secondary jobs and occasional services, designers work in a variety of design and non-design related sectors. Moreover, a third of the designers declared that they rely on the help of their family circle and friends in order to make it to the end of the month, specifying that this support has been, or still is, essential so as not to abandon this profession. A further third is made up of designers who barely square the balance sheet: who have debts, a bank loan or who have used personal savings to cover their living costs. Thus on the whole, only 16% of designers are able to describe an autonomous, 'well-off' economic situation, managing to put aside savings.

Nevertheless, when it comes to *satisfaction*, the main motivating factors towards work for the designers in the inquiry appear to be interest and enthusiasm: 61% would not change their study curriculum, even though they consider their education only partially useful in regards to professional goals, and despite the precarious working conditions encountered in the market. In relation to *working environment and health*, the inquiry reveals that 55% of designers work from a study or an office. However, a third of the participants take work home to do at night or over the weekend. The working environment appears to greatly influence quality of life and to work from home is considered

by many to be claustrophobic and non-stimulating. Nevertheless, the use of co-working spaces is not prevalent amongst designers in Italy. When it comes to assessing their health, well over half the participants complain of work-related physical problems, mainly connected with computer use and a sedentary lifestyle (backache, visual disturbances). Among psychological problems, stress, anxiety, depression and sleeping disorders prevail. Moreover, 22% of participants say they feel discriminated against at work, mainly in relation to gender, geographic provenance, personality and lack of strategic social relations. Gender-related discrimination does not affect male participants, while it affects a third of females.

In answers to questions around the perception of the *figure of the designer*, there emerges a sense that designers feel that their role is not sufficiently acknowledged within the context they live and operate in. This is further outlined by some of the adjectives used when asked to describe someone else's view of their profession, like "fun" and "indefinable." In answers to open-ended questions focussing on the relation between designers and society, a considerable number of designers interrogate themselves about the opportunities offered by design as a critical instrument; self-reflection amongst designers on their profession and their role appears to be commonplace.

Finally, when it comes to considering the political *organisation* of designers, competition is revealed to be a noticeable factor, with struggles around work evidently suffering from it: only 7% of the respondents declared themselves to be part of an organisation that protects the rights of designers. Moreover, almost no designer participating in the inquiry knew about cases of strike (2.4%) or sabotage (3.7%) within the profession.

## Reflections and next steps

A strong sense of resignation emerged in the personal statements collected by the inquiry – a feeling that the possibility to access work and fair working conditions will not change, or if not worsen. Moreover, the main strategy to deal with this situation appears to be to plan to emigrate in order to find work in less stifling socio-economic environments. Despite this rather bleak prospect depicted by the inquiry, we found that the collective evaluation of its different sections took away our perception of precariousness as an overwhelming, monolithic thing one cannot fight. Instead, it allowed us to see it as a process of precarisation constituted by a variety of procedures that act at different levels, such as disorientation around the monetary value of design work, difficulties in conceptualising design as work, unawareness of one's rights, discrimination



according to gender, age and ability, ambitions driven by the dominant discourse of competition and entrepreneurialism within design and fragmentation between designers. Although this stratification renders precariousness complex, it is also what provides the Cantiere with a sense that aspects of it can be countered, exited and/or undone from many different angles: by strategically strengthening design-workers in relation to clients and employers (for instance, by fostering a fluency in regards to standard fees and hourly wages, the negotiation of project estimates and contracts, collective organising), but also by intervening in how designers project themselves, their activities and their social relations into the future.

Having said this, we are aware that we are a collective that researches and produces together on minimal resources, while the results of the inquiry call for interventions in many different areas. Initially, this mismatch of resources and the need for action seemed overwhelming until we realised that we could effectively create alliances with other groups who similarly struggle against precarisation – some of which we have connected with throughout the process of the inquiry, such as ReRePre (Rete dei Redattori Precari - network of precarious editors) and ACTA (Associazione Consulenti Terziario Avanzato). Furthermore, we realised that in order for us to progress, it was important to find aspects within the inquiry that we could tackle with methods that would energise us. Ultimately, we decided to focus on what is most important to us, namely not to de-precarise designers as they are – because we are aware that much of what designers do is oiling the mechanisms of a mode of production that depletes not only designers but also other humans and non-humans – but to create both careful and strategic interventions against precarisation that also move towards politicising and transforming the activities of designers.

We have since begun to work on the elaboration of workshops and tools for designers and design students that address two areas:

- a) engaging designers in considering design as work – who gains from the work designers produce? How much do people in other professions earn? What are their rights as workers? What is considered work and what is not? To what extent does working as a designer mean spending time standing up for one's rights and how might one do that? How does one master the creation and negotiation of estimates, of contracts that work in the design-workers' favour?
- b) re-imagining what it means to work as a designer – what is a 'career'? What is success and failure and who measures them? What potential do relationships of solidarity hold vs. relations of competition? What

measures can empower female designers to stay in the profession? What unconventional paths can be developed in working as a designer?

The first area is where we see the possibility to connect with design schools, whereby it closely relates to their responsibility in preparing students not only to aspire to become creative geniuses and/or savvy entrepreneurs, but to actually acknowledge that the labour market for designers is particularly saturated, that in order for graduates to make a living there is a need to create solidarity between designers, to develop a strong sense of the value of their work and of tactics to claim it strategically as well as collectively. The second area focuses on de-precarising designers by inviting them to question the whole narrative of what it means to *be* a designer. Given that the inquiry showed the openness of designers to critically question themselves<sup>3</sup>, we consider that by engaging more designers in reflecting on how design-activities contribute to (re)create imaginaries that are often tied to stifling notions of a career, consumption, self-perception, gender- and social relations more generally, we can develop ways in which to employ our skills in order to create languages, imaginaries and relations that open up possibilities for transforming these notions, towards generating very different futures.

Whilst this post-inquiry journey has only just begun, we intend it to move us towards both improving the socio-economic awareness and conditions of designers and enabling more designers to make space for content and processes. In this way, designers might be able to engage with the world in meaningful and politicised ways.

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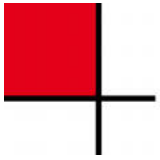
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## the authors

The Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative is a group of Italian designers who have been working together since 2011. They engage in studying and experimenting with support structures for critically engaged design practices. They believe that it is necessary to radically rethink the work of designers in relation to society and that there is no sense in reproducing the usual languages, products and methodologies whilst waiting for the next period of abundance, but rather that now is the time to create new ways of living and working together. The workshops being developed in response to the inquiry are made available at <http://www.precaritypilot.net/>.

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## Art workers want to know<sup>\*</sup>

Alan W. Moore

The call for the Politics of Workers' Inquiry conference asked specifically for methodological contributions. I told a kind of ghost story about a tribe of phantoms who occasionally reappear. It concerned an organization called the Art Workers Coalition (AWC), formed in early 1969 after a spectacular protest in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Through its regular open meetings akin to the peoples' assemblies of recent times, the AWC aired grievances against museums and markets of art. A bill of particulars was drafted called the Ten Points. They also laid out a different conception of what it meant to participate in the art world. The idea of an 'art worker' contained in the group's name cut across the divisions of labour that sustain both the capitalist art market, and the disciplinistic speciation and implicit class differentiations of the academy. The art worker idea echoed the free-and-easy working methods and role sharing of the amorphous Fluxus movement, a linchpin in the post-war global avant-garde.

Largely in response to this burst of organization, a government-funded alternative space movement unrolled in cities across the United States during the 1970s, especially in NYC, and many U.S. artists formed or joined groups. These alternative spaces for art exhibition and production were largely run by artists themselves. They put the horizontalist liberatory ideals of the AWC into practice. Over time, however, the survivors of state budget cutbacks among them adapted to normative institutional formations, boards of directors, managing directors, curators, etc., honouring their historic founding ideals as just that – history.

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\* This paper is revised from the version given at 'The politics of workers' inquiry' conference at Essex University, May 2013.

As the AWC lurched into action in 1969, it changed shape and form several times. Still, the group's actual political life was quite short. Today I argue that the 'art worker' idea survives mainly as a figure, a ghost that haunts customary arrangements in the art world.

What does this ghost do? What is its aspect, or attributes? First, horizontality; it composes itself through open meetings. Second, analysis; it is committed to analysing the current conditions of oppression. Third, actions; the assembly takes them. It is a horizontally organized analysing action machine.

What does this spectre want? What is its uncompleted mission in life? Why does it always return? It wants money – that is, a more equitable relation between artist and marketplace, and compensation for artistic labour by institutions. It wants respect for artists' rights. It wants its body reconstituted – it wants all its parts to be included. And finally, it wants peace, not war.

The AWC was important as a moment – an extended occasion – of collective analysis. Its most well-known extant document is the 'Open hearing', an event of short speeches and acts arranged shortly after its convening, and published today online. AWC's analysis led directly and repeatedly to action of many different kinds. In addition to the street demonstrations in front of museums, the action fraction, the Guerrilla Art Action Group, staged numerous inventive and dramatic political performances. (Although its members insist on their absolute autonomy from AWC, they were very closely involved in the larger group.)

Many of the artists involved in the AWC, and certainly among the most influential given their highly developed analytic skills, were working in the vein of conceptual art. Joseph Kosuth, the leading NYC promoter of the genre of conceptual art, was active in AWC, as was Robert Morris, an artist who practiced in every mode of making. Morris made work that experimented directly with collective political forms and the economics of art. His cohort, the minimalist sculptor Carl Andre, experimented with the sales economy of his work. Hans Haacke's art is based in systems analysis. Lucy Lippard wrote about the AWC, organized important exhibitions of conceptual art, and published the compendium of the form, *Six years*.

A group of conceptual artists made up an influential cadre within a lesser-known successor organization to the AWC in New York, the mid-1970s Artists Meeting for Cultural Change (AMCC). Both inside and outside the larger AMCC, the New York section of the Art & Language group carried out systematic analysis and agitation around nearly all aspects of the art production system.

This imbrication of political organizing within a sphere of productive activity and a mode of art has decisively influenced subsequent practice in art. Most prominent is the method of ‘institutional critique’, a kind of post-conceptual art that was firmly entrenched in the upper reaches of art academies in the 1990s. Today we may look at the various iterations of ‘social practice’, for a continuation of the same kind of basic relation between political organizing – that is, doing politics – and artistic practice.

In saying that AWC was a critical analytic action machine, I mean that it represented a workers' inquiry in the most basic sense. But a close study of how that sense of analysis and action – very often now construed as artistic practice in and of itself – has moved forward over time, will reveal that a collective workers' inquiry has been largely co-opted and recuperated in the figure of the artist intellectual. This figure can have strong class affiliations that make him deaf to the whispers of the spirits.

### **Halloween costumes – it's only a sheet with holes...**

The rise of the artist-critic-scholar within the ambit of western art institutions has been good for the institutions. They continually link with academics in other fields, spreading aesthetic activity into every reach of academic, institutional and governmental concern.

However, just as the AWC was propelled by artists and ‘art workers’ who were excluded from the art production and exhibition system as it was constituted in 1969 – primarily women and artists of color, on account of institutionalized sexism and racism – so too we may usefully look at (and to) those who are left out of today's academically consolidated system of politically inflected artistic discourses and practices.

Who is left out is everybody else. This includes artists whose practice lies within popular aesthetics, as well as many traditional painters and sculptors, people whose primary thought and feeling is expressed through the manipulation of physical materials. A large number of artists can't easily read; they are dyslexic, even dysgraphic. They are not anti-intellectual; they simply prefer not to do a lot of reading. One of these artists told me some years ago, ‘Conceptual art isn't art!’ She and her husband, a mural painter, were veterans of the little-regarded breakaway faction of the AWC, the service wing. (This is part of the political history of the AWC I recount in my book *Art gangs*.)

Fuck ‘em, some may say. Artists who make objects make plenty of money. Most don't. Lucky are they who can join the new proletariat in the studios of the high

earners. There is still a huge gypsy camp outside the ivory tower, even if it has been repainted in black and red.

### **The ghost will show you where the money is hidden...**

An important impetus of the AWC, and part of the activity of its committees was around the economic activity of artists. For example, an important final product of AWC committee work was the Artists Reserved Rights Sales Contract, produced years later by a group of artists and lawyers. This sales contract protected artists' financial interest in their work after it was first sold, so that a portion of subsequent sales would return to the artist. Original AWC member Hans Haacke may be alone among major artists who use this contract today.

Lucy Lippard once referred to the economic agenda of AWC as unfinished. This is the matter which has principally concerned artists in the last decade, and led to a number of initiatives which share characteristics with what is coming to be understood as a broader movement of sharing, commonsing, and a new wave of configurations of the cooperative economy. Prominent collective moves are being made by the Arts & Labor group of Occupy Wall Street and W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy).

### **Where is my union buried?**

The AWC came into being on a platform of artists' rights. (New York State now has a law protecting the integrity of artists' works; you can't cut up a public sculpture or privately owned artwork into pieces without consequences.) More broadly, the question of artists' rights leads us to ask to what extent was the AWC a union?

When I was working with artists' groups in the 1970s and '80s, I heard the expression – 'Organizing artists is like herding cats'. They are so solitary, so individualistic, that they can't be organized. This aphorism implies that organizing is like herding. Artists should be persuaded to accept collective representation. Julia Bryan-Wilson in her book *Art workers* writes that one notion of the AWC was as an artists' union, that is, a group that would negotiate with the employers, the museums and galleries, for better terms and conditions of labour.

It is an axiomatic slogan of the anarchist IWW (International Workers of the World, or Wobblies): 'The working class and the employing class have nothing in common.' In fact, in the art world, artists and members of the support structure

like curators, dealers, critics, and academics – the very people who the AWC included in the tag ‘art workers’ – have a lot in common. They are very often the same people, and are constantly commuting between roles in what is by no means a normal economic activity.

The AWC was *not* a union, but from time to time it would act like one. This first appeared when it merged with the broader Mobe (Mobilization Against the War) to engineer the Artists Strike against War, Racism and Repression, thereby actualizing the perennial radical unionists' dream of a general strike for political motives, at least among cultural producers. This example rolled forward, leading to the Day Without Art in the 1980s organized by AIDS activists, the Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America, the Art Strike in the United Kingdom, and, finally, the creation of an actual union, the PASTA of the MoMA itself (Professional and Administrative Staff Association, with Local 2110 of the United Auto Workers). This was inspired by the AWC's initial years of actions against policies of the museum. (Roman Petruniak, a member of the Chicago curatorial collective inCUBATE, shows this in his masters thesis.) PASTA is now a branch of the Teamsters union in NYC.

That artists are capable of acting in solidarity was demonstrated again in the support manifested by the Arts & Labor group of Occupy Wall Street when they supported the 2011 strike of unionized art handlers at auction houses in NYC.

As mentioned above, the art worker has been recuperated from its '68-ish origins, as the conception has generated new sets of professional identities, and new modes of practice within institutions. Unsurprisingly, the horizontality of the AWC did not find an institutional form. Artistic knowledges and practices remain firmly contained within vertical arrangements of judgement and management. They are regulated, normalized and exploitable: they can be sold and funded.

The role or identification, not the job title – what I call the figure of the AWC – is imprisoned, a djinn in a bottle. Scrape away the containment, however, and the assembly in all its criticality and raucous democracy re-emerges with an almost frightening suddenness, as we saw recently with the new '68 of 2011.

### **A curious incident in Berlin...**

The Berlin Biennale 7 art exposition in the spring of 2012 was directed by the artist-curator Artur Żmijewski and associates. (The artist-curator itself may be seen as an outcome of the process of horizontality, and the commutability of roles, within the profession of art worker begun by the figure of the AWC in its



time.) Żmijewski invited activists in the Spanish 15M and Occupy Wall Street movement to convene in one of the biennale spaces. The activists who took up this invitation were the more culturally engaged in those movements. They were given a space to, as it were, exhibit themselves and their political labour as a kind of performative work of art. Finally, after weeks of public discussion – and unrelenting mockery from art journalists – the activists of 15M and OWS were disposed to issue some advice on horizontality to art workers within the institutions wherein they found themselves confined.

### **Towards a zombie apocalypse for capitalism...**

My favourite hallucination is to see the figure of the AWC haunting the occupied social centres, those reanimated edifices of speculative capital, and subtly invading the deliberative assemblies of the political collectives that produce them. It is hard work to open and maintain these volunteer public service agencies, and many pressing political agendas regularly present themselves to be met. But the so-called ‘monster institutions’ of the social centres have about them a magic air that comes from the ideal and the possibility of collective re-invention of everyday life. This life is constructed in its dimensions of subsistence, to be sure, freedom from oppression, and steady resistance to absurdist governance with its corruptions and authoritarianisms. It is reinvention as well of the participating subject herself, who, through participation in collective work at a disobedient self-organized space, comes to understand herself as an empowered social agent, a person who can truly create her own world from the rubbish heap of neo-liberal impoverishments.

Here I return to the subject of the excluded, those who are excluded from the new spirit of art workers as it lives on in its institutionalized forms. And that is just everybody else, the masses, the multitude, and the perennial hope of all social movements.

These past few years I have been studying the disobedient culture of the occupied social centres (OSCs). None of these models – not the labour union, nor the institutionalized artist critic, and not the entrepreneurial model of art worker, include the disobedient artist. Political squatting and the occupied social centres and collective houses that it produces, is not part of the larger frame of art discourse. Of course squatting is against the law. (Actually, it is more beside the law, but that is an argument for another day.) Illegality endows the experiment with the frisson of adventure. It also underlines that anything happening here is outside the bounds of normal regulated life.

What OSCs offer – and certainly it is a promise that is not regularly fulfilled – is an opportunity for anyone to experiment with their life together with others. This is readily embraced within the context of disobedient subculture, the descendant strains of hippiedom – you can ‘punk out’ or ‘drop out’ of society together with us, your new family. But the ways in which anyone can be experimental and creative with their life, irrespective of cultural and social containments and boundaries, are less often understood or practiced.

The OSCs are arenas in which to practice a right to creativity. You have the right to try something different with your productive energies and your social instincts. You have the right to put into practice your wild schemes, to see how they might work out, and if they might be useful for others. A realm of unfettered and absolute freedom, a forest of Avalon or Sherwood outside of the endless city, is only ever imaginable. That is what OSCs struggle to practice. In the terms of Franco Berardi, they seek to interrupt the subjective automatisms that sustain capitalism. That is why so many resist what might more normally be understood as success – legalization as cultural centers under the normal terms of whatever governmental entity might have jurisdiction. For then they become simply replacement provisions, not free and open centres of creative experiment.

One of the better explanations of what has been going on was given 50 years ago by Alexander Trocchi in a proposal that had its own practical consequences during the 1960s as people strived to build an oppositional cultural configuration that could overtake the old one. Writing as a Situationist, Trocchi observes that people have ‘forgotten how to play’, settling for entertainment, art that ‘anesthetizes the living’, and from which ‘active participation is almost non-existent’.

Trocchi’s dream of a ‘spontaneous university’ as ‘detonator of the invisible insurrection’ has, in effect, already arisen. His 1963 essay on techniques for a ‘coup du monde’ – a text better known as ‘Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds’ – envisions a revolution already underway, which is in a continuous process of definition. It is a cultural revolt that aims to seize ‘the grids of expression and the powerhouses of the mind’, creating ‘the passionate substructure of a new order of things’. The revolutionary change will then come up on the mass of people ‘like the changing season’.

Trocchi laid out a plan for a town – citing Guy Debord’s notions of unitary urbanism (crucially influenced by the more radical Constant) – because ‘integral art cannot be accomplished except on the level of urbanism’. Trocchi’s plan for a network of free universities, further elaborated in his ‘Sigma: A tactical blueprint’, inspired the UK art centre movement of the 1960s and ‘70s. Despite

its reliance on commerce in culture – (more influential as a blueprint for the Beatles' Apple Corp) – and a Saint-Simonian faith in a creative elite, the Sigma tactics mirrored the blossoming of communes, intentional communities during the countercultural golden age.

The Sigma plan may also be seen as a foreshadowing of the political projects of occupation that began in the 1970s as self-organized occupied social centres. While the revolutionary cultural ideology that underlay Trocchi's appeals has faded after decades under the capitalist sun, appropriationist place-making has become a central strategy of a politicized subculture. As increasing precarization and gentrification draws together previously separated class fragments, the art worker in these centres has been joined by any worker, that is, anyone interested in skill-sharing, building networks of social solidarity, or just hanging out.

But have they been joined or supplanted? The challenge facing the politicized operators of the occupied social centres and the art workers of today is to realize their common interests and necessities in the hyper-regulated anti-creative realms of the security states, and together to do art work in those free spaces that remain, and those that will be opened.

Coda: A reviewer calls for a closer connection in this text between the life of the AWC at the turn of the decade of the 1960s into '70s and the political occupations of social centres that began in Italy in the later 1970s as an extension of the Autonomia, or extra-parliamentary left, and developed through the '80s, '90s, '00s, and continues strong as a main trope of political squatting to the present day. That link may be found now in Macao in Milan, where an assembly of cultural workers that took a high-rise building continues strong in another occupation in the urban periphery of the city. Macao is linked with Teatro Valle, an antique Roman theatre occupied by its workers. Both are networked with numerous other similar initiatives across Italy. Stay tuned to your Radio Alice for further news....

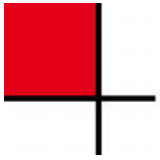
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## the author

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## The labour of being studied in a free love economy

T.L. Cowan and Jasmine Rault

### abstract

This paper takes up the economic logics of ‘community-based’ scholarly research and archival collection, and proposes a system of accounting for ‘collaborative’ labour across different locations within subcultural scenes, and ‘the labour of being studied’ within an academic-cultural milieu that increasingly camouflages free affective labour as collaboration and research-co-creation. Here, we consider the ways that a 2.0 academic economy thrives off the ‘sharing’ values of communality that were once the hallmark of counter-institutional subcultural scenes and we suggest that by introducing accounting measures as part of a research praxis, we can study the material conditions that constitute the relations of research production.

It was the ambivalence suggested by the initial proposed title of this special issue of *ephemera*, ‘Workers, despite themselves’, that hailed us.

As a research-creation team we are finally at a point when we can, theoretically, start to develop a proof-of-concept for our compelled fantasy project: an integrated, user-generated, open-source platform, digital archive and anecdotal encyclopaedia for trans- feminist and queer (TFQ) grassroots performance artists, audiences, activists and organizers, called The Cabaret Commons<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the paper we refer to our research subjects as ‘trans- feminist, and queer’ (TFQ) grassroots performance artists, audiences, organizers, activists, etc., gesturing to the gender, sexual and political mix that makes up our scenes of study. This is not to say that everyone or everything within these scenes is transgender or transsexual, feminist *and* queer simultaneously (although many are), but rather, that we study scenes driven by and for the people and politics that converge (and not always

Responding to one of the stated priorities of our scholarly granting agency, we proposed and were awarded funding to devise a digital environment designed to enable the translocal, networked and affective sharing and research of TFQ artist and activist cultural production throughout (at least) North America<sup>2</sup>. As participants, creators and researchers, users, producers and produsers of these subcultures and scenes, we recognise, as Jack Halberstam put it, that ‘queer academics can, and some should, participate in the ongoing project of recoding and interpreting queer culture and circulating a sense of its multiplicity and sophistication’ (Halberstam, 2003: 318). We envisioned a collaborative, interactive and agential ‘memories and feelings bank’ and gossip rag for our research participants; a space that would collect, theorize and generate diverse and trans-disciplinary modes of trans- feminist and queer knowing, that would transform the fleeting temporality of these ephemeral and affective traces from the almost-already-forgotten into the potentially-historical, to facilitate the passage of under-studied and thus under-valued cultural production into the economies of critical accessibility and academic valuation.

We pitched a speculative methodology, in which we anticipated all of the good that could come by using TFQ modes of knowing and creating to push the limits of the possible within the digital humanities, using these limits as opportunities to foreground and articulate our knowledge praxes – a set of praxes that exceed the ‘practical requirements of computational protocols’ (Drucker, 2009: xiv). We proposed a research-creation project (really, co-research-creation) that would heavily involve independent performance artists and other grassroots TFQ culture producers in every step of design and production. And wouldn’t the performers, audiences, activists and organizers be so happy, or even grateful, to volunteer their labour – to make or locate, scan, digitize, compress, transfer, craft, edit, upload and tag their photos and videos, posters, handbills, ticket-stubs, flyers, stories, memories and feelings from the fantastic TFQ cabaret they went to last night, last year, or two or three decades ago? Indeed, isn’t this habit of demanding cheerfully donated labour from independent artists, audiences, activists and community organizers, *for a good cause*, simply an extension of and

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painlessly) within this assemblage. Indeed, not all events that call themselves feminist are trans-friendly and not all queer events are feminist. For a recent discussion of this see Julia Serano’s *Excluded: Making feminist and queer movements more inclusive* (2013). For a description of The Cabaret Commons see <http://www.cwrc.ca/projects/the-cabaret-commons/>

- 2 This project is funded (thank you) by an Insight Development Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. For more on the Insight Program see:

[http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/umbrella\\_programs-programme\\_cadre/insight-savoir-eng.aspx](http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/umbrella_programs-programme_cadre/insight-savoir-eng.aspx)

consistent with prevailing relations of TFQ grassroots cultural (re)production? Isn't this how these scenes have always been built and sustained? And as our research participants help to build this collaborative digital archive, wouldn't they be overjoyed by the opportunity to do this work *for their own good*, toward the promise of finally being recognized, noticed, written about and *valued* by accredited scholars and, by extension, their academic institutions?

Three years later, we find ourselves racked with doubt and hailed by the ambivalence of 'Workers, despite themselves'. This special issue on a workers' inquiry offers us the chance to consider one of our central methodological contradictions: how do we, within a project that relies on mostly volunteer labour of TFQ performance artists and other cultural producers, account for the labour of being studied? That is, over the past two years, our priorities have slightly shifted from pushing the formal limits of digital architectures to better reflect, value and enable TFQ social, cultural and political work, to speculating the design of an online network which might intervene, workers' inquiry-style, in the relations of production and conditions of contemporary labour where trans-feminist and queer artists and academics meet.

In this short essay we try to do three things: first, we consider the labour of being studied in the context of all the unwaged, immaterial and affective labour sustaining online capitalism, academic and artistic careers as well as grassroots TFQ communities<sup>3</sup>. In this context academic researchers are compelled to enforce rather than resist these labour conditions, trading in enduring affective currencies like goodwill, aspiration, the persistent romance of community (Joseph, 2002: 483) and 'doing what we love'. Second, we consider the hazards of donating the products of this lovingly compelled free labour to not only the

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3 Along with Christian Fuchs, we have reservations about the term 'immaterial labour.' As Fuchs (2010) notes:

It is somewhat problematic to speak of 'immaterial labour'.... It might therefore be better to characterize online labour as (predominantly) knowledge labour.... [L]abour that characterizes web 2.0 systems is labour that is oriented on the production of affects, fantasy (cognitive labour) and social relations (communicative, co-operative labour) – it is like all labour material because it is activity that changes the state of real world systems. The difference between it and manual labour is that it doesn't primarily change the physical conditions of things, but instead the emotional and communicative aspects of human relations. It is also material in the sense that in its current forms it is ultimately to a certain extent oriented on the economy, subsumed under capital, and oriented towards producing economic profit. A better term than immaterial labour 2.0 hence is cognitive, communicative, and co-operative labour – informational labour. (299-300)

We continue to use 'immaterial labour' throughout this paper, with the understanding that these (knowledge, cognitive, communicative, co-operative and informational) labours are, indeed very material.

circuits of academic capitalism but also the affective industry of Web 2.0 data mining. Third, we propose an updated set of workers' inquiry questions that confront our contemporary immaterial workplace. While we came to recognize and critically thematize these labour conditions through our work on this digital humanities project, The Cabaret Commons, we do not want to suggest that the digital has somehow *created* these conditions. Of course, several generations of feminist activists and scholars have been agitating and organizing around the ways that capitalism relies on (women's) unwaged affective and immaterial labour; and black diaspora, critical race and African American studies scholars have traced the extent to which capitalism depends on the un- and under-waged material and affective labours of racialised and indigenous subjects, as the condition of possibility for the ongoing life of colonial modernity<sup>4</sup>. Instead, we hope here to situate the digital free labour market within capitalism's reliance on 'labours of love' to supplement this unequal distribution of resources and autonomy.

### The labour of being studied 2.0

In 'A workers' inquiry 2.0', Brian A. Brown and Anabel Quan-Haase (2012) develop an ethnographic method for studying the labour of Flickr producers. While we are inspired by this work, we want to add a level of inquiry to our research method that would account for the labour which performance artists, audiences and organizers are asked to donate to the work of academic research. As we develop our project, we seek to value not just the labours of scene-building and cultural production, but also to document and account for the labour of being studied, something that neither Brown and Quan-Haase nor, indeed, Marx nor the Italian Autonomists, seemed to take into account. Whereas they asked workers to catalogue, itemize and recognise the conditions of labour within their workplaces – Brown and Quan-Haase attempt to get Flickr producers to recognize their labour *as* labour – to stimulate radicalized consciousness and actionable knowledge, these methodologies all ignore the unwaged *research labour* required to arrive at that consciousness. For example, in order to 'undertake a serious inquiry into the position of the French working class,'

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4 Our thinking on this is indebted to (among others) Maria Dalla Costa & Selma James' *The power of women and the subversion of community* (1972); Leopoldina Fortunati *The arcane of reproduction: Housework, prostitution, labor and capital* (1985/1995); Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of subjection: Terror, slavery, and self-Making in nineteenth-century America* (1997) and *Lose your mother: A journey along the Atlantic slave route* (2007); Sharon P. Holland's *The erotic life of racism* (2012); Paul Gilroy's *The black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness* (1993); and Walter Dignolo's *The darker side of western modernity: Global futures, decolonial options* (2011).



Marx's 1880 Workers' Inquiry asked French factory workers one hundred questions in which he requested 'that replies should be as detailed and comprehensive as possible' (Marx, 1880: n.p.); and, in order to 'gain ... insight into their thoughts, feelings, and consciousness regarding their place in the mode of produsage', Brown and Quan-Haase recruited research participants who would 'respond...quickly, enthusiastically, and comprehensively' to a list of questions issued over the course of a 'temporally taxing' multi-staged research process (2012: 497-8). The remuneration, presumably, for these research labours is the reward of consciousness itself.

We see a similar problem in our project: we planned to recruit research participants (ideally, co-researchers) to create and 'share' their artefacts, anecdotes, memories and feelings in a community-driven and user-generated online archive. Although we are able to offer small honoraria for this work to a few solicited participants, we expected that the content development of the site would also happen spontaneously, hopefully, virally. That is, a foundational assumption of our initial proposal was that the majority of the labour required to create and sustain this archive would be donated (indeed, this unpaid or minimally-paid participation is stipulated by granting agency and university policy): a labour of love, supplied by unwaged producers of TFQ scenes, an assumption that undergirds so much grassroots cultural production and 'women's work', as well as the dependent relationship between humanities scholars and the artists that they study. We also assumed that artists would want their work represented visually within the Cabaret Commons. Although not all of our artist-producers have object-based practices, in order for their work to be included in an archival/research space like the Cabaret Commons, they are forced to create objects like photographs and/or video or risk being culturally and academically forgotten. This 'professionalization' undermines some conceptual/performance artists' intention to *not* have material objects (like photographs or video) represent their work, offering few to no routes to manoeuvre a dematerialized practice, and is reflected not only in the bias of our proposed project seeking digitized (and *digitizable*) artefacts, but also in the on- and offline art market. Thus, the pull into the digital might be understood to increase the unrecognized workload of predominantly under-resourced TFQ artists, especially conceptual and performance artists, who are required to meet the increasing demands of the visual digital cultural economy<sup>5</sup>.

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5 With many thanks to Dayna McLeod, who is working with us on the broader Cabaret Commons project, and who contributed a great deal of thinking to this essay, in particular this point on the ways that the digital continues to privilege objects and increases workload for conceptual artists who are required to translate/transfer their practice for digital media. See Lucy Lippard (1973) on conceptual and 'dematerialized'

We have turned to critical interventions into the logics of Web 2.0 produser economies that provide a framework for thinking about other produser economies – at work in grassroots cultural and activist scenes as well as Arts and Humanities-based qualitative academic research – which rely on the unpaid labours of *users* of these scenes to also produce their content. While ‘produsage’ tends to refer to user-generated online content – and the shift to economic and cultural models wherein the consumer or user also produces the product (Bruns, 2008), ‘[w]hat the “2.0” addresses is the “free” labour that subjects engage in on a cultural and biopolitical level when they participate on a site’ (Coté and Pybus, 2008: 90). This *new* reliance on ‘free’ produsage and participation takes advantage of the same *old* political and economic ‘not-for-profit’ structure that Miranda Joseph identifies as the supplement to capital, those ‘community’ based under- or unpaid labours that ‘articulate desires not met by capitalism for specific goods – religion, education, health care, arts, social services, or social change – but also often for an alternative mode of production, namely, gift exchange’ (2002: 72)<sup>6</sup>. Joseph notes that the ‘good’ (her double entendre is intended here, we think) produced by non-profits, or through the structure of mostly unpaid labour, is ‘community’; thus structures of volunteer or barely-paid labour,

do not merely complement the market and the state but rather mark the absent center of capitalism. Appearing at moments of capitalist expansion, instability, and crisis, nonprofits indicate that something, or rather someone – the subject of capital – is missing. (*ibid.*: 73)

The 2.0 structure of volunteer labour donated to for-profit enterprises might seem to be a newly sinister version of this supplementary relationship, but if we think about the common practice in Arts and Humanities academic research of demanding volunteer labour from artists and other cultural producers being studied in the service of a scholar’s contributions to a university’s profits and/or (e)valuation system (in whatever form that may take), then we see that it is an old structure – one that scholars have long helped to produce.

Following Pierre Bourdieu’s observations of the ‘field of cultural production’ in which those cultural practices, like poetry, for which producers receive negligible monetary compensation acquire elevated value through forms of *symbolic capital*, we might extrapolate that, like the ‘art for art’s sake’ (or art that appears most autonomous from the market), ‘work for work’s sake’ (or work that appears

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artwork and practices and Henry Sayre on photography as simultaneous presence and absence, and as an ideal formalist art object (1989).

- 6 Tiziana Terranova has done much work in helping us understand how free labor and the ‘gift economy, as part of the larger digital economy, is itself an important force within the reproduction of the labor force in late capitalism as a whole’ (Terranova, 2013: 36).

autonomous from the market, for example when the worker ‘loves’ what they do or because it is a manifestation of care, like volunteer labour) has a great deal of symbolic value as a cultural, social, economic ‘good’ (Bourdieu, 1993: 49)<sup>7</sup>. Joseph’s understanding of the ‘performativity of production’ (2002: 172) – that is, the work involved in building social formations that constitute communities as productive – helps us to apprehend how the special character of volunteer labour, usually rationalized as a form of mutual aid or ‘passionate effort’ (Ross, 2013: 26) produces the imaginary subjects (queers, women, ‘the poor’, transgender people) whose perceived needs and hopes determine its symbolic, social capital. The research structure which demands or assumes donated labour – in the form of long-form interviews, questionnaire-answering, uploading materials, sorting through personal archives, etc. – from mostly under- or unpaid ‘community’ artists, audiences and organizers further exploits the productive function of the social formations designed to address these needs and hopes, and further demands from ‘community’ members that they supplement, or bolster, that which is missing (i.e., adequate funding to pay artists a living wage while they contribute to your research project) from (academic) capitalism.

This practice is legitimized in at least two ways: first, through a tautological fetishization of unpaid labour as untainted by the vulgar incentives of financial remuneration and, thus, the expectation that participants join the research project because *they want to* (and because it’s work that they *love* and, therefore, don’t need to be paid for); and, second, through the ideal that Arts and Humanities research itself is community-based, and contributes to/benefits/is part of a ‘wider community’ beyond and including the university itself. The outcome here is simply that the labour conditions of our research practices (those we are compelled into by the demands of academic capitalism) reinforce the market logics of symbolic and social capital (like ‘exposure’ and reputation), in which the only acceptable incentive we can offer to artists and community organizers participating in the research is ‘the good’ of community itself. Furthermore, the market logics of academic capitalism suggest that research subjects (artists, community organizers, etc.) are compensated for their labour through the magical symbolic currency that might be called ‘the *caché* of being studied’, while academic researchers pursue a more-or-less hefty paycheque from their institutions as long as they continue to produce. Even those of us precariously situated within the university complex as adjunct professors,

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7 Of course, Bourdieu’s ‘autonomous art’ was also autonomous from an audience, and the kinds of volunteer labours we identify here are certainly not that. We might identify these labours as what Bourdieu calls ‘social art’, which ‘fulfill [sic] a social or political function’ (166).

graduate students, or under- and unemployed independent scholars have at least a cruelly optimistic expectation of a pay-off: if our research labours are unpaid in the moment, we toil with the assurance that this work is, indeed, already ‘the good life’, though its material support is always on the horizon and yet to come (Berlant, 2011). As long as we keep working, the culture of sacrificial labour promises that we will eventually be financially rewarded through (continued, or better) employment, scholarships, research grants, etc.

## Free love

Melissa Gregg has argued that academics need to better account for our own labour conditions – particularly the ways in which we are compelled into extensive and under-recognized forms of immaterial and affective labour – if we are to begin the task of studying or understanding the labour conditions of anyone else. Instead,

[d]iscounting the amount of time their job takes from other pursuits, academics have often been guilty of normalising the self-exploiting tendencies now mirrored in further segments of the white collar demographic. This makes it difficult for researchers to understand such behaviour in terms of labour politics, let alone provide grounds for critiquing the motivations for the affective labour engaged in by others. (Gregg, 2009: 211-12)

We want to add that this also makes it difficult for researchers to recognise or understand our own motivations for the affective labour demanded *by us from* others. As Halberstam argues, by building on work in subcultural studies, queer cultural studies has developed a critical methodology that privileges, rather than obscures, the researcher’s involvement in, creation of or belonging to, the subculture in question:

academics might labor side by side with artists...[forming] an alliance between the minority academic and the minority subcultural producer...the academic and the cultural producer may see themselves in a complementary relationship...[That is,] new queer cultural studies feeds off of and back into subcultural production. The academic might be the archivist or a co-archivist or they might be a fully-fledged participant in the subcultural scene that they write about. (Halberstam 2003: 322)

However, as contemporary academic labour conditions and the ‘workstyle’ logics of connectivity and perpetual availability (Gregg, 2009: 212) driven by the digital workplace demands for increasing degrees of invisibilized immaterial and affective labours, what Gregg calls ‘presence bleed’ (Gregg, 2011: 2), we need to become more attentive to the ways that our ‘complementary relationships’ to low/unwaged TFQ artists and subcultural workers can obfuscate the differentially valued labours involved. For example, the researcher, already (even

if precariously) institutionally-affiliated and consecrated, labours for the promise of more institutional and/or monetary value and can extract this value from the artist's volunteer research labour; the artist or community organizer has fewer opportunities to monetize this co-research labour.

As we 'normalize the self-exploiting tendencies' of the academic (and white collar) affective marketplace, we might be tempted to generalize these conditions and demands to unpaid co-researchers, artists and research participants. That is, academics in 'new queer cultural studies', often working with the best of intentions, can normalize a shift to 'feeding off of' more than 'back into' the TFQ subcultures, scenes and 'communities' we study. In the same way that it might be an accepted practice to ask an artist to perform at a benefit cabaret for free or for very little money, or to demand that an audience respond with high-energy approval to an underwhelming event, or to ask a community organizer to send high-quality digital images or video of a performance/rally/public talk to a scholar for an academic article – keeping in mind that this labour might be understood as an obligation or condition of membership in these scenes – it is easy to structure our research projects on the expectation of unwaged content generation that Christian Fuchs calls 'an extreme form of exploitation' (Fuchs, 2010: 298). Indeed, understanding ourselves as 'part of' these sites of study, and framing our work as 'collaborations' and/or our research participants as co-researchers (or friends) runs the risk of naturalizing the unwaged work that supplements academic capitalism – making us simultaneously 'blind to the ways we might [participate] in the enactment of domination and exploitation' and to how we might, following Joseph and Gregg, 'intervene' in these conditions (Joseph ix).

Many of us engaged in TFQ studies tend to think of our participation in these subcultural scenes as valuable to our research, and our research as ultimately valuable to these scenes. That is, the 'complementary relationship' between 'minority academic and minority subcultural producer' (Halberstam, 2003: 322) assumes a sort of equal exchange of value between making/performing/doing art or creative activism and paying with exposure or critical attention by writing about it or programming it. However, blurring this line between research worker and artistic/cultural worker – or aestheticizing research work – also meets the demands of our neoliberal labour market, which finds in both artists and academics the tantalizing willingness to work for nearly nothing. As Sarah Brouillette explains,

the creative worker and the academic equally confront a rhetoric celebrating the self-managing, flexible personality as the engine of economic growth. They tend to be also similarly invested in the idea that they should be committed heart and soul to their work. As scholars have often noted, our faith that our work offers non-

material rewards, and is more integral to our identity than a “regular” job would be, makes us ideal employees when the goal of management is to extract our labor’s maximum value at minimum cost. (Brouillette, 2013: 4)

By respecting our ‘faith’ that our work offers us something more than monetary capital, that it can’t be confined to an office space, or regular working hours, that our work is inseparable from our social, family or leisure time, management theory comes up with ways to both give us less and effectively export these labour conditions to other workers:

corporate managers have been examining [academics] for decades with a keen sense of envy. How to emulate the academic workplace and get people to work at a high level of intellectual and emotional intensity for fifty or sixty hours a week for bartenders’ wages or less? Is there any way we can get our employees to swoon over their desks, murmuring “I love what I do” in response to greater workloads and smaller paychecks? How can we get our workers to be like faculty and deny that they work at all? (Bousquet, 2009: n.p.)

And while the vast majority of our academic paycheques are indeed getting smaller in relation to personal debt load and costs of living, along with our hopes of ever securing a liveable income (recent statistics in the US show that seventy-six per cent of university and college courses are taught by underpaid and insecurely employed contingent and non-tenure-track faculty who earn an average of \$2,700 per course)<sup>8</sup>, academic output in the form of publication is still expected as a part of the job, both to maintain these precarious positions, and to be competitive in the hope-based ‘jackpot economy’ (Ross, 2009: 16) of the full-time academic job market.

So, we can see that there is a growing field of scholarship on the imperilled state of autonomous academic work (on the neoliberalization, casualization and upward distribution of resources in the academic industry) as well as a booming intellectual market on labour conditions in the creative, affective and immaterial economy, but we have very little research on the extent to which academic workers compel, rely on and normalize the unpaid work of the creative precariat. When we ask artists and activists for documentation of performances or events (images, video, audio recordings) for that essay we’re publishing; or to talk to us about their work, or their social/cultural scene for our doctoral thesis; or to perform/exhibit at that conference we’re organizing, we are requesting work for which we are almost never able or willing to pay a substantial fee. On the one hand, this is the product of institutional policies around research funds and ethics. That is, if we have access to institutional research funds or grants, these

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8 See: American Association of University Professors (AAUP) ‘Annual report on the economic status of the profession’ 2012-2013; Curtis and Thornton *Academe*, March-April 2013; Tamar Lewin *New York Times*, April 8, 2013.

typically stipulate that we may not use them to pay/incentivize research subjects or non-academic collaborators, so on the occasion that we manage to pay artists for some of the work that they do for our research/careers, we do this in contravention of the rules of our university ethics boards and research finance offices. Meanwhile our institutions have neither ethical nor financial qualms about using funds to pay inflated fees for scholarly associations, conference registrations or publishing costs. On the other hand, the fact that so many of us build our degrees and careers off of such unpaid labour seems evidence of our complicity with a neoliberal labour-of-love capitalism. As Miya Tokumitsu observes,

[t]here's little doubt that 'do what you love' (DWYL) is now the unofficial work mantra for our time. The problem is that it leads not to salvation, but to the devaluation of actual work, including the very work it pretends to elevate – and more importantly, the dehumanization of the vast majority of laborers. (Tokumitsu, 2014)

By exchanging research subjects' labour for the mostly intangible compensations of 'consciousness', 'reputation' or 'exposure', academic culture devalues 'actual work' and legitimizes an affective economy that exploits the ideal of loving, autonomous labour. However, we want to follow Selma James here and argue that just as 'demanding payment for housework...attack[s] what is terrible about caring in our capitalist society' (Gardiner, 2012: n.p.), calling attention to the forms of donated labour that buttress the academic pyramid scheme attacks what is terrible about working for love in an affective economy.

Research – or, 'doing what we love' and pursuing 'our own interests' – is increasingly the job requirement that academics do explicitly for free. As we know, so many faculty are paid only on a per-course basis for teaching-hours/credits, but are still required to update their CVs every year with evidence of 'contributions to the field' in order to compete in the 'contingent faculty' race. When research becomes so de-resourced – aestheticized and ascetic – as to be done for free or at significant personal cost to the researcher (who oftentimes pays out-of-pocket for expenses like travel for research at archives, festivals, or to undertake face-to-face interviews and certainly to present that research at conferences, another professional obligation), how do we measure researchers' fiscal responsibility to their research subjects? How do we measure the ways that (social, cultural, intellectual, fiscal) capital is gained by all participants, and is it possible to share or fairly divide this capital across participation levels? At this point does it simply mean that we are distributing our own precarity, expecting free labour from everyone involved in our research projects, *un*paying forward the diminishing academic 'rewards' (I don't get paid so nobody gets paid), reproducing the labour standards that condition our horizon of expectations? We

want to argue that this problem is particularly vital for scholars of contemporary marginal and marginalized cultural practices and populations. Rather than seeking the ‘generous assistance’ of an established/institutional archive that typically pays to acquire its collections, charges set rates for the reproduction of its materials and is staffed by paid employees, researchers of uncollected works by contemporary minoritized artists and activists must rely on goodwill in the form of mostly donated labour and materials to populate their research archives.

### **Affective Archives and Invisible Labour**

Our plan for a Cabaret Commons is designed to house and activate the kind of archive of feelings that Ann Cvetkovich argues is central to the survival of feminist and queer social, cultural and political lives:

Lesbian and gay history demands a radical archive of emotion in order to document intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism, all areas of experience that are difficult to chronicle through the materials of a traditional archive. Moreover, gay and lesbian archives address the traumatic loss of history that has accompanied sexual life and the formation of sexual publics, and they assert the role of memory and affect in compensating for institutional neglect. (Cvetkovich, 2002: 110)

An online, user-generated digital platform and network struck us as a promising site for such archive-building – with a capacity to preserve, share and connect not only records of the material ephemera of TFQ social and cultural political lives (like images of flyers, posters, handbills, street graffiti for shows) but also to preserve, share and connect individual stories, memories, feelings – the various emotional contents and labours upon which social and cultural politics are built and sustained but which have been traumatically lost and institutionally neglected.

However, we’ve come to recognize that our impulse to affective archiving has been anticipated, or compelled, by the current Web 2.0 business model. Robert Gehl provides a useful definition of this model as ‘the new media capitalist technique of relying upon users to supply and rank online media content, then using the attention this content generates to present advertisements to audiences’ (Gehl, 2011: 1229). For us, it seems the significance of this user-generated market is more than simply its capacity to supply audiences to advertisers, but also its capacity to supply our intimacies and affects as metadata surveilled, processed and transformed into policy or product by state political and security interests. Gehl suggests that this business model turns users into ‘affective processers’ – ‘expected to process digital objects by sharing content, making connections, ranking cultural artifacts, and producing digital content’



(2011: 1229) – building massive, and massively mined, archives of affect. Web 2.0 websites are designed to

surveil every action of users, store the resulting data, protect it via artificial barriers such as intellectual property, and mine it for profit.... These archives are comprised of the products of affective processing; *they are archives of affect*, sites of decontextualized data that can be rearranged by the site owners to construct particular forms of knowledge about Web 2.0 users. (Gehl: 1229, emphasis added)

Thus, even if we are attentive to the labour conditions of our research practices, once we launch The Cabaret Commons online, we can't anticipate or control how this knowledge about the affective tendencies of *our* producers will be used. Welcome to Ambivalence 2.0. Workers, despite themselves, indeed.

Our efforts to build an online TFQ affective archive brings us squarely into the realm of what Mark Andrejevic calls 'affective economics' (Andrejevic, 2011) – the thriving online market of sentiment analytic software and companies which track, harvest, aggregate, translate and sell the contents of our archives of feelings to advertisers (and security agencies): 'Such is the data-driven fantasy of control in the affective economy: the more emotions are expressed and circulated, the more behaviour is tracked and aggregated, the greater the ability of marketers to attempt to channel and fix affect in ways that translate into increased consumption' (Andrejevic, 2011: 615). Were we to build a Cabaret Commons, we would be (further) submitting TFQ social and cultural politics to this Web 2.0 affective economy – the exploitation of affective labour for both marketing and security capital, but also academic capital. Furthermore, even if we host such a site on an advertising-free server, through a public university host – like the Canadian Writing Research Collaboratory (CWRC), where we are currently set to build – the affects and artefacts collected are subject to this Web 2.0 economy, as well as the profit logics of academic capitalism in which all of our research endeavours are mined, aggregated and monetized.

### **The labour of being studied: A research workers' inquiry**

As we consider the above implications, we are still not convinced that our plan for The Cabaret Commons is completely unredeemable. However, it seems necessary to foreground and thematize the conditions in which we as academics, artists, audiences and organizers are labouring and to potentially use the site as a place to study these relations. We hope to use this project as a site in which we innumerate a methodology to account for the potentially exploitative labour relations of being studied and their particularly acute resonances in the context of online work. We are not sure that the need to create a space and opportunity to

bring researchers, artists and other cultural producers together to concentrate on the conditions of our labour is worth the risk of submitting our affective and immaterial work to academic and Web 2.0 economies of surveillance and data mining. However, if it were, the following are some components that might enable and provoke the sort of interventions for which we have some hope.

To begin, we will implement various accounting measures in which all contributors to the Cabaret Commons clock the hours that they put into the site (including the time that they put into clocking their hours) in order to get a better sense of how much labour this kind of user-generated content actually requires. Another measure will ask participants, including ourselves, to (anonymously) make transparent their economic situation in order to draw attention to the ranges of economic disparities and realities at play in academic-artist 'collaborations'. This measure will include questions like:

1. What do you do for work?
2. Do you get paid for all of that work?
3. Did you go to school or need specialized training in order to do your work?
  - 3.1 If yes, what was that degree, certificate or training and how did you pay for it?
4. Do you have a reliable income?
  - 4.1 If yes, how much money do you make each month?
  - 4.2 If not, what is the range of your income each month in the past two years?
5. Do you take extra jobs to supplement the pay you receive from your primary work?
6. How many jobs/contracts have you had in the past two years?
7. Have you received a grant in the past 5 years? Artist or academic grant?  
How much?

- 7.1 If it was an academic grant, how much money did you allot to distribute to artists/organizers involved with your project? How was the other money spent (i.e. stipends, travel, supplies)?
- 7.2 If it was an artDst grant, how much money did you allot to documentation and archiving? How was the other money spent (i.e. stipends, travel, supplies)?
8. Approximately how much do you pay in monthly expenses?
9. Approximately how much do you pay in debt repayment each month?
10. Excluding mortgage or car loans, how have you accumulated your debt and how is it distributed (art production debt, student loans, living expenses, impulse buying)?
11. Do you rent or own your home? In either case, please describe your economic relationship to your home (mortgage/rent payments, utilities, taxes, etc.)
12. Do you have roommates? If yes, why? If no, why not?
13. Do you own a car? If yes, please describe your economic relationship to your car (car payments, gas costs, maintenance, etc.)
14. Have you ever received a significant family inheritance? If yes, for how much and what did you do with it?
15. When was the last time you travelled for vacation that you paid for?
16. Do you do any 'work' for which you are not financially remunerated? Why?
17. How have your race, gender, sexuality, disabilities, class, body size, citizenship, and/or education level impacted your financial situation?

18. Have you participated in any other form of online archiving, or artist/activist networking project? If yes, what did you get or learn from it?
19. Why are you participating in this project?
20. What, if anything, do you hope to get out of this project?
21. Do you think other people involved in this project will benefit more or less than you? Why?
22. Please describe the working conditions of your participation in this project. Do you think they are fair?
- 22.1 Would you like to change these conditions? If yes, how?

Finally, we will ask participants after each session how much, or how, they think they should be paid for the labour that they contributed during that session. Marx's 'Workers' inquiry', the Autonomists' participant action research and Brown and Quan-Haase's 'A workers' inquiry 2.0' seek to raise their research subjects' consciousness about the working conditions *outside* of their studies thereby obfuscating the work of the study itself. We hope that introducing these accounting measures *within* our project will flip the gaze such that the researcher's labour conditions will be as subject to study as the workers', thereby centring the material conditions and relations of the immaterial labours that constitute the Arts and Humanities research shop floor.

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# The workers' inquiry from Trotskyism to *Operaismo*: A political methodology for investigating the workplace

Jamie Woodcock

## abstract

This article discusses different approaches to conducting a workers' inquiry. Although there is a certain level of ambiguity in the term, it is taken to mean a method for investigating the workplace from the point of view of the worker. The article aims to examine the methodological concerns involved with conducting a contemporary inquiry and to consider the different debates that have emerged from its use. It examines a particular set of examples from Marx, the breaks from orthodox Trotskyism with the Johnson-Forest Tendency and *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and early phase of *Operaismo* or Italian Workerism. It is intended as a specific intervention that aims to understand what can be learned from an unorthodox Trotskyist interpretation of a workers' inquiry and how this moment can provide an inspiration for the rethinking and reapplication of Marxism, both in terms of theory and practice, to the changing world.

## Introduction

The aim of this article is to consider what can be learned from a number of different attempts at workers' inquiries. This will be neither an exclusive nor an exhaustive study, but examine particular moments of interest. The different groups that broke with orthodox Trotskyism and the later Italian tradition sought to critically reassess the changing world around them, something that remains an important task today. The current conjuncture in the UK is characterised by the continuing impact of austerity. This follows previous decades that have been marked by defeats of the organised working class and the rise of neoliberalism:

sustained attacks on worker's pay and conditions, the slashing of government spending, and the prizing open of public services to the market (Harvey, 2007: 12).

This current context is of course different to that of Karl Marx, the Trotskyist groups in the 1950s, or the Italian *Operaismo*. There have been significant and far-reaching changes since the examples chosen for this article. Marx indicated that the dynamic of constant change was a fundamental part of the logic of capitalism: the 'constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation... all that is solid melts into air' (Marx and Engels, 2008: 38). The changes in the organisation of capital have resulted in new areas of employment expanding as the relative numbers employed in traditional working class jobs has fallen. The growth of the service sector has not seen a new wave of unionisation or the building of sustained workplace organisation. In 2011 there were 6.4 million members of trade unions in the UK, representing 26% of workers. The membership is divided between 3.9 million in the public sector and 2.5 million in the private sector, with density at 56.5% and 14.1% respectively (Brownlie, 2012:7, 11). The possibilities for organisation and resistance in new sectors of the economy – and in the private sector more generally – pose important questions which are going unanswered.

The renewed interest in the workers' inquiry as a method has the potential to open up an interesting and fruitful debate about how to address these contemporary questions. The moments chosen here are not the only possible sources of inspiration, in some ways a form of the method is implicit in any attempts at organisation. However it is necessary to make the method explicit in order for it to play an active role in understanding what organisational forms can emerge and succeed in new contexts. The focus on the Marxist tradition in this article aims to draw out the debates around the use of sociology in this endeavour, and recognise the tensions between the two. This article is intended as an intervention into the emerging debate surrounding the workers' inquiry as a method that seeks to understand what can be learned from the unorthodox Trotskyist tradition and the connection to *Operaismo* through a number of historical moments.

## Marx

The starting point for this article is the work of Karl Marx (1976) in *Capital*. Of particular importance is chapter ten, which represents a shift in form from the previous chapters in its ethnographic character. It involved the 'massive use of



empirical evidence' (Kincaid, 2008: 388) to document the struggle over the length of the working day by workers in factories in the nineteenth century. It draws on the same kind of documentation that Frederick Engels (2009) used in the *Condition of the working class in England in 1844*, and the decision not to update the book on its reissuing in 1884, points perhaps toward the success of Marx's achievement in this chapter. In the chapter Marx (1976: 344) argues that 'the establishment of a norm for the working day presents itself as a struggle over the limits of that day, a struggle between the collective capital, i.e. the class of capitalists, and the collective labour, i.e. the working class'. This is a significant step in *Capital*, summed up by David Harvey's (2010: 137) exclamation that 'finally, after 344 pages, we get to the idea of class struggle. Finally!'

The chapter on the Working Day is made up of a number of different voices. The empirical investigation carried out in the chapter relies on the evidence supplied by the bourgeois factory inspectors. Marx comments that 'the "ruthless" factory inspector Leonard Horner was again on the spot' (Marx, 1976: 397) and that 'his services to the English working class will never be forgotten' (Marx, 1976: 334). The use of these reports allows Marx insights into the conditions of workers, but does not draw on their experience directly. The inspectors starting point was to treat the workers in the same way that the quality of the soil was important for agriculture.

It is therefore necessary to draw attention to what Michael Lebowitz (2009: 314) has called the 'silence of *capital*'. The chapter on the working day discusses only 'a defensive action' on the part of the workers, a struggle against the extension of the working day, rather than a fight for better wages or conditions. The subject of *Capital*, as the name perhaps implies, is capital – rather than workers. This can result in a 'one-sided Marxism that fails to recognise that *Capital* presents only one side of capitalism' (Lebowitz, 2009: 310). This understanding is critical when considering *Capital* as an inspiration for a workers' inquiry. If the silences in *Capital* are not taken into account there can be a resulting failure to 'investigate the worker as subject', leaving only the 'Abstract Proletarian' which is 'the mere negation of capital' (Lebowitz, 2009: 311).

The correction has to begin with the fact that workers produce for, and are produced by, capitalism. As Marx (1976: 283) argued, the worker 'acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature'. This 'coincidence of the changing of circumstances and self-change' is crucial for understanding how the 'old subjects, the products of capital, go beyond capital' (Lebowitz, 2003: 180). Harry Cleaver (1979: 20) stresses that in reading *Capital* it is important to keep in mind 'Marx's original purpose: he wrote *Capital* to put a weapon in the hands of workers'. Therefore *Capital* was written,

and rewritten, over and over again precisely because of the ‘inherent mystification of capital, *demystification* is a necessary condition for workers to go beyond capital’ (Lebowitz, 2009: 314). So in order to re-emphasise the role of the worker in this argument there must be a focus on the ‘examination of workers’ actual struggles: their content, how they have developed, and where they are headed’ (Cleaver, 1979: 58).

In order to understand Marx’s contribution to the workers’ inquiry, there needs to be a move beyond *Capital*, and in effect attempt to speak to the silences. A direction for this is signalled in Marx’s (1938) own call for a workers’ inquiry published in a newspaper in France in 1880. Although it achieved circulation to some extent at the time, it remained relatively unknown for fifty years. In the introduction to the survey Marx outlines the aim of the inquiry:

We hope to meet in this work with the support of all workers in town and country who understand that they alone can describe with full knowledge the misfortunes from which they suffer, and that only they, and not saviors sent by Providence, can energetically apply the healing remedies for the social ills to which they are a prey. (Marx, 1938: 379)

This introduction clearly articulates the intention of the inquiry: understanding the exploitation of workers from their own perspective. The workers are not considered simply as passive subjects to be researched; instead they are positioned as the only people who can describe their own conditions, and more importantly as the only ones who can transform them. Marx continues to argue that those conducting such surveys:

Must wish for an exact and positive knowledge of the conditions in which the working class – the class to whom the future belongs – works and moves. (Marx, 1938: 379)

As Asad Haider and Salar Mohandesi (2013) argue Marx ‘established a fundamental epistemological challenge’ with the short introduction to the inquiry. What is less clear is the nature of the ‘relationship between the workers’ knowledge of their exploitation, and the scientific analysis of the “laws of motion” of capitalist society’ found in *Capital*.

This attempt to uncover the actual experience of workers and their struggles was a novel step. It has similarities with the approach of subaltern studies that begins from an ‘insistence upon the subaltern as the subject of history’ (Spivak, 1988: 16). This radical re-reading of a history from below focuses on the masses rather than the actions of the elite. In a similar vein, Sheila Rowbotham’s (1977) *Hidden from history*, placed women as the subject. These insights, alongside those from radical anthropology, provide examples of other ways in which the silences –

whether of the oppressed or exploited – can be spoken to, drawing a much needed attention to their self activity. For Marx the postal survey was also intended as a method to make contact with workers. He states that 'it is not essential to reply to every question', and emphasises that 'the name and address should be given so that if necessary we can send communication' (Marx, 1938: 379). However, there are no records of the results that were gained from the survey, nor is there a discussion of either its successes or failures.

## Trotskyism

The workers' inquiry was developed theoretically through the debates in the Trotskyist movement about the impact of Taylorism and the emergence of Fordism. It also involved a new analysis of the class basis of Stalinist Russia. The proposal of alternative positions led to splits from the Fourth International between 1948 and 1951 and the creation of three new independent groups. The first group was the Johnson-Forest Tendency in the USA. This was formed primarily by C.L.R. James with the pen name (common in the Trotskyist movement) Johnson and Raya Dunayevskaya, who had been a secretary of Trotsky, under the name Forest (Dunayevskaya, 1972). The second was the Chaulieu-Montal Tendency in France, with the pen names of Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort (Kessler, 1978). The third was the International Socialists in Britain – which did not solidify into a group until later on – led by a Palestinian Jew called Ygael Gluckstein, also known as Tony Cliff (Kuper, 1971; Cliff, 1999). The groups maintained regular contact with each other, with Castoriadis and Dunayevskaya still working together into the 1960s (van der Linden, 1997: 11).

### *Johnson-Forest Tendency*

The Johnson-Forest Tendency broke with the orthodox Trotskyist analysis of the USSR as a degenerated workers' state. The new position was put forward in full in *State capitalism and world revolution* (James, Dunayevskaya, and Lee, 1950) which involved a re-reading of Marx. The Hegelian perspective informed the analysis of the USSR, which can be seen in works like *Notes on dialectics* by C.L.R. James (1980) and *Philosophy and revolution* by Raya Dunayevskaya (1973b). They argued that the rise of Taylorism, followed by the developments of Fordism, had resulted in significant changes to the organisation of production and laid the basis for totalitarianism, not just within the capitalist heartland of the USA, but also Germany and the USSR. The production regime of Fordism 'before unionization' is 'the prototype of production relations in fascist Germany and Stalinist Russia' (James, Dunayevskaya, and Lee, 1950: 40). This analysis led

them to argue that the USSR was state capitalist, and that the ‘Stalinist bureaucracy’ was effectively the ‘American bureaucracy carried to its ultimate and logical conclusion, both of them products of capitalist production in the epoch of state-capitalism’ (James, Dunayevskaya, and Lee, 1950: 42).

This new analysis was an attempt to reclaim Marxism, not just from the potential one-sided reading of *Capital*, but also from the distortions of Stalinism. The emphasis ‘grew out of studies and contacts with factory workers’ that were ‘the hallmark of the political tendency’ (Cleaver, 1979: 62). As George Rawick (1969: 23) points out in his discussion of labour history: ‘Marxists have occasionally talked about working-class self-activity, as well they might, given that it was Marx’s main political focus’. One part of the project was to understand that behind observable institutional phenomena are the actions of an actually existing working class. Instead of studying these formal aspects – membership figures or the number of newspaper subscriptions – what is needed instead is:

The figures on how many man-hours were lost to production because of strikes, the amount of equipment and material destroyed by industrial sabotage and deliberate negligence, the amount of time lost by absenteeism, the hours gained by workers through slowdown, the limiting of the speed-up of the productive apparatus through the working class’s own initiative. (Rawick, 1969: 29)

This argument shows the possible utility in drawing on different kinds of quantitative data to understand the realities of struggle from the perspective of workers engaged in it. The choice of what sources of statistics to use is loaded with political implications; taking only the official statistics from union sanctioned industrial actions would obscure much of what is actually happening. In a sense what Rawick (1969) is arguing for is an attempt to discover the unrecorded or difficult to excavate figures of class struggle, perhaps analogous to the distortion created by unreported figures in official crime statistics referred to as ‘the dark figure’ by Coleman and Moynihan (1996), if it is possible to shed the negative connotations.

This perspective can be found in *The American worker*, a pamphlet by Paul Romano and Ria Stone (1946), which aimed to document the conditions and experience of rank-and-file workers in an American car factory. It is a two part study, the first part is a workers’ inquiry written by Paul Romano, who worked in the car factory; the second part contains the theoretical analysis, written under the pen name of Grace Lee Boggs. Romano worked in a car plant during the research for the study and describes how he had spent most of his life in various industries of mass production amongst many other workers. Romano was very much an insider, arguing that in terms of the workers:

Their feelings, anxieties, exhilaration, boredom, exhaustion, anger, have all been mine to one extent or another. By 'their feelings' I mean those, which are the direct reactions to modern high-speed production. (Romano, 1947: 1)

The pamphlet was distributed to workers across the USA. Romano (1947: 1) describes how workers were 'surprised and gratified' to see their experiences in the pamphlet. This is in direct contrast to the response from 'intellectuals.' Their view is summed up as 'so what?' and Romano (1947: 1) argues that this 'was to be expected' as 'how could those so removed from the daily experiences... expect to understand the life of the workers as only the worker can understand it'.

The analysis of the workers inquiry' by Romano (1947) is conducted by Stone (1947: 2) who introduces the report as 'a social document describing in essence the real existence of the hundreds of millions who constitute the basis of our society'. Stone (1947: 2) argues that it is 'only by understanding the actual conditions and the actual strivings of an actual working class at a certain stage of its development, can the problems of humanity as a whole be understood'. The description of the factory provided by Romano is steeped in rich detail and Stone (1947: 10) argues that it strength lies in fact that 'never for a single moment' does it allow the reader to 'forget that the contradictions in the process of production make life an agony of toil for the worker, be his payment high or low'. As the description unfolds it details in 'shocking clarity how deeply the alienation of labor pervades the very foundation of our society'.

A key theme that runs through the analysis is a hostility to academia and the intellectual. Stone (1947: 29) argues that the 'petty-bourgeois intellectuals' seek 'universality', but 'in an alienated fashion because they are themselves the production of the division between manual and mental labor'. This division of labour is seen as 'the culminating point of the inhumanity of class relations because it deprives both poles of the division of one essential aspect of human existence' (Stone, 1947: 29). The intellectual is affected by this division between manual and mental labour, which Stone (1947: 31) argues is the 'basic philosophic reason for the incapacity... to develop the concept of the social individual'. Glaberman (1947: 4) argued that the group fought for a perspective that 'the worker understands the complexity of modern production but sees directly its integration, its social character'.

The method set out in *The American worker* became a format for a political intervention. There were further inquiries: *Indignant heart: A black worker's journal* (Denby, 1989), focusing on the journey of a black worker from the American south to militancy in car factories, and *A women's place* (Brant and Santori, 1953), on housework, reproductive labour, and women's struggle. The aim of these inquiries was to proceed 'by learning to seek out in the daily life of

the workers in the factory the expression of their instinctive striving towards their liberation' (Glaberman, 1947: 1). This locates the worker, or more specifically groups of workers or oppressed, as the focus for empirical research. Glaberman (1947: 1) argued that the group 'based our politics in large part on Trotsky's conception of the instinctive urge to socialism of the working class'. The form of analysis required for this type of investigation tried to follow Marx's method. Glaberman (1947: 2) states that they 'learned to analyze the thought, the speech, the actions of the workers – not at face value, superficially – but rather fundamentally, in its innermost essence, in a word, dialectically'.

These inquiries documented the experience of workers and the oppressed in a particular form. Haider and Mohandesi (2013) point out that this development opened up Marx's call for an inquiry to allow 'workers to raise their own unique voice, express themselves in their own language' rather than responding to formulaic, closed questionnaires. This does complicate the original intentions as the 'openness of the narrative form exaggerates a tendency to slip from measured generalization to untenable overgeneralization'. For example in *The American worker* the individual worker's experience is put forward as a voice for all factory workers. However, *The American worker* was explicitly intended as a political intervention in struggles in the USA. This can also be found with examples like *Punching out* (Glaberman, 1952) and *Union committeemen and the wild cat strike* (Glaberman, 1955), which detailed and analysed the struggles of workers against both their management and the union bureaucracy. The methodological approach of the workers' inquiry they articulated was an attempt to follow in the footsteps of Marx by focusing on 'the actual life of workers' while 'never' losing 'sight of the revolution which would transform labor into human activity' (Stone, 1947: 32).

The resistance to both capital and the Stalinist bureaucracy was not only a theoretical possibility, but would develop with new forms of organisations. James (1974: i) argued that the struggle against new forms of control would require a rejection of old forms of organisation, as 'the proletariat always breaks up the old organization by impulse, a leap... the new organization, the new organism will begin with spontaneity, i.e. free creative activity, as its necessity'. This intensified the focus on the action of workers themselves, on a rank and file level, as a way of discovering the new forms that can emerge to challenge capital. The argument draws on a variety of examples from the Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian Soviets of 1905, to contemporary workers struggles, while reasserting that 'however high they soar they build upon shop floor organizations and action on the job' (James, Dunayevskaya and Lee, 1950: 11). The role of the workers' inquiry is therefore a crucial component in the process of building political organisation,

but a flexible form that stems from the changing circumstance and needs of the current period.

### *Socialisme ou Barbarie*

The formation of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, like other Trotskyist groups that broke away from the Fourth International, began with a rejection of the orthodox analysis of Russia. The two key theorists associated with the group were Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort. Their new analysis confronted the growth of the bureaucracy in Russia and argued that it was no longer a degenerated workers state but in fact had become bureaucratic capitalism (Castoriadis, 1975: 131).

The analysis of Russia as 'bureaucratic capitalist' shifted the focus of the group onto the role of bureaucracy in society, and in particular the bureaucratization of social movements. It posed the questions of whether 'it is an iron law that movements opposing the existing order either fall apart or change into rigid hierarchies?' and 'how can militants organize themselves without being absorbed or rigidified into a bureaucratic apparatus?' (van der Linden, 1997: 7). This involved furthering the analysis of the trade union bureaucracy as an independent layer, mediating between the workers and the bosses, careful not to lose support from either side. The group's interventions aimed to test new forms of organisation, the basis of which was the use of 'direct democracy' driven by a 'lengthy search for a new relationship between spontaneity and organization, between practice and theory' (van der Linden, 1997: 7). These theoretical positions informed the attempts at workers' inquiries that the group would carry out in the factories (Carrier, 1949; Mothé, 1954).

Castoriadis and Lefort took inspiration from *The American worker* (Romano and Stone, 1946) and reprinted it in the first issue of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (Romano, 1949). Like those in the Johnson-Forest Tendency, they were interested in understanding how the 'new structure of the labour process' was leaving 'its mark on the daily life and the consciousness of the workers' in order to understand 'the consequences... for the self-organization of the workers' (van der Linden, 1997: 19). The inquiries were built upon with factory based newspapers. For Claude Lefort (1952) the daily experiences of workers had within them:

Prior to any explicit reflection, to any interpretation of their lot or their role, workers have spontaneous comportments with respect to industrial work, exploitation, the organization of production and social life both inside and outside the factory.

Therefore the newspapers aimed to solicit testimonies from workers in order to analyse and publish them as political interventions. This raises a problem posed

by Lefort (1952): ‘who had the right to interpret these accounts?’. The conclusion was that if the members of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* took on this role this could be done if it would allow workers to reflect further on their own experiences.

The members of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* embarked on their own version of the workers’ inquiry project. They conducted investigations into the factories in France, for example Georges Vivier’s (1952) ‘Life in the Factory’. This work was continued by Daniel Mothé and Henri Simon, following in the footsteps of Paul Romano in the Johnson-Forest Tendency. The General Motors car factory is replaced with the Renault Bilancourt factory for Mothé and an insurance company for Simon (Cleaver, 1979: 64). This was the first instance of inquiries into a white-collar workplace and not only mass production. The attempts at leafleting and inquiry in the Renault factory had a degree of success; in 1954 the first issue of the factory-based, independent monthly newspaper *Tribune Ouvrière* was published (Mothé, 1955). This factory work – some of which was initiated by *Socialisme ou Barbarie* but not all, was mostly built upon the previous struggles that had taken place – led to a flourishing of newspapers in France: from Paris to Nantes, Bordeaux, and Toulouse, which by the start of 1958 had begun to work together (van der Linden, 1997: 20).

The workers’ inquiry formed the basis for this kind of syndicalist factory organisation. It allowed for the particular issues of the workplace to be uncovered and build links between different workers. The forms of organisation that developed were based on the ‘fundamental critique of social hierarchy’ that was one of the ‘main achievements’ of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (van der Linden, 1997: 32). This allowed the organisation to focus on the actual experience of workers in France, and to construct a perspective from the bottom up, despite the limitations that ‘this “view from below” was male and factory centred’ (van der Linden, 1997: 32).

The early part of 1958 saw the circumstances in which *Socialisme ou Barbarie* operated in change drastically. The De Gaulle coup spurred some in the group, like Castoriadis (Chaulieu, 1958), to argue for the formation of a revolutionary party that could aim for the coordinate action across the country with a national newspaper (van der Linden, 1997: 21). However, the view put forward by Castoriadis was ‘certainly not commonly shared in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*’ and in September 1958 the organisation split (van der Linden, 1997: 22). Castoriadis would subsequently break with Marxism, and then continue to reject historical materialism as a whole (Cardan [Castoriadis], 1964). *Socialisme ou Barbarie* received little attention outside the French-speaking world; but this changed after the outburst of student and worker struggle in 1968. The remaining copies of the journal ‘became a hot-selling item’ (van der Linden, 1997: 7) and it had an



influence on 'important figures of the "workers' autonomy" wing of the Italian New Left in the 1960s and 1970s' (Cleaver, 1979: 64).

## Operaismo

The next part of this article will focus on the use of the workers' inquiry in Italy. It involved inquiries into Italian car factories, which 'were informed by a reworking of some of the best Marxist analysis of earlier periods' and, in particular with the work of *Quaderni Rossi*, the rediscovery of ideas of the Johnson-Forest and *Socialisme ou Barbarie* groups (Cleaver, 1979: 65). The break with orthodoxy that took place with the early *Operaismo* differs from the examples examined so far, as it did not involve a new analysis of Russia. Nevertheless, it has been described as 'a veritable "Copernican revolution" against the Marxism derived from the Third International' which involved a 'reassessment of aspects' of Marxism (Turchetto, 2008: 287). The context of this new approach was an attempt to understand the use of Taylorism and the new forms of supervision and control in the factories of Italy. It required the development of new analytical tools which were sought through a radical re-reading of Marx. The work of *Quaderni Rossi* in the early 1960s signalled the beginning of the *Operaismo*.

These analytical tools were used to search for resistance against the new forms of capitalist organisation. The position of workers' autonomy developed through the journals informed the methodological approaches that followed. The research focussed on the form and content of workers self-activity. Steve Wright (2002: 32) argues that 'most were guilty, in the words of Lelio Basso of "positing the centre of gravity of struggle within the factory"'. The focus on the factory led to a series of further developments of the workers' inquiry as a methodological approach. Marx's (1938) workers' inquiry was rediscovered and republished in *Quaderni Rossi* (Lanzardo, 1965). There were studies of historic struggles of the working class like Sergio Bologna's (1972) research on examples of workers' councils and the struggle for workers control. Mario Tronti and others focused on 'retracing and going behind the rise of Fordism', with an examination of the 'relation between class composition and working class organization' (Cleaver, 1979: 67).

Romano and Stone's (1946) *The American worker* was translated into Italian (Romano, 1955), alongside Daniel Mothé's writings from *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and 'the Italians were influenced by and drew on this Franco-American experience of the direct examination of workers' struggles' (Cleaver, 1979: 66). The American example in particular was 'an important reference point', and the translations of the Johnson-Forest Tendency's work 'probably received wider

circulation and discussion in Italy than in the United States (Cleaver, 1979: 66).’ Wright (2002: 24) argues that both the American and French examples ‘provided corroborative evidence of what they took to be the most important of their own discoveries’.

The first concerted attempt at a workers’ inquiry took place at the FIAT car factory in Turin. There had been a series of industrial conflicts in the car industry at the end of the 1950s, ‘with the glaring exception of FIAT’ (Wright, 2002: 35). Vittorio Rieser (2001: 1) illustrates in an interview how those involved wanted to conduct an inquiry in a factory where struggles were actually taking place, but Raniero Panzieri argued against it saying: ‘No! We have to take up the questions and issues in FIAT, and the only means of doing this is enquiry (Inchiesta)’. The choice of FIAT as a subject for the inquiry was deliberate. To those on the left in Italy, ‘FIAT evoked images of poor working conditions, company unionism, and a docile workforce besotted with consumerism’ (Wright, 2002: 47). Therefore the choice of the firm represented the opportunity to test the theory that it would be possible to uncover the processes that were taking place at FIAT and understand the potential for future conflict in the factory.

The inquiry involved an investigation into the subjectivity of the workers employed in the factory. The local trade union provided access to the factory and the opportunity to conduct a study in contact with the workers themselves (Wright, 2002: 35). The inquiry was therefore able to proceed with interviews with FIAT workers and union activists at the factory. The results were detailed in the report by Romano Alquati (1975), which although Wright (2002: 46) argues was ‘somewhat impressionistic and rudimentary’, posed important questions. In the interviews the workers would move from criticising their individual job to broader questions in the factory. The criticisms put forward – ‘despite its often confused and naive form... revealed a preoccupation with “the problem of workers’ management, even if these young workers have never heard the expression”’ (Wright, 2002: 50). The study builds on the concepts of workers self-management, a theme that runs through much of the work of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. The report aimed to use the workers’ inquiry as an organising tool, gaining contact with workers and attempting to understand the processes taking place, specifically to understand how and why the factory had not seen industrial conflict in the previous wave of struggle.

The methodological component of the workers’ inquiry was elaborated further in the *Quaderni Rossi* and the theorists around it than in either the Johnson-Forest Tendency or *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. There was one particular issue, the difference between inquiry and co-research, which resulted in debates in the journal. A distinction was drawn between the inquiry ‘from above’ and inquiry

'from below', of which 'the latter was favoured by Romano<sup>1</sup> and others'. For the group at the time, 'this was an abstract dispute between two sociological approaches' (Rieser, 2001: 4). Although the distinction between 'from below' and 'from above' is useful, it was argued that 'Co-Ricerca' or co-research:

is a fundamental method, but it requires being in a condition where you are pursuing enquiry with workers that you are organizing or workers that are already organized and therefore in either case strictly related to political work. As a small group we were not in the position to do this and neither were the unions that were able to organize workers in FIAT. (Rieser, 2001: 4)

In the case described by Rieser it is therefore necessary to use traditional research methods. It is described as being abstract because the conditions for pursuing co-research were not present. However, 'if the conditions are there, this is clearly the best method'. Traditional research methods can be used to 'acquire knowledge of the situation', and that includes the use of 'quantitative questionnaires (of which data must nevertheless always be approached with a critical eye)' (Rieser, 2001: 4).

This debate opened up the question of how to approach the use of sociological tools, however, the 'search for a meeting point between Marxism and sociology' (Wright, 2002: 23) encounters a series of difficulties. Marxism contains within it a political suspicion of certain forms of sociology, whereas sociology contains a suspicion of politics – especially in terms of a political conception of the working class. This creates an instability in the combination of the two, something that can be seen in the tension between the continued use of sociological tools in the inquiries and the search for other ways to inject the political component into the project.

The hostility towards sociology is evident in the example of Alquati's attempt at an inquiry at the Olivetti factory. Although initially the militants who were members of the PSI (*Partito Socialista Italiano*, the Italian Socialist Party) were prepared to participate, the rest of the workers were 'more cautious' because of the 'contributions made by previous left sociologists to the intensifications of labour', and were not prepared to take part (Wright, 2002: 54). To clarify this, it is worth considering that management use techniques – at least similar in parts – to gain a better understanding of the processes of production:

The managers assume... the burden of gathering together all of the traditional knowledge which in the past has been possessed by the workmen and then the classifying, tabulating, and reducing this knowledge to rules, laws, and formulae. (Taylor, 1967: 36)

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1 Referring to Romano Alquati rather than Paul Romano.

As Braverman (1999: 60) has argued, these kind of investigations – starting with Taylor’s own project at the Midvale Steel company – not only laid the groundwork for the intense supervision of modern production, but also involved ‘a theory which is nothing less than the explicit verbalization of the capitalist mode of production’. Sociological tools can therefore be used in the process of knowledge theft, gaining an understanding of production from the point of view of the worker, and using it to extend the methods of control in the workplace.

The politics of knowledge plays an important role in the understanding of how to use sociological tools in a workers’ inquiry. For Tronti (1966: 18) ‘the weapons for proletarian revolts have always been taken from the bosses’ arsenals’, but the question of which tools and how they are used requires attention. Wright (2002: 24) argues that the conclusion of the debate about sociology in *Quaderni Rossi* was that there were ‘insights offered by certain sociological techniques’ and that these ‘could indeed play an important part in the reinvigoration of Marxism’. But as Cesare Bermanni and Sergio Bologna (1977: 31) have argued, the interview and questionnaire methods used in *Quaderni Rossi*, were ‘even if it passed for sociology, at bottom oral history’. As Wright (2002: 24) has pointed out, ‘the uncritical use of these tools has frequently produced a register of subjective perceptions which do no more than mirror the surface of capitalist social relations’.

The kind of partisan knowledge that the workers’ inquiry has the potential to produce begins from a very specific starting point. This approach starts with an understanding of a unique working class perspective linked to a political position rather than the experience of work. In doing so it forms a political epistemology which differs from the sociological conception. This is asserted by Tronti (1966: 53) in his claim to ‘ferocious *unilaterality*’, and that this:

Class science was to be no less partial than that of capital; what it alone could offer, however, was the possibility of destroying the thralldom of labour once and for all. (Wright, 2002: 38)

This new form of inquiry held important differences to that of the Johnson-Forest Tendency or *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. Haider and Mohandesi (2013) argue that:

No longer was the goal... to discover universal proletarian attitudes, or even the content of socialism, but to access a specifically *political logic*, which emerged from the *working-class viewpoint* – a consequence of the difficult relation between strategy and science represented by Marx’s theoretical practice.

To understand the significance of Tronti’s argument it is necessary to return briefly to the discussion of chapter ten of Marx’s *Capital* (1976: 415-6). The

'worker emerges from the process of production looking different from when he entered it'. Starting as a seller of their own labour power, the workers come to the conclusion that they 'have to put their head together... as a class' so 'they can be prevented from selling themselves and their families into slavery and death by voluntary contract with capital'. For Tronti (1966: 202) this is '*a political leap*', and 'It is the leap that the passage through production provokes in what we can call the *composition of the working class* or even the *composition of the class of workers*' (quoted in Haider and Mohandesi, 2013).

This concept of class composition is an important step for the workers' inquiry. It refocuses attention on the autonomy of the working class, not only by seeking to give a voice to workers, but understanding that capital attempts to 'incorporate the working class within itself as simply labour power', while the 'working class affirms itself as an independent class-for-itself only through struggles which rupture capital's self reproduction' (Cleaver, 1979: 66). Therefore the inquiry aims to uncover the composition of the working class at particular points or in different contexts to understand how struggle will develop. While the political component has been summarised by Alquati in a straightforward way:

Political militants have always done *conricerca*. We would go in front of the factory and speak with workers: there cannot be organization otherwise. (quoted in Roggero, 2010: 3)

The method itself becomes a way to develop strategies for the working class to overthrow capital through its own self activity. This is clarified further by Gigi Roggero (2010: 4):

Alquati taught us that the problem is to grasp the truth, not to describe it. For the capacity to anticipate a tendency is not an intellectual artifice but the compass of the militant and the condition for the possibility of organization.

## Contemporary inquiries

There is a tradition of conducting similar research in academia. There have been studies involving 'primary material of academic researchers, first-hand accounts marshalled by journalists and autobiographical testimonies of workers themselves' (Taylor et al., 2009: 7). From the 1970s there were a number of critical studies that sought to understand the workplace. These included Huw Beynon's (1973) *Working for Ford*, Anna Pollert's (1981) *Girls, wives, and factory lives*, Ruth Cavendish's (1982) *Women on the line*, or a number of studies by Michael Burawoy (1979) starting with *Manufacturing consent*. However, as this article has sought to argue there is an important difference between studies in a

workplace and workers' inquiries, the first seeks only to research and the second is also a political project.

The tradition of participatory action research has the potential to go beyond the limitations of pure academic research. The orientation aims 'to create participative communities of inquiry' and encourage 'a practice of participation, engaging those who might otherwise be subjects of research or recipients of interventions to a greater or lesser extent as co-researchers' (Reason and Bradbury, 2008: 1). This seeks to move research out of the ivory tower of academia to engage in the world outside it. The project, Reason and Bradbury (2008: 5) argue must contain a 'liberating and emancipatory dimension' otherwise it will be 'a shadow of its full possibility and will be in danger of being co-opted by the status quo'. Paul Brook and Ralph Darlington (2013: 240) discuss the possibilities of developing an 'organic public sociology of work' basing itself in this tradition, but highlight how 'the ebb and flow of struggle 'from below' obviously affects the opportunities'. It is worth drawing on these traditions in academia, especially those starting from a perspective like this, as they can inform the initial stages of inquiry.

An attempt to take theory out of the academy and directly into the workplace was undertaken in the *Hotlines* project; a workers' inquiry into call centres in Germany. The introduction states that they wanted to combine their 'rage against the daily exploitation with the desire and search for the struggles that can overcome it'. The project aimed to 'understand the class reality at this point, be part of the conflicts and intervene' (Kolinko, 2002). This introductory statement is clear in its intentions, following in the footsteps of the previous examples discussed in this article, with specific reference to *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and *Quaderni Rossi*. The difference in this case was the small number of people involved which limited the scale of the project. This is not to claim that any of the groups discussed before were mass parties, but it also means the project outlined is easier to reproduce with limited resources.

The project involved a group of militants engaging in discussions, working in a call centre, and collectively writing up the experience over a period of three years. They worked in ten different call centres and included discussions with other groups in Europe, USA, and Australia. The explicit nature of the inquiry was detailed as an attempt to understand 'the context between the daily cooperation of the workers and their forms of struggle and finding the new (communist) sociality within' (Kolinko, 2002). The writers argue that similar projects 'in all areas of exploitation, not just those of "wage labourers"' are worth undertaking, but that for it to be a workers' inquiry workers must be the subject. For the workers' inquiry to be viable, they argue that there are two criteria. Firstly

exploited people need to meet collectively, something which is a problem with people outside of the workplace, particularly with the unemployed. Secondly whether the struggles impact on other workers and in doing so interrupt the accumulation of capital. They point out that this is a problem with catering workers, or other workers whose 'strikes have little effect on the creation of capital overall.' This applies to other sectors, 'universities, cleaning and... most call centres' (Kolinko, 2002). However, these workers do have an impact on other workers and other processes under capitalism.

The workers' inquiry itself was divided into different stages. The first stage was called the 'pre-inquiry'. This involved research the workplace: academic and news articles, information from trade unions. These would then be used in theoretical discussions amongst the group aiming to collectively develop 'theoretical knowledge' which could be compared with 'our everyday life experience at the call centre'. The next stage would be conducting interviews, both with themselves and other workers in the call centre to develop further insights. The interviews were intended as the opening stage of a discussion about the possibilities of struggle. A further aim was to encourage other militants to take part in further workers' inquiries so that experiences could be shared (Kolinko, 2002).

The possibility of resistance and organisation was of particular interest for the Kolinko (2002) inquiry. Searching in the call centre for struggles to intervene in was an explicit aim of the research. It blurs the distinction between the workers' inquiry as an organisational tool and as a method of knowledge production, an issue which emerged in the previous part of this chapter. Although the researchers did not find struggles to intervene and engage in, their often frank and honest analysis of the project they undertook is revealing. They conclude by saying that 'the absence of open workers' struggles limited our own room for "movement"'. In terms of intervention this created a complication they describe when they pose the question: 'what is the point in leaflets and other kind of interventions at all if there is no workers' self-activity to refer to?' (Kolinko, 2002).

### **Towards a method for a workers' inquiry today**

The varied tradition of workers' inquiry is a rich one. Although this article has only touched on a particular moments it has sought to draw out a number of inspirations that can be used to inform a workers' inquiry today. The project laid out by Marx is still ongoing. There is no 'state capitalist' moment today that can provide a clear point of differentiation from an existing orthodoxy, but that that certainly does not mean there is no need to critically engage with the changing

world. There are significant changes that require attention: new forms of work, the impact of neoliberalism, the possibilities for resistance and organisation all pose serious challenges for Marxists and the left more generally.

The workers' inquiry provides a potential means to do this. By combining the insights of previous attempts – from Marx, the Johnson-Forest Tendency, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and *Operaismo* – with the tools of contemporary academia – sociological and ethnographic methods and the insights of participatory action research for example – it is possible to sketch out an inquiry for today. The framework provided by Kolinko (2002) is a useful starting point, as is the reflexive and open criticism they themselves raise. There needs to be an initial stage, like that of the inquiry 'from above' discussed by the Italian Workerists, where the aim is to develop theoretical insights and access to a workplace. This should be followed by a detailed investigation of the workplace itself, either through auto-ethnographic methods or with contact with workers. The aim is to move towards an inquiry 'from below', a form of co-research that breaks down the separation between researcher and subject. At its core the project is one of knowledge production and political organisation, and there has to be an awareness of this tension. The workers' inquiry cannot simply be limited to an academic tool for refreshing theory. This connexion between theory and practice is crucial for both the component parts.

A contemporary inquiry can draw on many more tools than either Marx or the later attempts had at their disposal. There are a number of digital resources that can be used: online surveys, discussions boards, and blogs. These methods make it significantly easier to collect and share experiences of workplaces. The prevalence of these also lowers the barriers to writing, and it is a much more common experience now to write, even if briefly on social media. This greatly widens the potential scope, both in terms of how inquiries can be conducted, but also where and by or with whom.

What are needed are more attempts at workers' inquiries: either where we work ourselves, or where we have contact with workers. They should follow on from Marx's (1843) call for a '*ruthless criticism of the existing order*, ruthless in that it will shrink neither from its own discoveries, nor from conflict with the powers that be.' This is the foundation for the workers' inquiry today: the importance of studying exploitation and resistance in the workplace and why this has to be closely tied to a project for the radical transformation of society.



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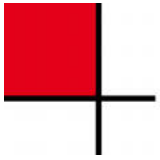
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## Notes on framing and re-inventing co-research

Gigi Roggero

Co-research (*conricerca*), which I discuss in this paper, was born in the context of Italian *operaismo*. This does not mean, however, that we cannot talk of co-research beyond this context, nor that the *operaisti* invented co-research. In fact, as I will try to show, all militants conduct co-research. At the same time, I will try to underline some peculiarities of the *operaista* co-research, its actuality, and ways in which we can reconsider it today.

### Genealogy

I will firstly point out five issues that could enlighten, in a stenographic way, the genealogy and meaning of co-research, its political peculiarity, and the how it is different from workers' inquiry.

Who are the co-researchers? The militants. So, it is immediately clear that the aim of co-research is entirely a political one. It is the organization of the struggles. This does not mean that co-research ignores science: on the contrary, the process was greatly influenced by the social sciences. In the 50s, for example, Italian co-researchers used American and French industrial sociology. But they radically fought the mythology of science and knowledge; in fact, according to Left tradition, science and knowledge are a neutral means to use for social progress. On the contrary, science and knowledge are battlefields, that is to say, not neutral means to be simply put to counter-uses. Indeed, co-researchers were labelled 'anarcho-sociologists'. Nowadays, it is said that they innovate or even invented the sociology of labour in Italy.

But co-research is completely irreducible to a matter of methodology: the object of the study, the capitalist social relationship, is the object of hate. In fact, co-research means a process of subjectivation, organisation and rupture. That is to say, the production of knowledge is immediately the production of autonomy.

## The relationship between knowledge and struggle

Co-research is the breaking with the traditional model of the organic intellectual, or the distinction between the intellectual and militant, discourse and practice. Or, to use Althusser's words, between theoretical practice and political practice, between the class struggle in philosophy and the class struggle in material social relationships. In fact, the Althusserian point of view risks to re-propose a distinction between the autonomy of theory and the autonomy of politics.

Meanwhile, the 'co-'<sup>1</sup> prefix does not presuppose a submission to pure empirical data, or even to a voluntaristic lack of distinction between the interviewer and the interviewee in the name of egalitarianism with populist flavour. Instead it points to the crisis of the division between intellectual and political action that enervates the system of representation, in order to situate the problem of organisation entirely within class composition – within a trajectory where the different positions of singularities are not negated but translated into a common process, the strength of which is measured by the capacity to destroy existing hierarchies. That is to say: it is impossible to fight against the capitalist hierarchies with the ideology of the free autonomous zones, or the micro-politics of the small community: this would be self-referential! The horizontality and equality are what is at stake in any struggle.

## Co-research is different from the tradition of 'workers' inquiry'

The latter begun with the work of Raniero Panzieri and part of the *Quaderni Rossi* group, who strived, among other things, to move beyond the inveterate distrust that Italian Marxism held for sociology. Panzieri described the method of 'workers inquiry' as a limited science, in a similar way to how Marx defined political economy. Yet, workers' inquiry was endowed with its own autonomy, structured on the rigor of scientific and logical coherence. In this tradition, however, worker's inquiry utilized capitalist paradigms and means of scientific organization, putting in question only its finalization, and not its process of production. In other words, its goal was to develop the production of knowledge for political organization rather than for the market.

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1 'con' – in Italian *conriserca*

Such a trajectory risked on the one hand to re-propose, although in a completely unprecedented manner, the idea of a neutral science which it was sufficient to appropriate; on the other, the production of knowledge that was constitutively destined for the use of an external subject, the party or the union, reinforcing in this way the classic division of labour between the political and scientific spheres. The co-research hypothesis, which clearly underlies its definition, has the potential for demolishing this separation: in co-research the production of knowledge is simultaneously the production of subjectivity and the construction of organisation.

To reiterate: co-research and inquiry are not necessarily opposed to one another. It could be said: co-research is a process, the inquiry is a phase. As Romano Alquati always said: it does not make sense to say 'I did some co-research'. The militant is always in the process of carrying out co-research. There is no militancy without co-research.

### **Co-research is closely connected to the concept of class composition.**

First of all, class – here I am talking about a political, not sociological concept of class. That is to say: there is no class without class struggle. Note the distinction between *technical composition*, based on Capital's articulation and hierarchization of the workforce, and the relation between workers and machines, and *political composition* – the process of the constitution of a class as an autonomous subject. *Operaismo* forged these categories in a very particular context, marked by the space-time coordinates of the Taylorist factory and the Fordist society, and a specific figure of the worker inhabiting these, i.e. the mass worker. Also, *Operaismo* forged the tools to be used against the idealist concept of 'class consciousness'; concretely, class consciousness is a sort of objective condition that, through the mediation of the Party, rips the veil of capital ideology and allows the progress of the History towards its socialist stage. Subjectivity has nothing to do with consciousness: it is not pre-existing but is always being produced. Subjectivity is a battlefield: the capitalist subjectivation is always at a tension with the autonomous subjectivation. This is because capital is always an antagonistic social relationship.

Therefore, the political subjectivation and organization are immanent to the materiality of the processes of life and struggle, and not in a sort of objective and transcendent class consciousness.

## What were the subject, time and place of co-research?

The subject was the mass worker, the space was the Taylorist factory, the time was the temporality of the Fordist society, with work and non-work visibly separated. Again, I quote Alquati: 'Co-research was to go in front of the gate of the factory at 6am, 2pm, and 10 pm (at the shift changes), to talk with the workers and to organize with them; and then to come back the day after, and then the day after again'.<sup>2</sup>

But the choice of the subject was not determined by the symmetry between technical and political composition: according to this deterministic view, the point most advanced in the production is objectively the most advanced in the struggle (this is the view of the Marxist socialist tradition. In the Soviet Union, for example, the chief-cell in the factory was the worker with the most technical skills). On the contrary, this political choice was an investment in a line of tendency, that is to say, a possible becoming. The tendency is never an objective arrow of the history, but a field of forces and possibilities – the material battlefield of possibilities of struggles and organization.

The centrality of the mass workers to this process was not determined by their numerical majority. Similarly, hierarchies of the struggles are not the sociological flipside and mirror of capitalist hierarchies. The *political* centrality of the mass worker was a combination of his position in the processes of accumulation and his processes of subjectivation, within and against his position in the capitalist hierarchy. It is always a matter of relationship, or it is better to say, of an antagonistic relationship. In fact, the mass worker was not objectively a political subject; he became a political subject.

Consequently, there was also a specific time and space for co-research. Panzieri talked of 'hot inquiry', an inquiry conducted as and when there were struggles happening. Instead, according to Alquati, once a struggle exploded, it was already too late. At the same time, the place for co-research is where there possibilities and conditions for a struggle to. So, to jokingly rephrase Panzieri's definition, one could say that co-research is 'lukewarm', or 'tepid', rather than 'hot' inquiry. It occupies the time and place of potentiality, of tendency, of organising, of a possibility to act on and overturn a tendency. Consequently, co-research act on a 'middle radius', where the theory becomes practice and the practice becomes theory. Here is it possible to act on the tendency and to overthrow it.

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2 Informal conversations.

In short: co-research is the ‘zip-level’ between political discourse and political practice, the *liaison* between the two. Yet, it is not merely mediation: co-research on the one hand translates and implements the discourse into practice, on the other hand it transforms and elaborates political discourse from the starting point of a struggle and the subjective composition. Co-research is at the centre of militancy.

### Actuality of co-research

Nowadays, following changes in the forms of production, labour and subjectivity, we have to re-think co-research, and perhaps, to reinvent it. I have been saying this for years now, but that is not enough: now I will try and pose the main problems, but also to go a step further. Below are some open nodes, some related and some new in relation to matters discussed above.

### The relationship between militants and class composition

It is true, we the militants are *within* the social composition: we’re precarious workers and exploited in the metropolitan social factory. It is the end of the militant as ‘external figure’. But we have to pay attention to the short circuit: often activist groups start from this correct assertion, yet arrive at an incorrect conclusion that the point of view of the activists is the point of view of the precariat. So, the idea of self-inquiry has to be managed carefully: self-inquiry cannot be self-referentiality, it has to be situated not within a group but within a social composition. For example: co-research in the No Tav movement in Susa Valley in Italy (See: ‘A sarà düra!’)<sup>3</sup>; self-inquiry by theatre workers in Milan by Macao collective; finally, the logistics workers militant inquiry (see uninomade.org and www.commonware.org).

### The circularity between production of political discourse, inquiry, and struggle: Co-research as a style of militancy

Today there is a great socialization of knowledge, which in turn extends of the abilities of inquiry – there is an expansion of the possibility of inquiry immanent to the class composition of ‘living knowledge’. It could be said there are many instances of inquiry, and few of co-research. That is to say, there is an expansion

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3 Centro Sociale Askatasuna, *A sarà düra! Storie di vita e di militanza no tav*, Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2013.



of knowledge production that has various difficulties becoming antagonistic knowledge. This is the political problem.

At the same time, there is a need to re-think class composition and the relationship between technical and political composition, based on a difference between living and dead labour. Indeed, there has been a change in the relationship between constant and variable capital, a kind of partial re-appropriation of the machines from the workers. The embodiment of an increasing part of constant capital in the living labour/knowledge certainly does not mean a deterministic line of liberation. It produces terrifically ambiguous effects, for which the suffering goes with the *potentia*, the new pathologies of living knowledge continuously segment the social cooperation. In a way, based on the centrality of subjectivity in the contemporary forms of production and capture/accumulation, the political composition comes before the technical composition. Or, to put in another way, the technical composition sustains the mechanisms of segmentation of the workforce and differential inclusion in the labour market, within a context in which the general intellect is embodied in the cooperation of living labour/knowledge.

In this context, one could say that there is more at stake in the co-research process than in the past: it is the autonomy of living labour/knowledge; it is the creation of the new institution of life in common.

There is also a need to re-think the tools required for these processes. For example, in the past the militant journal played a great role (*Quaderni Rossi*, *Classe Operaia*, etc.). Recently, there were some good examples of militant journals, but also a noted decline of its political effectiveness. In fact, now the tools of inquiry have to be reinvented at the level of the general intellect's networks, going beyond the division between virtual and real, which no more exists.

The above could be contested as the incurable optimism of the Operaista thinking. However, such critique risks losing the view of the Marxian concept of capital as a social relation, the antagonism inherent to the processes of capitalist development. In fact, there is a constitutive duplicity in all the Marxian concepts: they are also placed in a relation of force determined by resistance and command, cooperation and exploitation, living labour and dead labour. These abstractions are historically situated and embodied in specific collective subjects and power relations.

Co-research looks for the embodiment of the historical determination of the class antagonism, the material base of autonomy of living labour and the breaking with capital: the material base of revolution.

## Time and place

Let me return to Alquati: co-research means to go in front of the gates at 6am, 2pm and 10pm. And today, what are the gates and the shift? It is necessary to avoid two opposite risks: total continuity and total discontinuity. On one hand, I just excluded the possibility of practicing the co-research in the same form. It should be contradictory with its character of process immanent to the changes in class composition. On the other hand, it is true that the metropolis has become a factory, and the production is spread out; also, it is true that there is now an overlap or at least the blurring of the border between life and work. But it is not true that all the places and times are equal. For instance, financialisation: it is similar to a flow, but there are also taps of condensation of value. To interfere with these taps means to hurt the processes of accumulation and in turn, the bosses. Or let's take the problem of the strike: what does it mean to strike today for the new subjects of labour, in the confusion of life and work, often in the individualization and internalization of the forms of command and hierarchies? These are problems we have faced for a few years now, and tried to resolve in the student movement in Italy. We experimented with the idea of stopping circulation as a form to generalize strike beyond classical workplaces. Workers in the Italian logistics sector gave us some answers in the last few years: they were able to re-think the strike to effectively hurt their bosses and the vulnerable points in the circulation process.

## 4) Today a strike has to be destituent and constituent at once

It needs to hurt the bosses and create new forms of life and production in common simultaneously. This is the problem faced by movements in the current crisis, from Tunisia to the US, from occupied squares to attempts at self-managing of hospitals or universities.

Again, someone could say: we see only segmentation, fragmentation, decomposition!

The problem of co-research as a style of militancy is exactly to produce new glasses, through which to see what is not immediately visible and perceivable, as well as what it can be or what it could become. The glasses of the potentiality! When *operaisti* begun militant inquiry at the end of the 50s, factories were largely

absent from the political discourse abandoned on the political point of view. The idea was for an integration of the working class: a sort of a Frankfurt School – mode useful for the strategy of the Italian communist party. Operaisti saw, with their ‘new glasses’, underground forms of refusal. When workers did not participate in the strike, they tried to understand why, and discovered that workers refused to participate, but in the useless – in their eyes – strikes called by the unions. Even passivity can be a form of struggle! These forms of diffused refusal were present at the micro-level, not visible: they constituted a potentiality of a massive class struggle, and the micro became macro.

Is it possible to see something similar today? In '61 in the Olivetti factory Alquati talked of the contradiction between the growing socialization of production and the political role of hierarchies. What does it mean from the point of view of class composition subjectivity and its forms of political socialization? Can we talk of something of similar today? For example, during the ‘Anomalous wave’ of university movements in Italy in 2008, we had to face the problem of meritocracy. For us, there was no doubt about what meritocracy is: the language of power, i.e. a mystification aiming to create and legitimise fragmentation and hierarchies. We could reproach students and young precarious workers for their ‘lack of political consciousness’, but it would have been useless. It was better to point out the ambivalence of this feeling of disapproval that first of all depends on material condition. Its base is precarity, the *déclassement*, and the end of the university as an elevator for social mobility. Yet, the enemy is identified as those who are corrupt, rather than with the system, which produces and allows corruption. Yes, there is mystification, but this mystification acts on an ambivalent class’ claim. Two years later in Italy we had another strong students’ movement, with almost no claims of meritocracy. On one hand, the crisis quickly dispensed with any illusions of social mobility; on the other hand, the movement was younger than before. They were the ‘precarious of second generation’, sons and daughters of the precarious of first generation – socialized in an environment of welfare and stable work, the first generation experienced the erosion of rights and social condition, precarity not as a stage but a permanent condition, the stolen future, etc. Instead, the ‘precarious of second generation’ were socialized with precarity as a permanent condition, without any illusions about the future, and even without being able to tell if there is a future for them. Their only time is the present, a permanent present. It is an ambivalent state: it could become the source of mass nihilism, or, on the contrary, of a political radicalization, or a mix of the two. But certainly, progressive promises of capital no longer carry any possibility.

Also, it is not an irenic process; it could be process of conflict in the class composition. In fact, the emergence of mass workers created a conflict within the

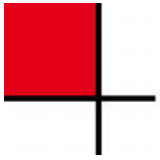
former class composition with craft workers at the centre. In any case, nowadays, between the lines of tendency and dramatic ambivalences the political gamble is not to await the Event, but rather to organize the process, which will bring it along. Forty years following the Piazza Statuto event, an interviewer asked Alquati whether the militants expected the workers' revolt at the time, and he replied: 'We didn't expect the revolt, but we've organized it'<sup>4</sup>. This sums up the truth of co-research, as well as the organization of class organization.

### the author

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4 'Interview with Romano Alquati', in Giuseppe Trotta and Fabio Milana, eds., *L'operaismo degli anni sessanta: Dai 'Quaderni Rossi' a 'Classe Operaia'*, Rome: DeriveApprodi, 2008, p. 738.



## Revisiting Jon McKenzie's *Perform or else*: Performance, labour and pedagogy

Jon McKenzie, Tim Edkins and Stevphen Shukaitis

Tim Edkins and Stevphen Shukaitis interviewed Jon McKenzie on 24 March 2013 about his book *Perform or else: From discipline to performance* (2001a), its current resonance and his recent research<sup>1</sup>. We begin by asking about *Perform or else*'s playful tone and composition. Then we ask about contemporary labour struggles, including in the state of Wisconsin where he is based as a Professor of English and Director of DesignLab at University of Wisconsin. We end by discussing how he sees the current role of the university. We focus on how DesignLab forms part of his applied research program, based on the multifaceted conception of performance theorised in *Perform or else* and instantiated in higher education.

### Introduction

**Stevphen Shukaitis:** Currently I'm co-editing an issue of the journal *ephemera: theory & politics in organization*. It comes out of management and organisation studies, but it's a more critical theory orientated journal drawing from Marxism, queer studies, sociology and the arts. It is published open source, so its readership is much broader than most journals. This interview will be for an issue on workers' inquiry, which, coming out of the Italian autonomist tradition, is an approach that uses sociological tools to push forward and deepen labour antagonisms. Part of the idea for this issue is also to draw on perspectives from cultural studies, performance studies, and the arts more broadly that could be usefully combined with workers' inquiry.

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<sup>1</sup> McKenzie was in London presenting a keynote paper 'Remediating performances: Strange politics of higher education' (2013a).

**Jon McKenzie:** And this is the Marx survey you mentioned, in relation to workers' inquiry?

**SS:** That was the basic idea and it was taken up in Italy. So that rather than presuming too much about the workers and the working class, asking: What are they actually doing? What do they really want? Well people are going on mass wildcat strikes, why are they doing that? So it was using those sorts of tools. And the idea of interviewing you for the issue is to explore some ways that your work on performance could enrich such a project.

**Tim Edkins:** I was thinking about similar debates around performance and labour happening in performance studies at the moment, with a series of recent journal special issues on this topic.<sup>2</sup> And this is something that I encountered at Queen Mary, when I did the performance studies MA in the Drama department there.<sup>3</sup> It was when post-Workerist thought was being applied by a critical mass of scholars in performance studies. It offered another way, alongside your work, of undertaking an analysis of performance and management, by situating the labour of the artist within broader changes to working conditions under post-Fordism. *Perform or else* also valorised my trip across campus into Queen Mary's business school. There I found a link with performance studies with people such as Stefano Harney, who was researching there at the time, and who I ended up teaching with. He has written on pedagogy with his longtime collaborator Fred Moten (2013), within the business school (Dunne et al, 2008) and at Queen Mary in particular (2009a; 2009b). And also, before arriving in the business school, he wrote about state theory from a post-Workerist perspective and drew on performance studies (2002). So I guess I am interested in discussing where a performance studies of this tradition, and of the *Perform or else* moment, might go next. The critical business school would be one instance, but there are many other sites it could venture into.

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2 'Precarity and performance' a special issue of *TDR* edited by Nicholas Ridout and Rebecca Schneider (2012), 'Precarious situations: Race, gender, globality' a special issue of *Women & Performance* edited by Tavia Nyong'o (2013), and 'On labour and performance', a special issue of *Performance Research* edited by Gabriele Klein and Bojana Kunst (2012), which includes an article by Shukaitis (2012).

3 See, for example, the work of Nicholas Ridout (2008; 2013), which sits alongside the department's treatment of this topic from a cultural materialist perspective (McKinnie, 2004; Harvie, 2013).

## Part one: The performance of *Perform or else*

**SS:** I really like how *Perform or else* is both an analytic machine and a performative gesture at the same time. But the relationship between the two elements makes me question certain parts of it. For instance, is the project to launch an overall theory of performance? Is that possible? Or is it in some ways a gesture of why the attempt to do this would in fact blow up?

**JM:** It is the latter. I say that I am rehearsing a general theory of performance. In many ways it is modelled on Jacques Derrida's *Of grammatology* (1974). He simultaneously launches this thing and also pulls it out. At the same time, I realised that there were these other paradigms of performance. So one of the rules in this was not to go out, as many performance scholars do, with an idea of what performance is and then find these objects and name it. I actually started with these different concepts and kind of went to different practices. Because I knew that there was a normative side of performativity, which I had discovered in my masters thesis. So the purpose was to kind of lay out these other kinds of performance, organisational and technological. When I first read Jean-François Lyotard (1979) I thought he was talking about Michel Foucault's (1979) discipline; the way that I understood performativity was as a mode of discipline. But then later I realised, oh no, there is something very different happening here. To lay out this notion that there was a stratum, drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, I play with some of their diagrams, reworking and using them. I also knew there would be the kind of Derridian playfulness part, that I wanted to do something with this notion of the performative, which is why the last half becomes the way it is. It would go together in a more traditional way if I had a number of analyses at the end that took these three paradigms of performance – cultural, organisational and technological – and looked at X, Y and Z, and saw how these different values played off of one another. I don't do it here, but I've since brought those together for analyses of TOYWAR, higher education, dataveillance, Abu Ghraib, the BP disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, and global resistance to war<sup>4</sup>.

**TE:** I guess you wouldn't need to perform that analysis if the gesture was to give the model to others. But the playful tone of it is at odds with other models, where you can be sure that they will remain steady. I was wondering how you thought about it being taken seriously or not. I know that tension is acknowledged within the text in different ways.

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4 See McKenzie, 2001b, 2008, 2009, 2013b, 2006a, and 2006b.

**JM:** A certain fatalism: I did not know whether I was going to write another book, and so it was important for me to have the playful gesture in this one. I think people take from the book what they want. I often get a sense that a lot of performance students are assigned just chapter one, 'The efficacy of cultural performance'. They don't get the rest of it, and don't see why they would need to go there. I suspect that other ones get probably halfway through the book, and that is something that they can use. There is a project that is laid out in the second half. That is to do with this catachrestic notion, what happens to words when they become post-conceptual in some way: they start to connect in different ways. The same thing with catastrophisation of behaviour, if the thing is nicely set up, how can you ship practices out in a different direction. There it is about desubjectification, and you could do that around deobjectification too: when the names and the materials start to come apart, things open up, for better and worse, but could inscribe thought in a different space. There is also the notion of this collaboration through these cells influenced by Critical Art Ensemble, what I call gay sci fi<sup>5</sup>. What would the cells of people working together do, like creating a radical business school? And then the last part is a reinscription of what is laid out in the first. This notion of time travelling and moving through different times, and not necessarily thinking you're just in one time and you are sealed in this way. Disastronautics. There is a certain anachronism that is always happening and how do you plug into that?

**TE:** Would there be a popular version?

**JM:** I thought about writing one actually. To take this and make it available for managers almost. It could have an intervention there. Part of the move is to try to introduce these cultural values into institutions in a way that is not simply the creative class. Can you enter these things in and make them important, in a way that would still be critical and change those institutions. Maybe that is a utopian dream, but it sounds like these radical business schools are attempting something similar.

**SS:** If there was going to be a pop version I might suggest it taking a style along the lines of someone like Cory Doctorow who does almost pop teenage novels, such as *For the win* (2010).

**JM:** So you are suggesting not only lay this out but to show an application. I like this idea. I have remediated it into a gay sci fi video (McKenzie, 2012a) with a certain cosmographic reframing.

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5 On Critical Art Ensemble see McKenzie (2001a: 235-6) and McKenzie, Schneider and Critical Art Ensemble (2000).



**TE:** What was interesting to me when I first read it was that the demand to be a productive worker is pretty familiar, and many people would spend time with this but wouldn't get as much from it as they could.

**JM:** There is a lot of scholarly apparatus and a lot of citations, which could be done in a much leaner way. I'm still working within this thing but to go back and rewrite it I cannot imagine doing that now. When Ralo Mayer asked me to reprise this for his artists' exhibition catalogue I was a little like, whoa, how would I do that<sup>6</sup>?

## **Part two: Cultural labour, specialisation and resistance**

**SS:** I wanted to ask something in a different direction. One thing I really like is the way that you hold together notions of performance as transgressive and as 'liminal-norm' (McKenzie, 2001a: 49-53). This seems quite important for ways for looking at the relationship between art and labour, where the role of the artist is both transgressive and also normative, in accepting longer hours and lower wages, etc. And I like your argument that 'performance will be to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries what discipline was to the eighteenth and nineteenth' (ibid.: 18). Thinking about this twelve years later, has this developed further from the way that you saw it then?

**JM:** Sure. My head is still in that space, because I have laid out general theory and it is pretty wide. There are other paradigms obviously out there: the financial, educational and medical performances<sup>7</sup>. So there are other ones. So I see it is continuing to be there and maybe it is not called performance, but this drive for assessment, this audit society is part of that. Artists have gone from legitimating themselves through these grand narratives of liberation and freedom to becoming increasingly under audit themselves. I think there is good and bad in this, and the question is what are the modes of resistance that are going to emerge under performativity?

**SS:** I was just thinking of Critical Art Ensemble, and if you ever worry that the arts will not have a political role, all you have to do is think of that moment in 2004 where Steve Kurtz got arrested for bioterrorism.

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6 McKenzie's (2011: 21-25) essay for this exhibition catalogue offers an overview of *Perform or else*. McKenzie (2012b) discusses remediating the book into this text, which also forms the script for the voiceover of the video essay (McKenzie, 2012a). More recently, Iga Ganczarczyk, Bartosz Frackowiak and Anna Zaradny (2013) have created the performance *Katastonauci*, inspired by the book and recent video.

7 See McKenzie (2004) for a discussion of performance and audit in education and finance.

**JM:** Yes, but he and Critical Art Ensemble had moved from electronic civil disobedience into that realm because they thought that the practices they had laid out in their first manifesto had already been co-opted and tactical media changes were needed. Artist activists have a critical role to play in experimenting with new social and media forms. It's important to note that the situation Critical Art Ensemble diagnosed in the early 1990s – namely, that artists were too technophobic, programmers were too tied to the state interests, and activists were too tied to the streets – had by then already changed. As Deleuze says, contemporary power is a constant modulation that breaks disciplinary moulds.

**TE:** To follow on, in terms of your use of *perfumance* (McKenzie, 2001a: 228-34), I can't quite follow that as a concept.

**JM:** It is not a concept. It is a condition, connected to Derrida's iterability and what Judith Butler does with iterability. The identity of something is not a substance that is there, it is relational and those relations can change, and things can flip over. I'm not quite sure poststructuralism ever happened because there seems to be a lot of dialectical puritanism: we are going to get ourselves in a nice pure space and be away from this ickiness. It is hard to be in that space. In terms of labour, Michel de Certeau wrote about what he called *la perruque*, wig making, as a fringe term for this: you are at your job but you are making your own wig. I think new media allows the space to do this. Generalized wig making suggests the perfumative element of labour. The term comes from a throwaway line that Derrida has in his reading of Joyce when he says 'I could have called this *On the perfumative in "Ulysses"*' (1992:300 cited in McKenzie, 2001a: 231). The notion for me that any performance, because of the citational network which precedes it, is iterable or other-able; that is the important thing; it's not that there is a performance and that there are iterations of it; the presence itself emerges out of iterability, which means the blur is always going to be in play for better and for worse. The reason *perfumance* cannot be a concept is if we traditionally think of concepts as having a unified sense with a series of attributes under it, this one, because it is a pun, is already in two places at once. It is trying to get at undecidability, and again I am channeling Derrida. But then what would it be to set up a whole system of thought that does that? For me, Deleuze and Guattari do this in *A thousand plateaus* (1987). Their concepts are introduced, for instance, the rhizomatic and the arborescent, and they seem very clear, but then later on, it's like, oh no, those things have been displaced into some other way. What would it be not just for one puncept but whole system of thought that is moving in a post-conceptual way of thinking and being in the world?

**SS:** I was just in Palermo and there's this certain tree that grows vines from it and when the vines hit the ground they turn into more trunks. It just destroyed things for me. I thought the tree and the rhizome were different.

**JM:** But Deleuze and Guattari say at the ends they turn into one another. On the one side it is stratifying and on the other side it's free flowing, and these things flip back and forth: a tree can become rhizomatic and rhizome can suddenly become a tree. It is interesting in *Kafka* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 74) they have these two diagrams. One is of the tower, which I would take to be discipline, and the other is of a series of doorways; so this is the hierarchical organisation and this is a networked organization. There is not anything inherently good or bad in either one of those forms, that is the important thing to realise. Not only could one turn into the other, but they could coexist at the same time. In most organisations this is an organisational chart but the way that power flows through it is different. This is in *The castle* (Kafka, 1962), where there are these weird instances of short-circuiting of power.

**SS:** It is interesting how organisations can move back and forth between different modalities, in very unpredictable ways: Is this a rehearsal or is this the actual thing? Is it the informal or is it the actual structure? And the codes that let you know when it is the real thing and when it is not. I wanted to ask about the particular outcomes of more performative forms of labour. I am thinking in particular of forms of cultural labour where you are not just producing your performance of the work itself, but also a certain kind of self-conception through it, such that it seems to be really difficult to talk about collective conditions in that labour. Because if the work you do is also about making yourself then it seems really difficult to talk about stopping work. How would you go on strike against your own creative labour? It becomes a very individualised: attached to particular bodies. Do you think there has been a change in labour politics, or the possibility for labour politics, coming out of more performative forms of work?

**JM:** In terms of cultural work why do we have to think that it is about the individual? If the romantic philosophers like Kant and Hegel had valorised theatre, rather than the poet and the painter, we would have a different idea of what aesthetics is: it would already be collaborative, recombinant, and multi-mediated. So many of those notions of originality, of being a single producer working in just one particular medium, might be different. So do we necessarily have to fall back that it is about individual labour? A lot of other folks have shown that there is a sociology always involved in this: everything from these situations that are supporting it to the medium and the training. If one is always already sociological, then you think of the way that it doesn't just come back to an

individual valorisation, but I think most artists do that. They see themselves as part of a community and that labour happens this way.

**SS:** I have had a lot of experience of talking to creative workers in London, who almost fall back on a certain moment of their arts training, where it is all about 'my practice'. And maybe that is a question about the way that arts education works itself, it then forms a certain kind of individual subjectivity, that looks to talk about your practice rather than focusing on these broader questions of the sociology of creativity.

**JM:** I originally trained as a painter and my experience of working in many different academic institutions, the pattern that I see is that, at least in the US, art is taught in mono media. There is the visual arts, dance, theatre, music and literature, and they hardly mix. Then within each of these there are certain valorisations of nineteenth century forms: painting, ballet, realist theatre, classical music or the novel or poem. My concern is how long can we maintain that within the academy when we are entering a good way into the twenty-first century? Are we going to continue to over-valorise those things and under, or even devalorise twentieth century art forms? And that's not just the avant-garde, well especially avant-garde, but also film, television, radio – media which are marginalised in the US both as object of study and languages of communication, expression, etc. I went to NYU: performance studies was disconnected from the theatre department, which was disconnected from the film school, etc. You still get narrow specialisation almost everywhere. I stopped being a painter because I felt the medium and materials that artists work in are often too narrow, and then the institutions that they work in are perhaps too narrow, too. There have been some scandalous paintings, but have they had the impact of certain films or television events? So if you're going to work on a visual arts mode, why paint? At some point I thought I needed to do something else. And to go back to what I was saying earlier about the notion of the individual genius being the primary mode still, except for theatre where it is collaborative.

**SS:** It is interesting that over the past year there have been a wave of theatres being occupied in Italy as a response to the drastic cuts in arts funding. And maybe that's part of it, why the theatres have been occupied as opposed to – well, I'm not quite sure if painters and poets decided they wanted to take over a particular space what in fact would they occupy?

**JM:** Galleries? I don't know what space poets would take?

**SS:** Bookstores?

**JM:** Bookstores. Another challenges that many of these institutions – the opera houses, the symphonies, the libraries, the bookstores, I don't know about the galleries, certainly the museums – are often times on life support in society, because people are not frequenting them the way that they used to. So are these new media cutting our legs off? Or is there something else that is emerging in which art is not done by artists? Creativity is a more widespread notion. This might an almost desperate hope for what is happening but it also opens the question of what new sorts of practices and interactions will emerge.

### **Part three: Performance, austerity and Wisconsin**

**SS:** I wanted to ask you about the performative dimensions of the events in Wisconsin when Governor Scott Walker was forcing through the changes in labour laws. Because that seemed to be significant politically but also in the way that it played out in US politics, where you had these connections between Wisconsin and Egypt, with people buying pizzas for one another. It seemed to me that it was both important because of the changes in labour law but also something broader than that, how it was being performed as a sort of public spectacle.

**JM:** It is hard to separate those two, because a lot of marches were organised by public sector labour unions. You did have then people coming because they felt strongly in support of this, even if they were not unionised. So there was a very festive feeling in terms of the marches from the UW campus. They would be faculty and high school students, who had been let out, marching up in the bitter cold, with signs and costumes. In terms of the physical occupation and music, for a while you could come into the Capitol, which has a really beautiful building. And people were coming in standing at the very base of the Rotunda singing 'We shall overcome'. One person at a time would come in and sing this song a cappella. It was very moving. Then you had people on the other side shouting 'What is this person doing? Drag them out of here. Why are they desecrating this space?'. So it was a social space, though I don't know how much dialogue was going on between the singing and shouting. But then the Capitol police really clamped down and forbid such protests.

**SS:** Do think that we could say that there is a theatrics of austerity? So in a certain way you can't just say there is a problem with the budget but the thing is to perform it, like 'I am sorry but the White House tour is cancelled because we are out of money'. This sort of dramatisation of austerity becomes a certain way to rationalise and justify it, as opposed to actually argue for it.

**JM:** A theatricality of austerity. Do you mean a staging or falsity? Are you using theatricality in a negative sense?

**SS:** I would not see it as being purely negative, as much as just a way to bypass having to rationally argue for what is happening, almost like performance as a substitute for argument. Maybe that is a bit too simplistic.

**JM:** Certainly in the US the federal and state government have ignored the lessons of history in terms of economics and are persuaded that this is the right way to go. Is that theatrical or are they insincere? Perhaps these economists, who were in the federal government, should know better. They are in some sense, maybe in negative theatrical terms, just miming their own arguments and ignoring the history of their own models. One of the biggest frustrations with Obama is that he had an opportunity to do something very different, but in many ways he has ignored the progressive side of the Democratic Party. Perhaps he was never a progressive possibility, he was always a neoliberal, and we shouldn't have expected anything else, but for me he has been a disappointment.

**SS:** I remember there was an occupation of a window factory in Chicago, when the workers had not been paid. And as President-elect he said it was right that these workers occupy the factory. And I thought this is great he just said that worker occupation is a great idea. But then we saw who he appointed for the cabinet and it was like oh I remember these people, this was the '90s again.

**JM:** Getting back to Madison: what was so frustrating there was that the local Democrats were completely ignored by the DNC, even though Obama had come here and campaigned in Madison, and there was a great outpouring of support for him. It is interesting in terms of the timing of when they tried to recall the Governor. There were great debates between the DNC and the local Democrats about when to hold that election. It ended up being held in the summer when there were no students in town and when the voter turnouts would not be so great. I wonder in retrospect whether it would have been better to have it later, since Obama did so well and carried the state of Wisconsin. Coming back to your point, isn't there a theatricality of all sides, in terms of some sort of presentation and performance?

**SS:** Probably, yes. I would say if there is a theatrics of austerity it goes both ways. How the performance of contesting austerity measures is approached would be just as relevant to think about, as much as how they present themselves.

**JM:** Would it have that negative valence then? Because it depends on what side you are on, even if you recognise that it is a construction, you would say

nonetheless this side is right and that's whatever word that you would use-more authentic, or more politically progressive, I don't know what word you would use when you throw your die with this side. And then what happens to the recognition of that constructiveness? You say it is an artifice I will live with or embrace and affirm, rather than one I will turn around and criticise.

**SS:** It's really interesting because I'm thinking here about the moment in the Bush presidency where he lands on the aircraft carrier from a plane and declares it as mission accomplished. A lot of people were like 'this is pure theatre, it is all spectacle'. But then what was the Obama campaign but well crafted spectacle.

**JM:** I don't know if that is anything new. I mean Clinton, Reagan, Kennedy there is a long tradition. What was interesting about the mission accomplished is that it instantly was seen as a terrible mistake, a performative that spectacularly misfired. On the left it was: 'oh yeah, we are going to hold you to this thing and anything that happens after this will show that the mission is not accomplished'. Bush was one of many performative Presidents. So you would have to ask how do you evaluate these different artifices of performativity?

**SS:** Have you read the book that Brian Massumi wrote after he translated *A thousand plateaus, First and last emperors* (1993)? It begins with statues in China of the emperor. He has this picture of Reagan in China with one whose head has fallen off. So Reagan puts his head behind them. So Massumi writes about the two bodies of the emperor: the ancient notions of sovereignty and telemediated sovereignty. It is similar to your book, and you can tell he just finished translating *A thousand plateaus*, because it has this Deleuze-inflected language. He starts talking about lice and bugs, and it goes off in this very strange performative dimension, whilst still talking about sovereignty.

**JM:** It is interesting how the Republicans seem to be able to goof on themselves. That is Reagan goofing on himself. 'Start the bombing in five minutes', do you remember when he did that? And he's joking, and the left got outraged. I'm trying to think of Democrats that have been able to do that and what would the gesture be that would pull off something like standing behind the Emperor. Again it would be that kind of playful and why, can you think of, someone on the Democratic the left side who would attempt such a thing? In the States the conservatives did a really good job of making the word liberal a nasty word. But now it has finally turned and they are now seen as the crazy ones.

**SS:** You could say that it is just effective branding policy?

**JM:** But it is not just effective branding policy, it is a certain turn of the knife. Obama is incredibly well branded, but I don't know if there is this turn of the knife. Chavez would be an example. He would say things to just piss off everybody and yet rally his own troops. It would be interesting to do an analysis of where and when was the last similar gesture from a Democratic leader in the States. Truman?

#### **Part four: The university, pedagogy and DesignLab**

**SS:** I would like to bring this back to where we started. If the university is drastically changing then how could it find ways to relate to forms of self-organised learning that grow outside of it in a non-exploitative fashion and encourage them? One thing that we have seen in the past five or six years here in the UK in particular, is lots of free university projects, forms of learning and education occurring outside of the university, in ways that are actually more advanced and interesting than what happens inside of the university itself.

**JM:** I am not familiar enough with things that are completely outside of university, but I can talk about some of the projects that have been coming through the media studios. There is my colleague Nancy Buenger, who works in legal studies at UW Madison, and she is interested in the youth justice system. She has collaborated with our public library on a service-learning course where students work with youths in the juvenile justice system to make new media projects. There is also, within my department, the Odyssey project run by Emily Auerbach, which works with people on the south side of Madison who are very poor, to help them learn literacy skills and earn a degree. And Jim Burling, a current DesignLab teaching assistant from our Theater and Drama Department, has worked with young people through public libraries to read and discuss novels while designing and building scenes from the narrative in the online game Minecraft. So there is both reading and building – they build these incredible virtual environments. But I don't have extensive knowledge of things completely outside of the university.

**SS:** A lot of projects that are outside of the university are not completely outside – they have some connection.

**JM:** That's one argument for the smart media that DesignLab studies and supports: video essays, theory comix, graphic essays, audio narratives, etc. You work in new genres, you go to new venues and you reach new audiences. I think the scientists may be better at this than humanists. On our campus we have three communications departments, and one is called Life Sciences Communication,



and it is about figuring out how scientific knowledge gets into the world. They go out and interview farmers about what they know about global warming: where they get this information, and how accurate it is, and how it affects what they are doing. It is part of the Wisconsin Idea from the Progressive era: the idea that the university should serve the people of the state. In the contemporary world the Wisconsinites are everywhere, and so it becomes a global thing. So there is a long tradition of outreach through the University's Extension Program, which has offices across the state. Wisconsin is a big agricultural state, and the program helped disseminate specialised knowledge generated by the Agriculture school. I see the smart media work that I am doing now grows right out of this. It is not so much about educating people. That is the wrong formulation: 'oh I've got the knowledge and I'm going to go in and educate others'. It needs to be a more collaborative process.

Within the academy and many other institutions, there is a generational split around technology, where the ones that are supposed to be the masters and have the knowledge realise their mastery and knowledge pertain to old paradigms and infrastructures. There is a sense of disjunction and a recognition that we could learn more from students and young faculty. Graduate students are a key way into it because they are more tied to the digital. They can 'teach up' as research assistants to faculty and if they are teaching assistants they 'teach down'. I have been arguing that we should put much more effort into helping graduate students work in this new infrastructure of knowledge. I think of the university as the good ship Theseus but being rebuilt while at sea: it's out there sailing, it can't stop, and it is going to have to transform itself in very choppy waters, with austerity or without. After fifty years of protest and critical theory, the organisation of the universities remains pretty much the same while its infrastructure has been radically transformed. New topics and new people have been welcomed, certainly, but made to fit in departmental structures organised in very traditional, hierarchical ways that restrict flows of information, resources, and decision-making and make new, vital connections very difficult.

In terms of digitality and new network structures of knowledge, will the University be to digital culture as the Catholic Church was to science: it helps initiate a break in thought and then can't handle it institutionally. Today there are least two institutions educating young people: formal education system and popular culture. And the learning practices and value systems are often at odds with one another. My partner Caroline Levine (2011) has written about how professors are represented in popular culture, and it is not a pretty picture: we are mad scientists, bumble heads and lecherous. That sounds pretty awful until you see what happens to popular culture when it comes into the university. It is not valorised: it is taken apart and relentlessly critiqued. At least in the US, when

popular culture is brought in it is something to distinguish from true knowledge. It is doxa as opposed to episteme. But is there some kind of mashup? You could say that smart media is sort of a mashup of that, trying to move into more mediated forms but keeping the critical, and that's what the smart part is. Keeping conceptual discourses still happening but in a way that would connect other audiences.

**TE:** Could you say a little more about DesignLab?

**JM:** DesignLab is like a writing centre for new media projects. We offer no courses but support potentially any project from any department, and we help faculty and departments develop assignments and courses with smart media components. Smart media are emerging scholarly genres: anything that moves scholarship into other media. We've had crucial infrastructural support from our university. DesignLab is located in UW's busiest library, and any student can meet with our TAs for media design advice on media projects for classes or extra-curricular activities. We focus on conceptual and aesthetic issues and refer technical issues elsewhere. I stress that smart media supplement and reinscribe, but do not replace, traditional genres such as books and articles. Smart media opens up new ways to structure arguments and evidence for new audiences<sup>8</sup>.

DesignLab is itself a bit of a mashup at the institutional level. We're transversal: we're located in the Library with our nine TA consultants drawn from nine programs: Art, Curriculum and Instruction, Design Studies, English, Geography, Journalism & Mass Communication, Life Sciences Communication, Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies, and Theatre and Drama. We're funded by a tuition-based program called the Madison Initiative for Undergraduates and as such required to produce annual assessment reports.

Pedagogically, my approach comes out of a series of experiments called StudioLab, which I began while I was still at NYU, trying to get theatre people to work with media. I did one class 'Performing bureaucracies', where I had graduate students use new media to examine their individual experiences of bureaucracy in everyday life. And then, extrapolating from Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka*, I had them as groups create a minor bureaucracy. But frankly the performance students could only parody organisational performance, which is fine, but people do organise and do serious work with it. And DesignLab comes from these earlier experiments, but it is not limited to performance studies and the arts and humanities, it is meant to be generalisable. It is an embodiment of the cultural, organisational and technological, and this

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8 McKenzie (2012c) discusses DesignLab further and offers examples of students work.

displacement of the lecture machine, in one place. So it comes out of the book but I am scaling up and plugging into other things that people are doing with different pedagogies: providing a language and a set of services to help them move into different spaces too.

DesignLab has three missions. The primary mission is to democratise digitality, which I define as the global remediation of literate, visual, aural and numerate archives into networked databases and the accompanying changes in individual skills, cognitive patterns, and social organisation. The second, sub-mission is to democratise design, to make media design, graphic design, sound design, installation and performance design as commonplace as reading and writing. The third, deeper mission is to democratise experimental theory, to continue and expand the twentieth century media experiments by the avant-garde, by documentary filmmakers, by indigenous media groups and craft new modes of post-conceptual, post-ideational thought. And that is a tough one because that experimental theoretical moment in the academy was a very brief one and it is done sporadically.

**TE:** I am interested in how you are describing democratising theory because it sounds like it is tied to a spatial visual practice?

**JM:** The visual and spatial are crucial, as are other dimensions such as sound and interactivity. The idea is that there have been a series of attempts to theorise beyond the book. Sticking with avant-garde theoretical experiments, Walter Benjamin's *The arcades project* (1999) is probably one of the most interesting ones. The thing was never made, but it exists is this kind of utopian project. There are a number of other examples. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore's *The medium is the massage* (1967) book looks like a magazine: Fiore designed some great spreads, and McLuhan is doing this aphoristic theorizing. McLuhan also did an experimental record that came out at the same time (McLuhan, Fiore and Agel, 1968). In science, Benoît Mandelbrot, the mathematician behind chaos theory, wrote a book called *The fractal geometry of nature* (1982). It was not a traditional math book. It had giant beautiful computer graphics, equations, stories – and this strange text launched chaos theory. One thing that Mandelbrot says is that he had been doing this math for years and nobody would listen to him until computer graphics came along, and then he could show people what he was talking about. Avital Ronell's *The telephone book* (1989) has been made into a performance, dramatised. Such textual experimentation is a tough sell today, even to humanists, because they walked away from it a long time ago. I sometimes think that deconstruction paradoxically became the method used by literature and language departments' to ward off the eruption of gram and trace. They basically made it safe. The experiments didn't go outside of writing texts,

even when they were deconstructing the book. For me, the grammatological is a different mode to do something different than what deconstructivists were trying to do, and that's Gregory Ulmer's move. He has been doing this for almost thirty years. So when I was a student of his at Florida, we were the Florida School in juxtaposition to the Yale School<sup>9</sup>. The Yale School was doing by then rather safe literary deconstruction, and we were trying to do something else.

So the democratising part, hell, it's hard just to get people to do old theory. In the '80s, people were clambering to do theory, and it is much more difficult to do it now. Part of this is getting students to read theory the old way or new way or any way, and it could be that new, experimental ways will get them to do the old way. Certainly you need to have serious theoretical chops to do this. So some of the suspicions that I get with smart media is that, first, it is a dumbing down of theory or knowledge, 'Because you can't do in video or comics what you are doing in a forty-page paper'. This is the wrong comparison because these are different things. Abstracts are different from articles, and we produce them all the time. You have to recognise the limits of different forms and media genres. The second common objection is that smart media is against writing. It is not against writing but it is helping to reinscribe alphabetic writing within a different *mise-en-scène*. For me, this move comes from Antonin Artaud and Derrida's reading of Artaud, which inscribed it somewhere else, and also from Bertolt Brecht's call for theatre to both entertain and instruct. It is the same move. And finally the third objection, and this is a challenging one, is that there is not enough time to do this: that I am schooled up in the writing machine and I cannot possibly retool.

I am telling students and colleagues that we need to learn to play the old game and the new game. There is a real need now because we need to legitimate ourselves for different audiences and collaborators. We can't just go back and beat on the book and expect people to rally around the humanities because they are asking us 'so what?'. We need to tell them 'so what' in new, more persuasive ways. This experimentation I think could be useful for the arts and humanities in general, not just performance studies. Because it is a legitimation and perhaps an existential issue when we are being asked what is the value of the arts and humanities, and even the sciences. At UW, faculty are engaging with this in a really concrete way. What's the value and function of our research for communities and our society? If you go back to the Lyotard, I mean it's a dated book, but he called a lot of things. We are being called on to 'operationalise or else'. What is to be done? In the US, there is much stress on public research universities. I teach at a large, Big Ten research university, and like other public

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9 McKenzie (2007: 22-3) explores this experience at Florida.

universities, we're trying to figure out our place at this time. That's the big picture. I'm trying to see how the experiments I'm doing on a micro-level resonate with these larger demands, by scaling up frames and perspectives. That's how mutations go systemic. DesignLab is trying to help bring smart media and transversal research not just to those in performance studies, or even in the arts and humanities, but to all disciplines where, at the edges, other connections are possible. The genres, the new modes of thinking and acting, are actually already there, waiting to be connected. What did E.M. Forster say, 'only connect'? Well, almost.

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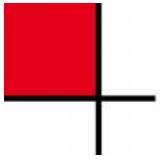
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## Life beyond work

Craig Willse

### review of

Kathi Weeks (2011) *The problem with work: Feminism, Marxism, antiwork politics, and postwork imaginaries*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. (PB, pp. 304, £14.99, ISBN 978-0822351122)

In *The problem with work*, Kathi Weeks issues a clarion call for the abandonment of moralistic pro-work politics. Rather than better work or better wages, Weeks asks us to imagine a life beyond work and the wage. Part polemic, part philosophical rumination, part political program, *The problem with work* revives neglected strands of Marxist analysis, including demands for less work or no work, demands for wages for housework, and demands for a basic income. In turn, it offers a feminist counter-tradition to a politics that would shift control of the means of production but leave in place an ethics of productivity. While the text does not take up what critical race and ethnic studies might also contribute to a renewed Marxism, we must think through those questions alongside those posed by Weeks.

Framing the political terrain of work, the introduction establishes anticapitalist attachments to work and its worthiness. For Weeks, in work we experience naked forms of domination and control. Despite this, the fact of work is not only unquestioned, but overvalued; work has achieved the status of moral good. Chapter 1 turns to Max Weber's classic *Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* to excavate the origins of this overvaluation of work. Weeks positions our contemporary version of Calvinism as 'productivist norms' (45), and here we see the radical stakes of the project. Rather than simply rescue work from capitalist



control, or from routinization and boredom, Weeks's repoliticization of work calls into question the worthiness of productivity. Why must our lives be productive?

To push this question forward, Weeks centres a feminist analysis of social reproduction over and above a classic Marxist analysis that accepts the wage relation's buying and selling of labour power as capital's lynchpin. Drawing from Mimi Abramovitz's vital formulation, Weeks argues that the family ethic remains essential 'for the role it plays in reproducing a stable and able workforce with little in the way of public funding' (64). For Weeks, though, feminist analysis of the family ethic and its concomitant gendered division of labour must not only call for freedom from family and equal opportunity for participation in wage labour markets. Rather, we must question the accepted status of work while attending to the contemporary operations of 'professionalization' across gendered and classed labour categories. From here, the work ethic's total permutation as professionalization imperatives may expose it to challenge:

Where attitudes are productive, an insubordination to the work ethic; a scepticism about the virtues of self-discipline for the sake of capital accumulation; an unwillingness to cultivate, simply on principle, a good "professional" attitude about work; and a refusal to subordinate all of life to work carry a new kind of subversive potential. (77)

With this denaturalizing of the work ethic in place, chapters 2, 3 and 4 visit Marxist and feminist anti-work trajectories. Weeks draws on Marxist autonomous traditions that insist not on better work, but less or no work. Weeks shows how autonomous Marxism departs from two apparently conflicted but actually connected strands. For the first, a modernization model, socialism perfects the capitalist mode of production. For the second, a humanist model, socialism offers freedom for individual self-expression and creativity but neither challenges work nor productivity. In contrast, the autonomous refusal to work names work itself – 'not private property, the market, the factory, or the alienation of our creative capacities' (97) – as our central concern.

Weeks then turns to the writings and campaigns of wages for housework. Here Weeks finds feminist antiwork politics that recognize the general condition of social reproduction and challenge the family ethic. Weeks notes that some liberal versions of wages for housework may actually accommodate rather than explode the twinned family and work ethics – securing women to domestic labour, and valorising through the wage domestic work of familial housekeeping, child-rearing, and sex. But Weeks unearths antiproduktivist possibilities as well:

... [F]eminists in the wages for housework movement rejected not only the capitalist but also the socialist remedies defended by other feminists at that time.

Wages for housework extended the autonomous Marxist critique of socialist production – a vision they saw as nothing more than the substitution of state control for private control over the same structure of production – into the field of reproduction. Socialism was understood as a program intended to rationalize production in the social factory, to perfect rather than transform the work society. (125)

Thus, in problematizing the received categories of Marxist analysis, feminist iterations of autonomism offer a more radically transformative vision.

Across its chapters, *The problem with work* cleanly distills its argument, guiding the reader along such that its cogent analysis is useful beyond the text. During my reading, two cases came immediately to mind: same-sex marriage debates and the ‘crisis’ of the university. Regarding the former, we can see the core conservativeness of the mainstream LGBT marriage push, as it has sought to advance this conjoined family ethic and work ethic (Kandaswamy, 2008). Advocates and mainstream media portray LGBT families as loving, hard-working citizens who simply deserve the just returns of their contributions to society. Thus, same-sex marriage campaigns promote the economic and social productivity of heteronormalized gay families rather than claim an inherent validity to any and all sexual practices and groupings. As many critics have pointed out, same sex marriage abandons poor and un- and under-employed queer people with no property or health benefits to share (Willse and Spade, 2005). Weeks’s framework highlights how a queer formulation of a less or no work ethic might differently produce cross socio-economic solidarities.

Weeks also helps us think through questions of academic labour. In the university we readily find an abundance of liberals, including Marxists, celebrating working too much. I recently read a very moving and helpful account of one tenure-track faculty member’s efforts to balance life and work demands (Nagpal, 2013); that the formula arrived at limited working hours to fifty a week points not to the author’s co-optation, but to the absurd conditions of professionalized academic labour. The university’s speed-up has been passed down to graduate students facing full-time employment requirements that might have been reserved for tenure or promotion in earlier eras. Even the least precarious, tenured and tenure-track faculty, face mounting workloads, including more students in classes, more classes, more advisees, more assessment and reporting duties, and higher publishing demands. Greater instability accompanies the speed-up, as tenure track lines at some universities become de facto extended visiting appointments; the supposed security of tenure-track lines has been exposed as especially fragile for women of colour (Evans, 2007).

The last point brings us to the most obvious limitation of Weeks's analysis – the failure to engage critical race scholarship on labour and neoliberalism. *The problem with work* most compels when Weeks takes up feminist lineages as generative, rather than corrective, as in the analysis of wages for housework and the argument about social reproduction. Black, critical ethnic, and Native studies might play a similarly useful role here (e.g., Harris, 1993; Robinson, 2000; Ferguson, 2003; Hong, 2006; Simon, 2011, to name a few). What does it mean for decades of scholarship insisting on the social and material generativity of racial formations to be put aside? Obviously, a review of any monograph can always point out omissions, but here we might note a few places the analysis falls short in its refusal to take seriously that social reproduction within racial capitalism is always a racial project.

Weeks briefly considers hired domestic help (172-74) in relation to a feminist demand for shorter hours. Weeks rightfully rejects this as a private solution to a social organization of time, work, and production. The question of hired domestic help cannot be thought through, however, without situating it in historical trajectories of slavery, antiblack racism, and racialized migration regimes. Foundational work in Black feminist theory has engaged with domestic labour, and women of color feminism has shown that the public/private divide (the basis for Weeks's rejection of this option) does not operate for white and Black women in the same ways; if white women have struggled to get out of the home and into the workforce, a Black struggle in the white supremacist US has been for access to private, domestic/family space. The paradigm-shifting writings of the Combahee River Collective and *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press* brought this argument forward decades ago (see, e.g., Smith, 1983). Further, the private sphere of white female domestication has been produced out of the labour of women of colour, for whom others' homes have often been the only available sites for (highly exploitative, under-the-table) waged labour. Patricia Hill Collins, whom Weeks cites elsewhere, recognized the category of domestic worker as so central to African American female life that Collins theorized the social position of Black women in sociology as an extrapolation of this role, giving us the concept of 'outsider within' (Collins, 1986). The questions of family time and family ethic carry not only different but perhaps incommensurate histories from the vantages of white, Black, Native and migrant women of colour, what Grace Hong has identified as the 'ruptures of American capital' (Hong, 2006). Contemporary organizing work, such as Domestic Workers United and their Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights, might provide instructive and generative examples here. What might Weeks's demand for shorter hours look like starting from the position of racialized waged domestic work and abstracting up from there?

Critical race and ethnic studies would also help fill out and complicate Weeks's brief engagement with sex worker organizing, which Weeks criticizes for valorising work. While that might be true at an immediate rhetorical level, here a more sustained engagement with actually existing social movements might be helpful. Experiences of sex work are of course highly stratified by race, class, and gender identity. People of colour and trans people are more likely to engage in street-based sex work, and hence are more vulnerable to police harassment, violence, and arrest. Sex work in the US cannot be understood separate from our racialized-gendered prison regime (Davis, 2003; Stanley and Smith, 2011; Woods, 2013). When I think of the most compelling cases of sex worker organizing, these are efforts led by women and trans people of colour who are fighting simultaneously against police brutality, imprisonment, and denial of healthcare and health resources (such as Women with a Vision in New Orleans, or HIPS in Washington, DC). The recognition of sex work *as* work offers a platform for depathologization such that these other demands can be made, demands that might be broadly construed as workplace safety given our capitalist context, and might be thought of as life entitlements in others. While *The problem with work* does not claim to be a social movement history, sex worker and prison abolition movements have generated discursive reflections on the relationships of work, gender, and sexuality that certainly could be engaged with here.

Thinking about how to overcome these limits, we might consider the final chapters of the text. Weeks closes the monograph with a defence of utopic thinking. Weeks compellingly insists on a vision of demands not bound to the practical, while also not conceding that territory. For Weeks, a demand is a worldview-making practice; it calls attention to received and accepted ideas about our world – for example, that we must work. Demands help reframe our current circumstances, and when we mobilize effectively around them, we begin to envision and build a world in which bizarre, utopic demands would make perfect sense. In the epilogue, titled 'A life beyond work', Weeks hypothesizes a basic income demand predicated not on the work we do, but on the fact of our living: 'what if basic income were to be seen as income not for the common production of value, but for the common reproduction of life?' (230). While Michel Foucault makes just a few brief appearances, in this proposal of utopic demands, *The problem with work* offers fruitful contact points between Marxist political economy and a Foucaultian biopower framework. Here Weeks extends and radicalizes the focus on social reproduction beyond a narrow articulation and towards a broad category of life itself.

A conversation with Black studies might expand the possibilities of this demand further. In 'Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the slave in civil society?', Frank Wilderson begins with a simple and profound observation: the Black slave,

foundational to the emergence of a world capitalist system, is constituted outside of capital because the slave, unlike the worker, is not produced through the wage relation. The slave is not an interpellated worker; the slave has no labour power from which to be alienated and in turn unalienated. Rather, the enslaved person is a thing, meant to be accumulated and die. From there Wilderson argues that the revolutionary subject of Marxist analysis, extended by Gramsci and hailed in various civil society counter-movements, precludes the slave and her Black heirs as well. If the worker is the revolutionary subject, the slave can never be the subject of revolution, of history, only its object.

Wilderson illustrates pointedly the stakes of articulating Marxism through Black studies. While Weeks shifts us from work, that shift must account for the lives cut out by a work model in the first place. Reading Wilderson and Weeks together suggests a way forward. Wilderson writes,

Thus, the black subject position in America is an antagonism, a demand that can not be satisfied through a transfer of ownership/organisation of existing rubrics; whereas the Gramscian subject, the worker, represents a demand that can indeed be satisfied by way of a successful War of Position, which brings about the end of exploitation. The worker calls into question the legitimacy of productive practices; the slave calls into question the legitimacy of productivity itself. (Wilderson, 2003: 231)

As I suggested with the case of sex work above, what would it mean to begin with this formulation and abstract up? In moving to social reproduction, Weeks enters a terrain that Wilderson marks as that of slavery and anti-blackness: productivity, or life itself outside the relationality of wage and ideology. In shifting from capitalism/anti-capitalism to biopower, Weeks argues that we achieve neither innocence nor outsidership. Accounting for racialized cuts within a landscape of social reproduction – for example, waged white work – might further radicalize Weeks's insights (i.e. Roediger, 1999).

A final challenge to Weeks is offered by analysis of the ways in which capitalism has been drawn into subjectless valuation (Clough et al, 2007). Life itself, before or beyond its disciplinary organization into labouring classes, has already been made productive for capital; this is why Kaushik Sunder Rajan, for example, speaks of biocapital (Rajan, 2006). From this view, capital may be happy for us to refuse work, as our biological matter already generates value, as stem cell lines, as affective states. But Wilderson's provocation complicates this and for me unlocks another potential in *The problem with work*, starting from the position of the constitutiveness of antiblack racism.

*The problem with work* is a rigorous and challenging read. I enjoyed the effort of thinking through it and with it, and even in moments against it. It is one of those

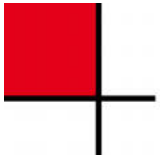
rare texts that immediately propose lives beyond itself, and I look forward to continue engaging its arguments and provocations.

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## The Christie phenomenon

Stephen Parliament

### review of:

Cynthia L. Negrey (2012) *Work time: Conflict, control, and change*. Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA, USA: Polity Press. (PB, pp. 200, £15.99, ISBN 978-0745654263)

‘Aunt Betsey’, announces Christie as she prepares to leave home as a young lady in her late teens, ‘there’s going to be a new Declaration of Independence’. She means a declaration of her own independence as she decides that she is coming of age and is, ‘...going to take care of myself’, thereafter finding employment as a servant, actress, governess, companion (in the old fashioned sense), and seamstress, pursuing a feminist search for survival and fulfillment that symbolically is still going on. Louisa May Alcott’s surrogate in self-discovery, Christie, is the central character in her fictitious though highly autobiographical novel, *Work: A story of experience* (Alcott 1873, 1994), which describes the search for the boundary-less life of work and personal satisfaction. She has yet to arrive, as Cynthia Negrey reveals and as many of us know from personal experience.

Cynthia L. Negrey’s new book, bluntly entitled *Work time: Conflict, control, and change*, was written as if responding to observations posed by the editors of *ephemera* last February, in the issue ‘Free work’ (*ephemera*, 13:1, 2/13). As Armin Beverungen and others pose in the abstract to the issue:

The relationship between freedom and work is a complex one. For some, they are considered opposites: ‘true’ freedom is possible only once the necessity of work is removed, and a life of luxury attained. For others, work itself provides an opportunity to achieve a sense of freedom and authenticity.

Prof. Negrey documents the struggle between these conflicting views of work with methodical diligence and an extraordinary massing of information.

This review will use her foundation in the sociology of work to ask the questions: if and how academic sociology can be utilized to frame a revolutionary new 'becoming' and assist in worker inquiry as to the next steps for revolutionary social transformation. Negrey's call for a new political economy of work time is responsive to the question, if raised in the right setting.

### **Taking control of our time**

Reading Cynthia Negrey's exquisitely detailed new book on our aversion to, and desperate need for, work, entitled *Work time: Conflict, control, and change*, makes me want to get up from my desk, plow the back forty, and build a new house. This is not the message of the book, but spending all this time just thinking about the number of hours in our life and how we spend them makes me realize how I manage to waste them. So stop reading this review and go do something, or better yet, to be fully informed, read Cynthia's book, then go do something. And fully informed you will be. In less than 200 pages plus notes and an excellent Reference section, you will know how our desire to be productively employed is changing, not just in the last decade, but since man first hunted and woman cooked on fire; and you will be provided with an extensive look at the impact of women on the workforce.

If we accept that value is derived from labor, the history of the world is determined by the struggle to mobilize and control workers, and the response of those workers who want to balance survival with personal satisfaction. After years of fighting for workers' rights, a reasonable work week, fair wages, and safe working conditions, new needs are entering the calculation. More women in the workforce are making employers pay attention to the need for flexible hours during the day, fewer days of work during the week, and wages reflecting level of responsibility and skill rather than gender and seniority. But the attention that employers are paying is not sympathetic but rather strategic: whatever workers want, management will use that as a means of barter and control. The underlying theme is power over the terms of work, and thereby, over the benefits derived from production.

On second thought, don't get up and plow the back forty. Read the book. And then go organize your colleagues at work, if you have not already done so.

As of this writing in mid-2014, the average length of the work week has dropped to 34.4 hours, while approximately 635,000 jobs have been added to the



employment base in the months of February, March and April. Those two numbers connote a dramatic increase in part-time employment in the U.S., so dramatic that we now have 278,000 part-time employees seeking full-time work, and still 11.7 million available workers are unemployed, or 4.4 million more than six months ago.

Prof. Negrey saw it coming. 'This trend', she observes, 'was setting up a structural condition whereby there would not be enough full-time jobs for everyone who wanted them'. (3) The complicating factor is that not everyone wants full time employment. As she explains, '...some workers, especially women, want part-time jobs to integrate employment and family care'. Some workplace reforms have mitigated the desire of women for more flexible hours such as job sharing, compressing the work week into fewer days, and flexible hours during the day. Management resists, even if they know that these adjustment to the terms of work would have a positive effect on morale: hence, management retains control and can use these terms to bargain over wages.

Earlier labor battles with management resulted in the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 that reduces required hours to 40 per week with higher pay for overtime. Management wanted to squeeze more hours out of every worker. The response from industrial labor unions was to fight for reasonable hours per day and days per week. The working class either organized at the workplace, if possible, or progressive legislation tried to protect workers from abusive time requirements.

These class struggles of the mid-1900s are now being supplanted by a new class of politics: the 'product of women's activism in the labor movement'. What you will get from this book is a broad examination of the changing dynamic of work time and reform activism.

The breadth of her approach is evident at the start. We don't begin with the normal discussion of work as it evolved during the Industrial Revolution. Prof. Negrey begins with work and time among hunter-gatherers and nomads, who moved according to the seasons, sunrises and sunsets, and a pattern of natural time during the day. She writes with elegance and sincerity about family, food and leisure. Having worked with nomadic Cashmere goat and camel herders in the southern Gobi Desert of Mongolia, this writer knows the connection that nomads make between staggering changes in the seasonal environment and the work requirements. Work and time in nomadic life is measured in two long and painful seasons of extreme cold with almost no snow, and brutally hot summers in an endless search for water and grass. This life still exists in many parts of Mongolia and Central Asia, in Saharan Africa, and parts of the Arctic Circle.

Work and time becomes a philosophical schema of animal, plant and human life in a balance so delicate that the idea of money almost has no place. Yet this schema is being violently upset by extraordinarily wealthy mining interests backed by Rio Tinto, an international mining investment firm in the UK. In the spirit of Weberian comparative sociology, Prof. Negrey expands her analysis of work time conditions in the U.S. to a comparison of the situation in other industrial and developing countries.

Some members of society do not have to work because they live off the work of others. Such a position in society is not dignified to anyone except themselves. Others are not able to work for a variety of reasons. For those of us who can work, it is a privilege and an honor to help support those who cannot, with the constant threat of unemployment hovering in our opaque awareness.

For those of us who are able to work, and want to, the constant challenge is to find work that provides a living wage within a time frame that leaves room for family and leisure. Our goal is to earn the highest possible wage per hour worked and to be occupied for just the right amount of time that provides the total number of hours in a year that aggregate to the annual wage that we want. To accomplish this balance, we make choices about occupation, salary level, part-time or full-time positions, and doing something that pays what we need but is less satisfying personally. These choices are made available to us by those who control the industries for which the society in which we live retain a comparative advantage over other countries that are trying to provide the same service or product.

The dynamic that workers face in making choices about time, wage and occupation, and the way those choices are structured or imposed is the subject of Ms. Negrey's book on *Work time*. She agilely describes the chess game of management and employees over time in as the needs of industry and of workers changes: industry forcing employees to work long hours, then legislatures limiting work hours for children and women, then unions wanting to leave hours the results of collective bargaining agreements instead of being imposed by law, then the slowly merging realization of management that having many more people each working fewer hours as part-time employees actually has its advantages, such as the avoidance of benefits and the absence of union representation.

The method of presentation is full emersion in the anthropology of time and labor. As you might guess, hunter-gatherers were not concerned with hourly wage rates. Nomadic cultures organized time first by season and then by sunlight. The advent of capitalism brought the wage-labor exchange as the

dynamic governing work time. As we invent new forms of production and cooperative enterprise, we may replace the wage-for-labor exchange with the project-for-fulfillment exchange, but that will come later in this review.

Early in the book, the adjective 'work' as a modifier of 'time' merges into a new noun, which is what the writer wants us to realize from the start: 'work-time' a concept distinguishing it from free time and family time? Work-time is an idea, a construct of modern capitalist society, a schema around which we organize our society and which the managers of cost-conscious organizations manipulate the options available to workers. As the average number of hours a week has declined over the last few decades from 48 hours per week to the current 34, a gender split has emerged distinguishing the desires of women from male workers.

We now have a mismatch between real hours available and the number of hours desired. Male workers generally want more hours per week, but employers are not providing them; and women want fewer hours per week, but prefer that the reduction in work-time is accomplished by working fewer hours per day. Employers are taking advantage of the conflicts over work and time by being able to reduce wages and remove benefits as part-time work increases: men will take what they can get, and women are looking for fewer hours. Managers are in control.

Prof. Negrey discusses a number of reforms in the workplace that will alleviate this imbalance between workers and employers in the wage-labor exchange. Give women the hours per week they need but reduce the hours per day; increase vacation time to provide for family needs; increase the availability of child care; and complete the move to universal health care. These are the liberal reformist approaches that challenge budgets and are rejected by conservative politicians, but the argument must be framed as family values trumping market values as a strategy to reach conservatives. The research agenda needs to look at the intersection of work and leisure, work and community engagement, and other lifestyle issues. Negrey thinks that an especially significant research subject is how workers can maintain a boundary between work and non-work time, with the crux of the matter in controlling the difference between salaried time and hourly wages. Given the number of ways that employers can manipulate hourly work patterns, a salaried job is subject to greater time abuse.

The most common approach to time flexibility is part-time employment, which so far has provided greater manipulative advantages to employers than to workers.

## The new political economy of work time: flexibility and degendering work: experiences in the United States and Western Europe

Negrey's book opens with this distinction between work and personal time, and what are the customs, norms, and rules that govern the distinction. She observes that productivity is comparable between the U.S. and Europe, but the European work week is shorter due partly to more vacation and paid holidays in Europe, indicating the Europeans are willing to sacrifice paid work time for more leisure time. Using good comparable data of developed economies from 2007 to 2009, only 6 of 33 countries had an increase in average annual work time. For both the US and the UK annual work hours declined; but all OECD countries worked fewer hours in 2009 than the US average; and the UK had 23.9% of its work force at a part-time rate compared to 14.1% for the US.

Some of the explanation for the difference between the US and European countries in hours worked is the degree of regulation in the EU, with little to no regulation in the US. The consequences are most severe on working women in the US compared to women in Europe where leaves are paid and of longer duration.

Many suggestions new policies and programs that would help workers are listed, with a main conclusion being that the distinction between paid time and unpaid household work is actually a gender-based distinction. A masculine orientation would call for a shorter work week; while a female approach would reduce the number of hours worked during the day to provide for daily family responsibilities. Policies that come closest to a broader political strategy include a post-industrial New Deal through self-management of time; sharing work and valued care responsibilities; and early childhood education to help dissolve paid gender specialization. Looking at models in European countries, the author refers to some delightful jargon, such as 'high-road flexibilization' which means degendering part-time work and giving employees the authority to set their own schedule. The conclusion that collective action through labor organization combined with state intervention in current labor laws are '...at their social limits'. These solutions are not part of an emergent political economy that the author foresees in restructuring work-time. In thinking about the new political economy, the author asks the pregnant question leading to the strategic discussion below: 'what role will you play in shaping it?' (193).

Can *Work time* be both a legislative agenda and the basis for workers to design a more political movement to take control of the workplace?

**The fundamental worker inquiry: What role can workers play in moving from legislative lists to taking control?**

The options for reform are detailed, documented, and explained as a blueprint for legislative action, but underlying the discussion is the pervasive and unaddressed issue of control and a strategy of deployment.

Amit Rai confronts academic sociology with the observation that, ‘The focus on the struggles in the knowledge-based sectors of the economy results in an overall neglect of class struggles’ (Rai, 2013: 184). He notes that autonomous living labour is qualitatively different from the entrepreneur’s mode of capturing or accumulating cognitive capital, and has political value political value, ‘...in its unceasing lines of flight that create conjunctions between radical practices of communisation – potentializing, anomalous, and experimental forms of life that are no longer subsumable within capital’s relations of measure’ (*ibid.*: 186). In a concluding statement, Rai summarizes his writing and that of other contributors to the same issue:

This is precisely where many of the contributors note that the neo-liberal educational institutions become sites of struggle over measure and value and a veritable laboratory for autonomy itself... At stake is the relationship between the time of capital accumulation and the time of politics... But we shouldn’t subsume the time of autonomy within a presentist temporal disposition. We would do well to recall here a key passage from Deleuze (a constant point of reference throughout this volume) who urged a practice of duration in the interests of a time to come:

Rai’s reference to Deleuze captures the transition that must occur between studying the past and informing the future. ‘Becoming isn’t part of history; history amounts [to] only the set of preconditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to “become”, that is, to create something new’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). The historical past is the study of how revolutions turn out; re-configuring the future involves ‘people’s revolutionary becoming’. The uses of the past constitute preconditions for the future transformation and are left behind only in the sense that social transformation requires a new set of relationships among workers and production, mindful of the previous relationships that must be deconstructed.

The classroom as a laboratory of autonomous living labour is a deep thread in the connection between future workers and the neo-liberal educational institutions that think they are preparing students for conventional occupations, but, if infiltrated correctly, can be the experimental site for autonomist re-configuration.

Rai's call for the classroom to be a laboratory for autonomy is fundamental to avoiding Marx's second type of alienation from corporate society, 'alienation from others' (Meszaros, 1970). The Jungian educator and therapist Clifford Mayes proposes a pedagogy that directly addresses formation of a laboratory for democratic process as a means of removing Marx's second form of alienation in which

Objectification and excessive competition (can) destroy the heroic educational ideal of a vibrant community of mutually respectful dialogue in the classroom... The classroom should be a laboratory for democracy. (Mayes 2010)

If we have an extensive description of possible programs and policies that would de-gender and flexibilize work, how can we start talking about it with young or even potential new workers? Where does the initiative for a re-configuration of work come from? Rai's phraseology above is a good starting point: the classroom as a laboratory of autonomous living labour; Mayes' classroom as a laboratory of removing our alienation from others; Paulo Freire's lifetime commitment to education as politics (Freire 2005) and Judith Suissa's concern for, '...the status of the connection between anarchist ideology and non-coercive pedagogy is one which still demands careful theoretical treatment' (Suissa 2010: 149).

Taking an agenda of workers controlling their own time, environment and production into a classroom that is comprised of potential new workers is one of many places to start. This is a personal strategy for this writer, as much as an expansion on the review of Prof. Negrey's book. This is a personal aside, but I think relevant to the discussion. My life's work is in building cooperatives, from housing for low income families, food stores, day care centers, health care clinics, and community development organizations, all of which create a mechanism for workers and consumers to own the means through which they derive essential goods and services. Now I teach: as a teaching fellow with Oakland Unified Schools District, as the licensed teacher of severely disabled special education students who did not, and mostly never will, obtain a high school degree. I was their instructor, or more accurately, their guide in moving from school to life on the streets of Oakland. Rough territory. All they really wanted was to learn how to navigate the city in safety and to find and hold a job; as a current instructor in a two-year technical college system in northern Wisconsin where my students want to learn to navigate life, find and hold a job that they enjoy; and at the University of Wisconsin River Falls in the graduate professional and educational school, working with students who want to safely navigate the world, teach English as a second language overseas, explore, and find and hold a job that they enjoy. You notice that, regardless of mental capacity and educational level, they all want the same thing; and the vehicle, I believe, is the classroom laboratory of living labour.

If we better understand how employers use the divisions of gender and race to keep workers fighting among ourselves, we can submerge the issue of class into oblivion, to the advantage of employers and owners, who are solely interested in cheap labor. The classroom, through field work, observation, and organizing, can reveal these imposed distinctions that are so prevalent. As Steven Peter Vallas citing other research, in his recent study of work that is more theoretically sociological and anthropological than Negrey's, though perfectly compatible with it, '...these two axes of inequality and subordination are commonly conjoined in highly complex ways that defy any efforts to study them separately' (Vallas 2013).

The broad agenda now is to place race and gender in the employer's perspective, for all new workers to understand that employers will use any divisions available to turn workers against one another, to keep them begging for suitable work conditions that will never be fully granted so as to retain power over them, and to work with lackey legislators to guarantee less than full employment so that the cost of labor is permanently cheap. Those are sociological issues that can be researched and explained.

Then the classroom in special education, tech college and teacher training at the university level must be aimed at building cooperative structures in which workers own their own means of providing goods and services. It is not utopian; it is practical; it is done; and can be done for the entire society if we build it into our pedagogy of autonomous livelihood.

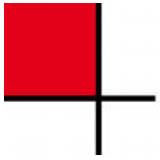
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## How I learned to stop worrying and love finance

Christian De Cock

### review of

Brett Scott (2013) *The heretic's guide to global finance: Hacking the future of money*. London: Pluto Press. (PB, pp. 262, £11.50, ISBN 9780745333502)

Despite my dislike of the topic, I began to nose around it with a mixture of repugnance and fascination, like a substance abuser circling around the long-denied admission of his own addiction. (Powers, 2005: 614).

How can I recognize this forbiddingly foreign totality as my own doing, how may I appropriate it and make it my own handiwork and acknowledge its laws as my own projection and my own praxis? (Jameson, 2009: 608).

A heretic's guide to finance? Hacking money? What could Brett Scott possibly mean by this? Is this just an(other) unfortunate case of mixed-up metaphors? I have to admit I picked up this book with a certain degree of trepidation. But quite quickly I got drawn into a pretty compelling narrative. The hacking metaphor is central to the structure and purpose of the book so deserves a bit of 'unpacking'. For Scott, hacking is about 'an action that combines an act of rebellion with an act of creative re-wiring' (8). It involves 'using the language of mainstream finance to open small breaches in an existing structure' (208). He thus distances himself from the way hacking is commonly presented, 'as a form of malicious disruption, normally involving computers' (*ibid.*). Hacking in the sense used here is about taking things apart, seeing how they work, and then using this knowledge to reassemble things in new and more interesting ways. It is about gaining 'access to a system in order to develop an internal sense for how to work it to your advantage or to play with it' (97). This requires developing 'curiosity

and empathy for the diverse human components of financial systems' (*ibid.*). As Scott emphasizes using a computer analogy, 'The person who dislikes computers will never be a computer hacker'. Finance can be 'rock and roll' he believes; it can be charged with 'activist energy... with artistic energy... with ecological energy' (213). Energy is very much what runs through this profoundly affirmative book. Indeed, Scott seems to be mindful of Marx's injunction that we need to combine a politics of revolt with a 'poetry of the future' (cf. Jameson, 2011: 90), injecting a sense of futurism and excitement in the discursive struggles of the left. This energy-infused hacking metaphor very much underpins the entire book.

The *heretics guide* consists of three parts, each containing two chapters. The hacker approach of *exploring* (Part I: emphatically getting to know the nuances of systems), *jamming* (Part II: seeking out the systems' vulnerabilities and exposing them) and *building* (Part III: creatively recombining the elements of systems to create something new) provides a very tight framework for the book. Part I offers a hugely enjoyable, technically knowledgeable and yet subversive read<sup>1</sup>. It is a fantastic introduction to ground level processes of our 'financial times', taking in everything from corporate banking to derivatives, to private equity. The denotations are precise but often carry interesting and quite subversive connotations and interesting anecdotes and stories from the author's own experience as derivatives broker and campaigner. The neat hacking structure comes somewhat under strain in the second part. Chapter 3, *financial culture hacking*, is still very much about unpacking and understanding finance – Scott's emphasizes the webs of knowledge and the importance of information flows that much of finance relies upon<sup>2</sup> – rather than the promised 'jamming'. Throughout these first three chapters the reader will find a general sense of excitement about finance as something we can get close to and understand. Scott fully takes on board the slogan of the *Financial Times* newspaper that 'We Live in Financial Times'<sup>3</sup> (viz. De Cock et al., 2009: 8). Our life world is fully mediated by financial

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- 1 I very much appreciated the attention to detail when discussing the key players; for example when pointing out that technically speaking after the global financial crisis there no longer exist 'pure' investment banks (49). Scott's idea of an alternative CFA – the Chartered Financial Activist – is a nice example of the mischievous humour deployed.
  - 2 It reminds me of a recent conversation I had about the recruitment process at a major global bank. After the first interview for a (senior) job in the risk management department the applicant was told that in the second interview he would be quizzed about a new project in the bank in question, information about which was not in the public domain. His task was to use all his personal networks to find out about the project (which remained unspecified in the first interview).
  - 3 Scott suggests that reading the *Financial Times* each day is an incredibly effective way for learning the language of finance (35). I would add that a close reading of the *Financial Times* is also a useful way of mapping the fundamental contradictions that

systems and simply denouncing finance from a moralizing point of view, perhaps in the hope of preserving a few enclaves still untouched by the financial juggernaut, is a profoundly conservative move. These ‘financial times’ are simply what we have assembled for ourselves to live in. Too often, and especially in the context of the global financial crisis, we have fallen prey to a sullen resentment at ‘banksters’. It is precisely this ‘pervasive insider-outsider dichotomy that is itself a major source of power for an entrenched mainstream financial regime’, Scott suggests (4). He holds up Louis Theroux’s television programmes as an example of how we should approach finance: ‘He’s simply curious and open. He listens, and people open up to him’ (98). He opposes this as a more useful alternative to the ‘banker-bashing as an attempt to lash out at a system that one appears powerless to act against’ (96). Of course, there is always the danger of ‘cognitive capture’ Scott realizes, but the ‘process of flying by night on the dark side’ can be serious fun:

I could literally feel my thinking shift, pulled along by the emotional currents that come with building such relationships [with finance professionals]... It’s like deliberately electrocuting yourself to develop an emotional theory – or intuition – about electricity... As I put myself in alien situations I was disrupting my pre-existing world of social relationships. (112-113)

This reflection reminded me somehow of Father Urritia Lacroix, the protagonist of Roberto Bolaño’s (2003) delightful novella *By night in Chile*, who is called upon to instruct General Augusto Pinochet and a few of his generals in Marxist doctrine, as the generals need to know how far their enemies will go. Know thy enemy indeed! It is only halfway through chapter 4 of *The heretics guide* (141) that we get some serious forays into ‘activism’ territory, although holding up as example activist Hedge Funds like TCI can be a bit tricky conceptually. The section on food speculation (pp. 150-160) is insightful in building our understanding of an important phenomenon but as ‘economic circuitbending’ (as the chapter title promises) it seems somewhat tame. The final part has some excellent sections on environmental finance, social finance, and ‘the limitations of doing good by doing well’ (205) but again these sections do not always fit that well into the tight ‘hacker’ structure the introduction promised.

The limitations of hacker interventions are reflected in the qualifications Scott often expresses when introducing them. To point to just a few examples:

It’s a slightly tongue in cheek idea... (114)

It’s a slightly cheeky idea, but it could develop organically... (148)

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permeate and make up finance. For an example of such a mapping exercise see De Cock (2009).

It's hard to know what the potential might be... (162)

The idea was always more symbolic than practical... (197)

Absurd? No more absurd than current investment banks (216)

Almost inevitably the critique Scott directs at others – for example when suggesting that the breaches the Yes Men open up by embarrassing big corporates quickly close up as they don't confuse anyone for too long (110); or in his delightful discussion of the limitations of the actions of 'reformed bankers' [203-207] – can easily be leveled at this book too. Yes, exploring the apparent darkness of finance can create a feeling of liberation (245), and 'unpacking' the financial system into its components can be empowering at times, but it is hard to see how the existing initiatives he describes and the experiments he suggests can resist being either dismissed as absurd, being co-opted by the financial system, or avoid simply fading out. This is not necessarily a weakness of the writing, more an effect of the material the *Heretics guide* is dealing with and the particular stance Scott is taking vis-à-vis this material. The truism that every representation is always partial very much applies here. Every attempt at representation will be a mixture of success and failure: some features will be foregrounded, others neglected or even misrepresented. Various issues, themes and facets certainly remain underexplored in this book (e.g. Private Equity gets two pages devoted to it, Bitcoin gets just over a page<sup>4</sup>). Yet, the more substantial point about representation to make here is that we live in a particular social totality (of which Finance, with a capital F, makes up much of the texture), which is never visible as such (only in its component parts and then in a fragmentary way). Following Jameson (2009), this social totality is not an entity but rather a contradiction, and therefore cannot be imagined as a kind of static object. From within this totality, it is impossible to conceive how we can imagine another one.<sup>5</sup> One cannot simply picture Finance, let alone a different Finance. Every representation, as in the *Heretics guide*, is effectively a literary experiment, a *Darstellung*. What Scott calls an 'unpacking' of finance is really a way of putting this together in some form in order to gain a glimpse of the Real that we have somehow assembled and that we live in. He performs this bricolage particularly well but readers should always remember that this book can offer no more than a particular glimpse. In very much emphasizing individual agency and the positive

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4 But Scott has an excellent introduction to Bitcoin on his blog:

<http://suitpossum.blogspot.co.uk/2013/04/how-to-explain-bitcoin-to-your.html>.

5 Scott, in a rare explicit acknowledgement of the limiting effects of structure on agency, posits that 'Looking forward, something may appear crazy because we cannot envisage how it might be supported given the existing social structures – like trying to imagine Spotify when you've only experienced a cassette player. Thus the answer to the question "Where is your alternative?" should be "Who knows? We're experimenting"' (212).

valence of finance – ‘Depending on one’s inclination, the individualism or aggression of the [financial] sector can be portrayed positively in terms of innovation, freedom and adventure...’ (119) – Scott could be accused of projecting a set of political possibilities which do not really exist or encouraging actions which are far more dangerous than his exuberant narrative suggests. Should we really start messing with vulture funds in a playful way (cf. 169)? The people involved are probably not your average city professional, but rather more like some characters out of *Heart of darkness* described later in the book in the context of monetizing carbon sinks (193). Perhaps I can add my own little anecdote to the many stories offered in this book. In the mid-1990s I was working for a few months in Sofia as part of a large EU funded project aimed at restructuring the Bulgarian banking sector. Whilst my own job within the National Bank was relatively uneventful, colleagues who were working on the accounts of some private banks with perhaps too much zeal were not so lucky. One day they were offered a ‘free’ car journey to the deep Bulgarian countryside, several hours drive away from Sofia. They were stripped to their underwear and left with the unambiguous advice: ‘next time: bang bang!’ It took them two days to get back to Sofia and they left the country soon afterwards. The husband of another colleague came to a more tragic end. After ignoring two warnings ‘not to meddle’ he had a fatal car accident. The police investigation revealed that the car had been sabotaged. More recently the story of the ‘Arctic 30’ serves as a reminder that ‘flying by night on the dark side’ or noble deeds of activism, however justifiable they may be, are not *just* ‘shit-stirring’ adventures (31). Messing with powerful interests – and finance certainly has those – can be bloody dangerous. We certainly should be wary of falling too deeply in love with the idea of disrupting the finance game. Love can also hurt, Dr. Strangelove!

A final point, which is worth exploring briefly, is the notion of ‘the popular’, in that the stated aim of *The Heretics guide* is to build a more democratic financial system. Perhaps the relation between finance and the popular is a bit more complex than Scott’s proposition that we simply have to ‘take back’ and popularize finance. In a recent book Stäheli (2013:13) suggests that rather than finance being an entity divorced from and in opposition to the popular, the latter is inscribed deeply in the functioning of the financial system: ‘The popular in the economy, then, is not an external force that directs itself as an anti-capitalist movement against hegemonic economic structures. Rather, the popular is a constitutive element of and for the functioning of the financial system’ (*ibid.*). Finance has always needed to produce its own popular side in order to function, but in doing so simultaneously acquired a number of problems and vulnerabilities that it must endlessly engage. In turn the popular has played a central role in constructing a financial audience whose legitimate borders are

repeatedly contested<sup>6</sup>. Stäheli develops this line of thinking with particular reference to history of speculation and the stock market and explores how the notion of fascination, the logic of suspense, and the experience of thrills are all deeply inscribed in the basic structure of stock market activity and finance more widely.

It is to Scott's great credit that *The heretics guide* tries to reclaim this affective power of fascination for what one could loosely describe as 'the left', and thus makes us see how the financial world which may appear unintelligibly abstract to laypeople is ultimately the doing of the human collective. Yes, we are shaped by finance, but we should always remember that it is also us who shape finance! So despite my reservations about some of the practical actions suggested by Scott, what makes his book so appealing and worthwhile reading for me is its profoundly affirmative message: 'Yes, another financial set-up is possible!'. In this context it is perhaps appropriate to finish this review with a reflection on the global financial crisis by J.M. Coetzee (2013) who, as always, offers an eloquent turn of phrase to capture our all-too-human predicament<sup>7</sup>:

Compared with the weight and density of human history, the numbers on the computer monitors don't come trailing all that much historical freight behind them – not so much that we could not, if we truly wanted it, agree to dispense with them and start with a fresh set of numbers. It is the question of whether we truly want a new financial dispensation, whether we can agree on a new set of figures, that is the rub. The figures themselves offer no resistance: the resistance is in ourselves. So, looking around us today, we see just what we might expect: we, 'the world', would rather live through the misery of the reality we have created (the entirely artificial reality of the crisis) than put together a new, negotiated reality. (Coetzee, 2013: 135-136)

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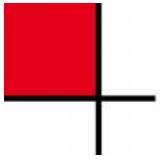
6 For example, the Private Equity industry often put forward the argument that the supersized profits they generated in the early part of this century could be justified in that their main investors were pension funds, thus creating the impression that their higher social mission was to help pensioners.

7 This is fragment from a letter written to Paul Auster.

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## A tall tale

Mathias Skrutkowski

### review of

Angela Lait (2012) *Telling tales: Work, narrative and identity in a market age*. Manchester University Press (HB, pp. 224, £65, ISBN 978-0719085222)

### Contextualization

*Telling Tales* is a monograph written by Angela Lait, based on research carried out for her PhD project at Manchester University. The book is based on personal experiences from her employment at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), as well as a U.K. publishing house, and aims to explore how the language of corporate business literature constructs the subjectivity of contemporary employees. Lait's core argument is that such efforts at identity regulation are increasingly resisted and challenged by contemporary employees. Failing to find satisfaction in constructing work-life identities by drawing on the prevailing repertoire of management tropes, Lait argues that office workers are increasingly choosing to emphasize non work-related aspects in their identity constructions. Drawing on narrative identity theory, she offers examples such as the increasing popularity of TV programmes and books on gardening and cookery, as well as autobiographical writing and life-style blogs about 'downshifting', as supporting evidence for the conclusions drawn from her personal experiences. These trends are all symptomatic, she claims, of a Western workplace culture that fails to provide the basis for narrating a satisfying representation of one's working self. Instead, we are increasingly choosing to represent ourselves in ways that express a nostalgic desire to return to older, more traditional bourgeois values and life-forms.



I will admit upfront that I had several problems with the point that the author is trying to make, as well as the theoretical perspective that underpins it. This review will therefore have a critical slant, and I will focus on some of the key problems I found with the theoretical basis for the book's argument. My critique takes aim more broadly at a genre of identity studies that draws on Richard Sennett's (1997) argument in *The corrosion of character*. It is my intention and hope that in thus broadening the aim, the review might be seen more as a vehicle for a critical discussion about certain strands in the body of (often critically oriented) management literature on identity theory, rather than motivated by a desire to pick on a particular work or author.

### Structure and summary of the book

The first chapter contains a number of well-argued and poignant analyses of the types of corporate language employed in the 'post-Fordist' economy, along with the ambiguity and inherent contradictions in these discourses: such as an ostensible concern for employee health, coupled with a vacuum of managerial responsibility for health-related issues. The selection criteria for this part of the empirical study are broadly corporate communications texts and internal policies – employee health policies, annual reports and other official documents – published by Lait's previous employer, DEFRA. Here, the book relies on rhetorical analysis to demonstrate inherent contradictions in the texts. While there are some brilliant flourishes of analysis here, the overall chapter is marred by an inescapable sense of being coloured by a fair dose of personal bitterness and resentment, harboured by Lait towards her previous employer. This comes out more blatantly in a number of instances, such as the analysis of the photograph of her previous boss, the Minister for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, included as a portrait in the Departmental reports. While Lait is trying to make a point about the visual clues contained in her portrayal, one cannot help suspect that she finds a certain gleeful satisfaction in describing her boss's pose as that of 'a child whose eyes are, of necessity, tilted slightly upwards in the pose of vulnerability made famous by the late Princess of Wales' (16). Such instances of personal vindictiveness tend to leave a bad taste in the reader's mouth.

The second chapter elaborates Lait's theoretical take on narrative identity. The basic theoretical premise (as well as the key argument of the whole book) is identical to that advanced by Sennett (1997) in *The corrosion of character*. Like Sennett, drawing on Ricoeur (1995) and (implicitly) MacIntyre (1991), Lait argues that personal identity may be seen as a narrative representation of self, which takes the form of a life story. Drawing on narrative psychology (MacAdams, 1997), she argues that the structural coherence of such a life-story is key to

psychological wellbeing. Like Sennett, she argues that the conditions of employment in the contemporary 'post-Fordist' economy are having a harmful effect on the ability of employees to construct such a coherent life story. What's novel in her analysis, compared to Sennett's work, is the focus on textual analysis of corporate communication and business self-help manuals that seek to discursively align employee identity with organizational ideals of flexibility and market orientation. Lait's argument, unlike Sennett's, is anchored more in a rhetorical analysis of inherent contradictions in contemporary managerial discourses, and how this leads to unavoidable incoherence in subject positions constituted by them.

The third chapter complements the analysis of corporate communication texts with an analysis of a fictional work, Ian McEwan's novel 'Saturday'. Lait concedes at the start of the chapter that her selection criteria for the empirical material may start to appear incoherent at this stage, but tries to justify the move, by arguing that fictional works can express something akin to the Hegelian *Zeitgeist*, in literary form. While her analysis of the plot and main character of 'Saturday' provides some support for the general argument about psychological vulnerability of contemporary professionals, the chapter also contains a lot of general exposition on literary theory, such as the use of a first vs. third person narrator, which to my mind had little immediate bearing on the main argument of the book. As such, the analysis of 'Saturday' feels somewhat arbitrarily squeezed in as a way to compensate for the lack of empirical material drawn from actual worklife sources, other than that based on Lait's own employment and career.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 elaborate on the idea of employees compensating for the inability to construct meaningful work-life stories, through escape fantasies about gardening and downshifting (Chapter 4), eventually prompting a wholesale imaginative reordering of existence through autobiographical narration of a personally salient life story (Chapters 5 and 6). While these are arguably significant contemporary trends – bookstore shelves these days have a high proportion of books in the genres of celebrity autobiographies and self-help manuals on how to become happy through gardening – Lait's account of their genesis suffers somewhat from theoretical underdevelopment. There is a blanket acceptance of Sennett's claim, along with similar claims made by the proponents of narrative psychology; namely and as aforementioned, that the construction of a coherent personal life story is key to psychological well-being, and as such a fundamental human need – one that was better satisfied during a previous 'Golden Age' era. There are a number of problems with this argument, which I will turn to in the next section.

## Critical discussion

### *Methodological issues...*

First of all, I think there is a basic methodological problem with combining highly specific and limited empirical material on corporate communications texts, personal work experience, literary analysis of fictional works and general observations of contemporary trends, to make an argument that claims a high degree of universality. Lait's account of work conditions at DEFRA suffers from a heavy personal bias, which sits uneasily with the very broad and general character of her argument. In order to claim that the rhetorical contradictions she identifies in DEFRA's corporate communication texts give rise to incoherent work-life subject positions, and a consequent turn to alternative narratives for self-representation, I would have expected to find a richer set of empirical material, e.g. drawn from ethnographic observation, perhaps focusing on conversation analysis, or life story interviews with former colleagues. There is an inescapable feeling of reading one person's crudely rationalized jeremiad against the unfair treatment suffered in her previous employment, and why she has turned to gardening to feel better about herself. This essentially auto-ethnographic material is then peppered by a somewhat strained analysis of vaguely corroborating evidence drawn from an arbitrary collection of secondary material (novels, cookery books and blogs), to turn it all into a grand theoretical argument about an universal inability of employees in Western corporations to construct meaningful narrative representations of their work-life selves.

This is not simply a question of methodological nit picking; it renders the argument that Lait is trying to make rather incoherent. In order to make an argument as to why a certain aspect of contemporary work-life makes it more difficult to craft a narrative identity, I would have expected to see a theoretical definition of the requirements for a coherent, or otherwise satisfying, narrative identity, along with an analysis showing why Lait's observations in the first chapter (about contradictions in the neo-liberal discourse permeating corporate communications documents at DEFRA) contribute to render narrative representations of work-life selves in that organization incoherent/unsatisfying. Instead, the reader is offered a dubious link to the way that Ian McEwan has chosen to represent the inner life of a fictional medical professional in literary form. The problem is also partly one of weak theoretical fit, which leads me neatly into the next section of the critical discussion.

... *flawed theoretical grounding*...

In my opinion, one solution to the analytical weakness of Lait's argument would have been to adopt a different theoretical perspective on identity. For instance, the discursive identity perspective establishes a much closer link between management discourse (as embedded in e.g. such corporate communications texts that Lait analyses), managerial/employee subjectivity and the enactment of work-life roles constituted by such bodies of text (Knights and Willmott, 1989; Grey, 1994; Strangleman and Roberts, 1999; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). There is furthermore a dramatic dimension via the theoretical link to Goffman (1955), and the role enactment involved in the presentation of oneself as e.g. a leader, or knowledge worker. It would have been a simpler analytical link between observed discursive contradictions in the textual material and 'cracks in the façade' of managerial self-presentation, should the empirical material contain such observations. Such an analytical link is absent in Lait's argument. Instead she strongly relies on a blanket acceptance of Sennett's argument, that the insistence on flexibility and change in the 'market age' makes it increasingly difficult to represent one's personal work-life story as oriented towards the pursuit of an Aristotelian *telos*. Her own observations and experiences, as well as her analysis of *Saturday*, are simply bolted on as self-evident corroborations of Sennett's point, without need of any further analysis. While Sennett's argument is at least internally consistent, it is rather unclear why, say, Lait's observations on discursive contradictions in corporate communications texts should somehow impact managers' or employees' abilities to represent their work-life stories as oriented towards the pursuit of a *telos*, or construct an otherwise satisfying personal life story. However, one of the personal benefits to me of reading Lait's text has been to prompt a broader critical examination of Sennett's argument, which I'd like to take the opportunity to elaborate.

In *The corrosion of character*, Sennett (1997) draws implicitly on MacIntyre's argument that the idea of a personally satisfying narrative identity is more conducive to Aristotelian virtue ethics: life needs to be teleologically oriented towards the pursuit of an intellectual, practical or moral virtue, to be at all meaningful in its narrative representation. Sennett then claims that the pursuit of such a *telos* is made impossible by the insistence of flexibility and perpetual dynamic change in the contemporary economic order. The basic premise of this argument appears to be that employees in bureaucratic organizations during the Taylorist/Fordist era were both able and inclined to represent their work-life selves as oriented towards the pursuit of some intellectual or practical virtue. I have several problems with this argument. Firstly, the idea that a typical office career in a bureaucratic organization – based on, say, entering credit invoices in the general ledger – would somehow be more conducive to narrative

representation as a life story in pursuit of personal virtue is somewhat preposterous. Secondly, the very idea of pursuing such a *telos* is arguably only meaningful within a culture and moral order based on some variant of virtue ethics. Indeed, MacIntyre offers the heroic epic of Icelandic sagas as the paramount example of literary genre conventions shaped by such a moral order, rather than, say, the genre conventions of the French Realist tradition, or those of literary modernism; the latter two being literary movements more contemporaneous with the emergence of organizational bureaucracy.

Ever since Luther attacked the scholastic notion that human lives ought to be teleologically oriented towards the pursuit of virtue, Northern European and Anglo-American cultures have been somewhat sceptical towards the idea of virtue ethics – to say the least. Since man's original sin has rendered us incapable of understanding the good, Luther insisted on faith (*sola fide*) as the only recipe for salvation. This development ultimately opened up for a shift towards Kantian deontology and/or a positivist basis for the moral law, ethical standards that have shaped the development of Western European social order following the Enlightenment onwards (MacIntyre, 1997). Ever since then, bourgeois existence in Western cultures has been represented in literary forms that place more narrative emphasis on the intra-historical aspect of human existence, as minor characters embedded in a meta-narrative account of social progress. The teleological dimension was found rather in the way that Western civilization was perceived to move towards a historical destiny, obeying some Hegelian law of historic-dialectical improvement (Lyotard, 1984). For instance, the implicit meta-protagonist in the novels in the French realist tradition (e.g. in the works of Balzac, Flaubert and Stendahl) is society itself. Individual protagonists suffering misfortunes and a tragic fate do so, not primarily by having committed any personal moral errors, but rather because of society being at fault, prompting a moral injunction for social change (Auerbach, 1953). The very premise of Sennett's argument, namely that organizational bureaucracy is more conducive to narrative representation of work-life self as oriented towards the teleological pursuit of personal virtue (practical, moral or intellectual) – is thus, in my mind, based on a straw man argument, and a rather preposterous one for that matter.

The simplistic, not to say flawed, nature of Sennett's argument – and Lait's version of it – might well have been avoided by a stronger theoretical grounding, as well as more thorough engagement with the contemporary body of work on identity studies. An important figure here is Paul Ricoeur, and his phenomenological/hermeneutical enquiry into our perception of time, as well as his attempts to develop an ontology of identity. Ricoeur (1984, 1995) contrasts his take on personal identity as selfhood (using the latin term *ipsem*) with what he considers as the wilful paradoxes (or *aporias*) of those, primarily Anglo-Saxon,

philosophical traditions that have enquired into the idea of personal identity as sameness (*idem*). Clearly, we are not the same person over time, so the *idem* notion is not applicable to identity in the sense of an understanding of self. Instead, Ricoeur bases his understanding of identity as selfhood on a narratological definition, thereby drawing heavily on Aristotle's concept of unity of action.

In the *Poetics*, one of Aristotle's requirements for tragedy is that the plot or action of the play can be grasped together, in the sense that each sequence of the plot will be perceived by the audience to follow logically upon the preceding one – or at least as a highly probable outcome of it. As Ricoeur convincingly argues, what determines the extent to which an audience will perceive a narrated protagonist's course of actions as logical (or at least highly probable) is culturally contingent, and more precisely depends on shared ethical standards regarding the right course of action under certain given circumstances. Ricoeur then proceeds to define his concept of identity as selfhood in an analogous way: as the ability of an individual in a given culture, to represent his personal life story as a more or less unavoidable sequence of actions, given the circumstances that were presented to him/her. In other words, the identity of the life story *with itself* is dependent on the ability to convey it to an audience, as the only righteous (or at least plausible) course of action, given the circumstances. This is arguable a more general definition of narrative identity as selfhood, than that of Sennett and MacIntyre, which seems to require an orientation towards pursuit of some personal virtue or *telos*. If doing your job and following the law is seen as the only righteous course of action (even though it might not be virtuous, in a personal/teleological sense), then the life story of a bureaucratic office worker is clearly identical with itself, in the sense of having no conceivably more righteous alternative. If such a view of office careers is less strongly shared in our culture than during the heydays of corporate bureaucracy, then I would venture to argue that it has very little to do with 'flexible capitalism' being less conducive to the pursuit of *telos* or personal virtue, as compared to corporate bureaucracy.

A contrary view to that of Sennett and Lait might instead be that the postmodern turn itself has generated an increasing preoccupation with the idea of a unique and authentic personal life story, which was less of a pressing 'need' in Western culture during a previous era, since personal destiny was conceived of as embedded in a deeply meaningful meta-narrative of social progress. This in turn may well have lowered the likelihood that people will perceive an office career in a bureaucratic organization to be a meaningful basis for selfhood. Following the postmodern legitimization crisis, we are all more sceptical towards key Enlightenment notions of progress and constitutionalism: that an intrinsically just and fair social order could be developed through a process of rational and

progressive enquiry in the social sciences. The meta-narrative of progress that provided bourgeois individuals with such shining inspiration to engage in the common struggle for a better society in an earlier era – often through persisting in tedious occupations, in the belief that it would contribute to improving the lot of future generations – has thus arguably been internalised as a narrative impulse towards more personal, sentimentally subjective life stories of triumph over adversity, or emancipation from conformist existential standards. The problem is of course that not everybody triumphs (and everyone cannot be anti-conformist and anti-authoritarian). The life stories of e.g. those that do not triumph in their office careers tend to take on a heavy tone of personal bitterness and resentment, especially when no good reasons can be recognized for one's misfortune. In a postmodern era of value pluralism, characterized by a plurality of conflicting discourses (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006), it is of course increasingly easy to find recourse to arguments for why one's misfortune might be seen as undeserved.

The problem is that such ironic modes of narrative closure (Frye, 1957) – suffering misfortune without recognizing any valid reasons for it – lends a certain grotesque and absurd aspect to a personal life story (reminiscent of Kafka's novels), questioning whether Sennett's and MacAdam's ideal of narrative coherence is necessarily always something to strive for, at least in our own culture, shaped as it is by heavily ironic modes of narrative representation. For me, this is the crucial problem with Lait's analysis, as well as the broader suite of perspectives on narrative identity that rely on an implicit ideal of narrative coherence in the representation of self. As evidenced by Gabriel et al.'s (2010) analysis of managerial stories of job loss, narrative closure, in the representation of such an episode in one's life, may not necessarily be the most satisfying coping strategy. Rather, the group of interviewees who had managed to reach narrative closure in their accounts of career misfortune exhibited 'a lack of control and an inability to find solace in their story' (Gabriel et al., 2010: 1705). The more loosely structured accounts, which avoided viewing job loss as a key turning point (or *peripeteia*) in one's life story, were conveyed by the group of interviewees who expressed the least resentment and frustration about having lost their jobs. While MacIntyre may thus be right, that the notion of a personally satisfying narrative identity (in term of a closed and coherent personal life story, obeying Aristotelian narrative conventions) is most conducive to a moral order based on virtue ethics (participation of which is ineluctable), it is unclear whether many people would find the personal consequences of such a moral order very appealing. For instance, according to the *bushido*, the virtue ethic of the Japanese *samurai*, personal blame for misfortune and failure necessarily prompts *seppuku*, ritual suicide, in order to preserve one's honour. This might lead to a more satisfying form of narrative closure – in terms of coherence and dramatic effect –

but it's unlikely to be a human destiny that Sennett or Lait would seriously consider more appealing, compared to the chronic anxiety that may well be the curse of our contemporary middle classes, and their inability to find any solace or narrative redemption in subjective accounts of petty misfortune.

*... and dubious attributions of blame*

Another problem with Lait's analysis revolves around how the genesis of an ostensibly new economic order, post-Fordism, is externalised in her analysis. Lait expresses an ambivalent yearning for a period when working life was more ordered. But as argued by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), the transition to, and theoretical justification for, more flexible forms of organizing work was legitimated partly by an appropriation of the radical humanist critique of corporate bureaucracy. Lait draws up a battle line between the new capitalist economy, and the traditional values of autonomy, self-determination and economic accumulation of a bourgeois class that she argues to have become squeezed by the new economy. But who then is the driving agent behind this transition, if not the bourgeois class itself? Perhaps it is more fruitful to conceive of Western social reality of today as a product of the Protestant bourgeois ethic having turned in on itself: a dialectical development whereby the social and bureaucratic strictures that were once seen as a guarantor of fair/equal treatment and meretricious reward (as compared to the arbitrary whims of the feudal aristocracy that ruled prior to them) have now become seen as inimical to autonomy and self-determination. We should perhaps be more open about the overlapping anti-authoritarian concerns of key right- and left-wing liberal arguments that have played a part in this intellectual development: Marcuse's (1991) critique of bureaucracy engendered a similarly disdainful attitude towards Fordism among progressively minded youths of the post-war generation, as that instilled by Mintzberg's (1983) arguments about the inadequate ability of bureaucratic organizations to effectively adapt to competitive changes, among neo-liberal advocates for 'the network economy'. The ideological divide that Lait draws up between a 'new' bourgeois white collar elite, and an older bourgeois class that values traditional crafts, is ultimately not very convincing. The causes of the transition to a more flexible economic order are culturally endogenous – not driven by some shadowy new social class that controls the world behind the scenes. This tension is brought out in Lait's argument that the more traditional bourgeois sub-class associated with handicrafts and gardening tend to vote Labour (rather than Tory) – whilst arguing elsewhere that the new Labour party has in itself been a major driving force behind the social and institutional changes she so abhors.



## Conclusion

In conclusion, Angela Lait does make some contributions to the perspective elaborated by Sennett, particularly in her rhetorical analysis of inherent contradictions in corporate communication and business self-help manuals, and how this might shape incoherent subject positions. She also offers some valuable insights into a possible link between such narratively unsatisfying work-life roles, and a number of contemporary life-style trends, but, as aforementioned, the central argument suffers from methodological problems and a weak theoretical grounding. In my mind, there is a broader problem about the implicit idealization of a coherent human subject, inherited from Sennett (1997). Narrative coherence in the representation of a personal life story is arguably only satisfying in the context of a more closely knit moral order, based on a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person. Lait's own representation of her work-life experiences is testament of how narrative closure in the representation of career misfortune tends to take on a heavily bitter and resentful tone, in a more fragmented and ironic culture such as ours. As she acknowledges herself, the stories of bourgeois downshifting on the other hand tend to come drenched in excruciating smugness, in their narcissistic stories of escapist triumph over the stupid drones that remain stuck in the capitalist machinery. Her argument that people attempt to find narrative redemption and solace in such coping strategies may thus be true on the one hand, but it carries an unresolved ambivalence about whether these strategies ultimately pay off. Are the escapist stories of downshifting or taking up gardening truly more satisfying as personal life stories, compared to those, say, that triumph in a business career? Lait's attitude of personal contempt for this class of people is not in itself a convincing argument. For a variety of reasons, we live in a culture and moral order, which is more fragmented than in previous eras, making narrative closure in one's representation of self increasingly difficult to achieve these days – so far I can agree with Sennett and Lait. But while this has certain drawbacks, any analysis of these drawbacks would do well to recognize the diversity of reasons for why such a cultural transition has occurred, in order to assess whether the coping strategies that Lait identifies 'truly' carry the potential for an alternative form of narrative redemption, or whether they are nothing more than symptoms of the very problem at hand.

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## Migration, integration and activism in Ireland

Orla McGarry

### review of

Lentin, R. & Moreo, E. (eds.) (2012) *Migrant activism and integration from below in Ireland*. Palgrave MacMillan. (HB. pp. 231, \$85.00, ISBN 9780230300620).

*Migrant activism and integration from below in Ireland* brings an original perspective to Irish migration studies by providing an in-depth exploration of migrant associations in contemporary Ireland. This book makes an important contribution to Irish migration studies by focusing on the role of migrant-led organizations as vehicles of social change and integration. Given the isolation often associated with the migration experience, organizations and associations can be seen as providing a vital social link for migrants in contemporary Ireland. Migrant-led organizations and associations provide a communal focus and a rallying point for group solidarity, and are shown to be a central means through which migrants both assert their presence in Ireland and engage in a *de facto* process of integration. This book directs attention to migration issues at a time when, due to Ireland's recent economic crisis, migration and integration policies have fallen from the political agenda in spite of continued high levels of immigration (Central statistics office of Ireland, 2012). Editors Ronit Lentin and Elena Moreo bring together contributions from 6 authors exploring a range of theoretical and empirical perspectives to provide insight into the active role played by migrant associations in negotiating processes of integration. Published in 2012, this book is a culmination of the work carried through the innovative *Migrant networks project* as part of the *Trinity immigration initiative* (TII) between

2007 and 2010 and sheds new light into an underexplored aspect of migration studies.

This book is ambitious in its scope. It sets out to merge key theoretical debates with empirical studies of a range of migrant associations in Ireland in order to develop an understanding of the nuanced and complex issues affecting the process of integration. As a result of the theoretical diversity and conceptual complexity the writing is dense and challenging to even the most alert and theoretically oriented reader. Nonetheless it succeeds in its goal of providing innovative insight into the diverse range of practices through which migrants negotiate their integration into Irish society.

The book consists of a series of theoretical/contextualization chapters and chapters which merge theoretical debates with empirical data gathered from research with members of migrant associations. Each chapter introduces a complex range of themes and issues and provides a nuanced perspective into the lives and experiences of migrants in Ireland. In doing so it makes a very important contribution to Irish migration studies by demonstrating the versatility and capacity of migrant associations in instigating and negotiating a process of integration from below as well as providing a realistic account of the limitations imposed on these associations by the socio-political context of contemporary Ireland.

### Terminology and theoretical paradigms

*Migrant activism and integration from below in Ireland* highlights the vast disjuncture between current migration and integration regimes and the *de facto* experience of daily life for migrants in contemporary Ireland. The onset of the recession directly following the dramatic increase in levels of in-migration in Ireland has left many migrant members of the population severely marginalized and socially excluded as a result of cuts to welfare and social supports. In spite of the glossy rhetoric of interculturalism, with its emphasis on interaction and engagement, introduced by Irish politicians during the peak of Ireland's migration boom, few practical supports are available for migrants facing the challenge of integrating into Irish society (see Lentin, 2010).

The book provides a powerful historical and theoretical critique of integration regimes and immigration policy in Ireland. Lentin builds on her previous work in this area to outline the gross inconsistencies between the Irish immigration and integration regimes which at best, do little to facilitate a process of integration and inclusion, and at worst are at the core of the process of

marginalization and exclusion affecting migrant communities throughout Ireland (Lentin, 2008). She argues that in light of the manner in which its institutionalized practices perpetuate and consolidate processes of marginalization and exclusion, the Irish state can be seen as a racial state, and indeed, as a racist state. For Lentin this is epitomized by the 2004 Citizenship Referendum, which redefined the parameters of Irish society through the introduction of new exclusionary measures based on parental origin (7).

The hollow regime of interculturalism and top-down policies of integration espoused by the Irish state are contrasted notably with 'integration from below'; the *de facto* processes through migrants negotiate their position and assert their presence in contemporary Ireland. The view is taken throughout the book that the process of 'integration from below' is instigated by migrants through their practices and, therefore, defined by migrants according to personal and group aspirations and ambitions. For some, 'integration from below' is associated with access to education and healthcare facilities; while for others it may constitute the liberty to practice religious rituals (42). This flexible approach avoids the discussion becoming entangled in debates elsewhere explored at length (see Gray, 2006, MacEinri, 2007, Lenihan, 2008). In addition, the flexibility of the definition is extremely effective in allowing for engagement with a diverse range of migrant associations.

In keeping with the necessity for a flexible approach in analyzing the experiences of diverse migrant associations, the authors employ and develop the concept of agency as an analytical prism. The concept of agency is used to engage with the active role played by migrants in the process of 'integration from below'. Migrants are located in this process as the main protagonists of the process of integration. A focus on agency affords a means of understanding the diverse forms of migrant activism studies across a wide range of contexts. As outlined in chapter 2 by Carla De Tona and Elena Moreo: 'We understand migrants' agency in terms of concrete praxis but also as a form of knowledge production rooted in activists' subjective understandings and experiences' (36). This analytical devise is successful in allowing for a nuanced and in-depth analysis of the role of migrant associations as vehicles for migrant agency and empowerment. Through the formation of associations, migrants assert their presence and play an active role in shaping their position in contemporary Irish society.

As the experiences of migrants are a central focus of this book, the use of research as a means of empowerment is a central methodological tenet. Moreo, in chapter 4, confronts the contradictions inherent in many academic engagements with marginalized groups. Drawing on the work of Fanon (1967) on visibility and representation, this discussion reflects on the implications of

representations of minority groups. She aptly points out that representations of migrants in Ireland have largely been constructed and mediated by non-migrants in the popular media and academic spheres. While this increases levels of visibility for migrant groups, it is contrasted with the positive empowerment that derives from a process of self-representation. Moreo therefore underlines the importance of a migrant-centred approach to academic studies as a means of empowering migrants in shaping their own representation. This point is well enunciated and provides a suitable segue into a series of studies which focus on empirical data generated in partnership with a diverse range of migrant associations.

### **Migrant activism as a multi-faceted process**

The book makes an important contribution to migration studies by shedding light on the complex range of ways in which migrants negotiate their position within Irish society. However, in spite of its apparent commitment to capturing the diverse range of experiences of migrant associations in Ireland, this book focuses almost exclusively on migrant-led associations in Dublin. It overlooks the experiences of migrants based in rural areas and indeed in other urban centres. This is a significant blind spot given the pivotal role played by both formal and informal associations and networks in the lives of rurally based migrants (McGarry and McGrath, 2013; McGrath, 2010). The authors nonetheless capture the diversity among Dublin based migrant associations, engaging with diverse migrant led-associations; including migrant women's associations, Chinese economic, cultural and emergency relief associations, Protestant churches and the *Horn of Africa peoples association*. By engaging closely with these associations the authors highlight a variety of manifestations of migrant activism, demonstrating that agency can be asserted in different ways, from engaging in advocacy work to the attainment of social membership and acceptance by taking part in religious ceremonies. This is a valuable perspective in a country where popular discourse tends towards the representation of migrants as a homogenous group.

De Tona's discussion, in chapter 5, of migrant women's associations highlights the extent to which migrant associations can act as vehicles for different types of agency and activism. By conducting research with a total of 18 migrant women's associations, ranging from small and recently established migrant groups to larger, well-established associations, she demonstrates that associations provide vehicles for agency in a variety of ways. While some associations seek change in a systematic and politically explicit way, others, which are concerned with the day-to-day issues facing migrants, enact a more subtle form of activism. Some

migrant women's associations such as AkiDwA, a migrant women's association founded in 2001, focus on the process of activism and advocacy which are explicitly linked to resistance, while others focus primarily on lending support to members and their families in their daily lives. De Tona here makes an important point highlighting the importance of seemingly every day and mundane events to the process of integration.

De Tona uses feminist theory to elucidate that the work carried out by migrant women's associations can be seen as socially transformative on many levels. The discussion outlines that; the activities of migrant women's associations 'enact a form of transformation through their empowerment of members in their day to day lives within the family and community'. By engaging in these processes of integration from below, migrant women challenge not only racism and ethnic marginalization, but also sexism and patriarchy. This is described as 'a new, creative anti-racist feminism', through which female members of migrant groups not only carve out their position and assert their presence in Ireland but also engage in an active process of transforming Irish society (115-116).

Yin Yang Wang's discussion of Chinese associations in Dublin also draws attention to the variety of forms that migrant activism can assume. This discussion highlights how specific discourses of activism and integration are employed by migrants in different contexts. This discussion also highlights the intricate processes of identity politics invoked in this process. Chinese associations are among the longest established and most diverse group of migrant associations in Ireland, comprising advocacy associations, commercial associations, professional associations and social/cultural associations. Traditionally membership of these associations was based on locality, lineage and dialect. These associations were largely informal, financially self-reliant and directed towards the provision of support to Chinese migrants while emphasizing transnational connections. Increasing the visibility of the Chinese community and seeking active inclusion in Irish society were not goals of these associations (126).

This orientation changed in the wake of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake. Following the devastation of this tragic event, the *Irish-Chinese Sichuan appeal committee* was established to raise funds for victims of the tragedy. The foundation of the committee led to the adoption of a more visible role for the Chinese community in Dublin. The staging of public events such as the Chinese vigil resulted in the raising of the profile of the Chinese population in a manner that reinforced discourses of national unity, while asserting their position in Irish society. Rather than emphasizing ethnic traits and ethnic differences, the events organized by the *Irish-Chinese Sichuan appeal committee* saw the emergence of a

discourse of a unified Chinese national identity and of transnational solidarity. Yang draws on Hall's (1997) theorizations of identity as shifting and contextually constructed in order to further the argument that migrant activism can be understood as a form of identity performance that is context specific. The shift from informal and largely invisible associations to the public manifestations of the *Irish-Chinese Sichuan appeal committee* demonstrates that migrant activism is shaped by context and can be expressed in a variety of forms.

### Empowerment and limitations of migrant agency

While at its core, this book is a celebration of migrant activism and agency, the authors are realistic in pointing out the limitations of migrant associations in attaining integration. Migrant activism can succeed in instigating a process of integration from below, however, existing power hierarchies within associations and the limitations of regimes of integration and immigration may prevent the achievement of integration and empowerment.

This point is developed from an early stage of the book, Lentin, in chapter 3, provides detailed discussion of the evolutionary phases of migrant associations developing on the seminal work carried out by Pnina Werbner in the UK (1991). The discussion underlines the extent to which migrant associations, despite being founded as sites of resistance, come to be shaped and controlled by the inequalities inherent in mainstream society. While migrant led associations are generally founded as organic bottom-up organizations, often with the central goal of developing capacity and empowering members, they constantly face the threat of being overrun by the official top-down agencies and well-meaning indigenous philanthropists. Lentin traces four phases in the evolution of migrant-led associations, illustrating her discussion by reference to the experience of a number of these associations in Ireland.

The first phase, *from localized empowerment to appropriation*, is illustrated by reference to the experiences of the *Association of refugees and asylum seekers in Ireland* (ARASI). ARASI, a bottom-up initiative, was founded in the late 1990s by refugees with the goal of building bridges with mainstream society through self-organization. As a result of its initial success and continued increases in levels of in-migration, the association experienced a need to secure funding for sustained development. This led to the formation of an alliance with the Spiritans and the creation of SPIRASI. The alliance became one of unequal power relations with the original aims and objectives of ARASI being dominated by the charitable agenda of the Spiritans. The agenda of SPIRASI under the under this unequal



partnership became one of meeting needs rather than developing capacities and self-organization and building bridges (55-56).

A similar process of top-down domination is described in Phase 2 of Lentin's treatise; *solidaristic anti-racism*. For Lentin this entails the mobilization of indigenous members of society on behalf of migrants. While generally well-intentioned, this top-down approach is patronizing and can impede processes of integration from below and hence the organic process of empowerment. This effect is similar in many respects to phase 4; *Resistance without a presence*. This phase describes the manner in which state-funded bodies and NGOs, championing themes such as diversity and integration, engage with migrant led-associations on an unequal footing. For Lentin this is epitomized the frequent invitation of members of migrant associations to attend events as migrant representatives, without being afforded an opportunity to influence the agenda or hence to contribute in an empowering way.

Phase 3: *Independent mobilization* is Lentin's most optimistic example of 'integration from below'. This phase is illustrated by reference to AkiDwA, the longest established migrant women's association in Ireland. AkiDwA exemplifies how migrant-led associations can experience organic growth and development without falling prey to domination by non-migrant members or top-down agendas. AkiDwA was founded by African women in Dublin simply as 'a space for expression' in 2004 (63). In the intervening years this association has experienced extensive growth and has moved from a voluntary phase to one of professionalism, developing its remit to encompass policy submission to government departments. It has also extended its representational remit from African Women to migrant women more generally. For Lentin, the development of AkiDwA demonstrates the manner in which migrant women can become agents of resistance and transformation and resistance (64). However, AkiDwA, despite their many successes, find themselves continuously in a position of competition with indigenous women's groups for scarce budgets.

The precarious line between empowerment and patronage is also explored in Alessia Paserelli's discussion of Protestant Churches in Ireland. Paserelli's fifth chapter of the book develops an understanding of the role of Protestant Churches as vehicles of integration for migrants. This discussion addresses the manner in which the structures of Churches, while providing an important level of support to migrants, do not necessarily lead to integration. Paserelli reflects on data gathered through engagement with migrant members of both new migrant-led Churches such as the Pentecostal Church as well as with historical Protestant churches such as the Methodist Church and the Anglican Church.

The contributions of participants in this study underline that Protestant churches, particularly migrant-led churches such as the Pentecostal Church, provide 'a home away from home', acting as a cushion from the culture shock of migration and enhancing their sense of belonging. These services are seen by Paserelli as a platform for agency and activism in other areas of life. Historical Protestant Churches, in particular the Methodist Church and the Anglican Church, are also shown to play a vital role in providing support for new migrants, they often provide material aid as well as serving as a source of assistance in accessing employment and providing access to networks of friends and acquaintances.

However the extent to which these historical Protestant Churches foster a bottom-up process of empowerment is drawn into question by Paserelli. Historical Protestant Churches have made concerted efforts to support engagement with migrants; with the Anglican Church developing a national strategy, *The discovery project*, aimed at providing a welcome for new members from ethnic minorities and the Methodist Church encouraging each congregation to develop an intercultural strategy which suits its own needs. In spite of the measures taken by these Churches, many factors continue to hinder the agency of migrant members. Their role as service givers, though often vital, often results in migrants being constructed as 'needy'. In addition to this many participants cited a lack of training opportunities as delimiting their ambitions and preventing them from assuming leadership roles within the Church. Paserelli makes the important point while these Churches play an important role in supporting the needs and providing a welcome for newly arrived migrants, the constraints placed on their empowerment within the Churches prevent this welcome from engendering a process of 'integration from below'.

The theme of empowerment is also critically explored in Moreo's account of the experiences of members of the *Horn of Africa people's aid* (HAPA) in acting as an advocate for refugees and asylum seekers from Somalia and other Horn of Africa regions. Given the direct provision system governing the lives of asylum seekers and refugees, these migrants are among the most marginalized in Ireland<sup>1</sup>. The goal of HAPA is therefore to fill gaps in provision and to create a space for the valorization of refugee's knowledge and skills and their empowerment. However as a result of the paucity of services and supports available for asylum seekers

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1 The Direct Provision system was established in 2,000 as means of meeting the basic needs of asylum seekers while their claims for refugee status are being processed. Asylum seekers are accommodated in hostels where meals are provided and receive a personal allowance of €19.10 per adult and €9.60 per child per week. The conditions in Direct Provision centers have been widely criticized by a number of NGOs and Human Rights organizations

and refugees, HAPA focuses its work on advocacy and lobbying in relation to political and legal matters rather than on the development of individual and community resources.

Moreo's discussion problematizes the extent to which this process can be considered empowerment. She draws attention to the way that refugees and asylum seekers are constructed as helpless and dependent in political and popular media discourses. This process is likened to a form of bio-politics whereby all aspects of disempowerment are perpetuated and sustained by the institutional welfare structures (177). The work carried out by HAPA in securing resources for Somali migrants and enabling members of the organization to self-organize and to network with other groups can be seen as a form of basic empowerment. However, the extent to which this is conducive to 'integration from below' is severely delimited by the bio-politics of the institutional welfare structures.

Moreo delivers a clear and resounding message about the dangers of romanticization of the concept of empowerment at a grass-roots level. While the achievements of HAPA and the positive effect of this association on the daily lives of Somali refugees in Ireland should not be ignored, an over-estimation of the extent to which associations which receive no state funding can achieve full empowerment for members is detrimental to the development of socially inclusive policies. Moreo highlights this by reference to the tendency of many states to abnegate their responsibilities to provide resources for marginalized groups. In line with the current neo-liberal agenda pursued by many governments tend to transfer responsibility for integration to community organizations rather than investing in resources and supports. While an acknowledgement of the value and importance of migrant agency and activism in the process of integration from below it is vital that this is not presented as a full solution to migration issues leading to an abnegation of state welfare and social support responsibilities.

## Conclusion

This is a book that captures a series of snapshots of Ireland at a difficult juncture. Following the affluence of the 'Celtic tiger' period, migration has all but disappeared from the political agenda since the onset of the economic recession. Lentin and Moreo have compiled a series of treatises that lend important insight into the manner in which 'intercultural' Ireland has continued to evolve below the radar. They draw attention to the importance of collective action in countering the marginalization and exclusion that accompany the migration

experience. Migrant-led organizations and associations play a pivotal role in this process, acting as vehicles of activism and advocacy as well as providing the supports essential to day to day life in Ireland. The authors have captured diversity of migrant organizations and associations allowing for an understanding of the fluidity and the complex nature of migrant activism. By engaging with a wide range of theoretical perspectives and analytical prisms, this book provides a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of migrant experience in contemporary Ireland. This activism may be an explicit process, often spurred on by particular socio-political events, or may be an incidental outcome of the mundane processes of everyday life.

While this aspect of the book is celebratory it wisely contains a clear warning against the romanticization of migrant activism as a justification for governmental abnegation of welfare and social support responsibilities towards migrant groups. In doing so it captures migrant-led associations as balancing on a knife-edge. It conveys the precarious position in which they find themselves running a gauntlet between the need to ascribe to top-down processes of integration and organic processes of activism. The decision of the authors to draw attention to this fine line between empowerment and dominant patronage is a vital contribution to Irish migration studies. It clearly points to the need for Irish policy to engage with migrant activism at a grass roots level, and to engage with and support migrant associations and organizations in the shaping and development of a truly inclusive Ireland.

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