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Marco Deseriis¹

Abstract

Taking cue from the Marxian analysis of the relationship between cooperation and capitalist command in *Capital* and the Grundrisse, the article reviews how Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have addressed this matter. Drawing from the notorious fragment of the Grundrisse on the general intellect, Hardt and Negri argue that in post-industrial societies the production of value tends to coincide with the ensemble of social activities. Hardt and Negri maintain that since any social activity is potentially a value-generating practice, the capitalist organization of labor is increasingly parasitical and external to the social bios. From this flows that labor can no longer be measured in abstract units of time and the exploitation of living labor leaves way to the expropriation of the common. The second part of the article challenges Hardt and Negri's idealized view of the common by arguing that in the society of control communication and cooperation are always affected and tinged by the media that enable them—the vast majority of which are owned by private corporations. Neither the general in Marx's *Capital* who organizes the workers from above nor the watchman and regulator of the Grundrisse, the contemporary engineer of control deploys micro-mechanisms of control inside the digital networks that modulate social cooperation. Drawing from Andrejevic's notion of the "digital enclosure" and Terranova's analysis of subjectification in the societies of control, the article concludes

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with a reflection on post-consensual forms of cooperation that cannot be integrated without igniting a catastrophic transformation of the system.

Keywords

cooperative production, general intellect, society of control, cybernetics, subjectivation

The concepts of communication and cooperation occupy an important role in the theoretical elaboration of Hardt and Negri and in general within the tradition of post-Marxist autonomist thought. The reasons for such centrality are multiple, but for the purpose of this article we should limit ourselves to trace their origin to two distinct analyses of cooperation advanced by Marx in *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*.

In Chapter 13 of *Capital, Vol. I*, Marx (1976) reads the integration of cooperative labor under the capitalist system of production as the result of a twofold movement. On the one hand, Marx argues that in the process of bringing labor under its command capital appropriates the socially productive power of labor as a “free gift”—that is, as a power that “costs capital nothing” insofar as the human capacity to cooperate and act in concert preexists capitalism (p. 451). On the other hand, by concentrating the means of production in few hands and massing together workers and various labor processes, capital multiplies the cooperative efforts to an hitherto unknown scale. Thus capital appears now as a material condition for the cooperation of waged workers so “that a capitalist should command in the field of production is now as indispensable as that a general should command on the field of battle” (pp. 448-449).

In the *Grundrisse*, however, Marx (1973) describes the relation between cooperative production and capitalist command in very different terms. In particular in the “Fragment on the Machines”—the text that serves as a true keystone for the Italian autonomist thought—Marx argues that as capital develops the large-scale industry it relies less and less on labor directly employed in those industries and increasingly “on the general state of science and on the progress of technology, or the application of this science to production” (p. 705). As the “general social knowledge” or *general intellect* is channeled toward the development of more productive machines “labour no longer appears so much to be included within the production process; rather the human being comes to relate more as watchman and regulator to the production process itself” (p. 705). As a great amount of wealth is withdrawn from the production for direct consumption and invested in fixed capital, “the development of the social individual . . . appears as the great foundation-stone of the production of wealth” (p. 705).

We see how Marx presents us with a veritable bifurcation. While the labor necessary to the production of exchangeable goods is directed by a *general*, the labor that is oriented to the production of the means of production (or the reproduction of fixed capital) is *itself* a regulatory activity that does not seem to need further supervision. As is known, in this passage of the *Grundrisse* on the general intellect, the Italian Marxist

autonomist school reads a refiguration of the progressive autonomization of living labor from capitalist command—a process that becomes fully visible with the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism. Drawing inspiration from the *workerist* analysis of the working class' struggles of the 1960s and 1970s against factory work and waged labor, and Negri's concept of the self-valorization of living labor (1991 [1979]), Hardt and Negri (2000) argue that this process of autonomization has three major implications for the relationship between capital, cooperation, and communication: (1) Because in late capitalism cooperation and communication are no longer strictly subordinated to capital, the organizational function of capitalist command becomes increasingly parasitic and extrinsic to the production process; (2) Communication is not only a driving force of production but is also essential to the autopoietic, self-validating discourse of imperial power. However, because communication is an intrinsically deterritorializing force, sovereign power constantly has to struggle to bring it under its control; (3) The fact that labor is less and less oriented to the production of commodities means that it mobilizes human faculties that are immeasurable and intangible, such as the ability to communicate, take care of others “in the bodily mode,” and engage in abstract cognitive processes (2000, p. 293; 2004, p. 108).

In the *Empire* trilogy, Hardt and Negri lump together these linguistic, affective, and cognitive activities under the concepts of immaterial labor and biopolitical production. Because these activities are social in character and invest the entire social *bios*, Hardt and Negri contend that capital cannot reduce them to abstract units of time in order to exploit them. Rather, the exploitation of labor typical of industrial societies leaves way to the postindustrial *expropriation* of immaterial labor, understood as the ability to cooperate and produce in common. This movement from the exploitation of living labor to the biopolitical expropriation of the common (clearly articulated in *Commonwealth*) has several implications—namely, the fact that capital reduces the productivity of the common every time it imposes restrictions on the free flow of knowledge and cooperation among researchers, deprives workers of the ability to dispose of their own time, and prevents migrants from moving freely across state borders (2009). Thus, on the one hand, capital is increasingly unable to organize the cooperation among workers and the common production of wealth. On the other hand, capital's intervention is oriented at the creation of *artificial scarcities* through the imposition of fetters on production that limit the potentiality of the common. This classic Marxian argument on the immanent conflict between the excessive forces of production and the constraining relations of production, however, does not seem very well suited to read the actual cooperative dynamics as they unfold within the current information environment. We shall now see why.

From a cursory analysis of the Internet, anyone can see that the vast majority of online social interactions are mediated by software and services provided by private corporations. Although these companies do not *create* networked forms of cooperation, they enable them in order to extract a value from them. One of the ways in which this value is extracted is by monitoring and collecting information generated by users' actions and transactions. As Mark Andrejevic (2007) has shown, in the online world

each action and transaction generates a feedback about itself that is stored, sorted, and possibly sold to third parties by private companies. Vincent Mosco (1989) has defined a “cybernetic commodity” as the information about transactions and viewing habits stored in commercial databases. Drawing from Mosco, Andrejevic argues that the continuous monitoring of electronic transactions occurs within what he calls “digital enclosures.” In the digital enclosure, the “cybernetic participation” of consumers guarantees that those who are in control remain in control by adjusting their trajectory on the basis of the feedback provided by the users. Andrejevic unearths the etymology of the word “cybernetics” (in Greek *kubernētikos* means “good at steering”) to argue that while the actual goals of the owners of the digital enclosures remain foreclosed to the general public, “they are the destination toward which marketers steer with assistance from public feedback. This feedback may alter the course but not the final destination” (p. 44).

To be sure, Andrejevic’s definition of digital enclosure has limitations—as often times Internet companies do not try to fence off these spaces of interaction, but on the contrary they tend to open them up to integrate them with other services (sometimes owned by competitors).¹ Furthermore, while the 18th-century British landowners described by Marx appropriated and fenced off the common land, Internet companies do not simply appropriate and coral social cooperation. Rather they simultaneously instigate and put social cooperation to work by developing on the one hand *social machines* that set in motion a turbulent proliferation of uncertainties, and on the other hand *analytical machines* that by reducing social interaction to a set of probabilities contain such uncertainty. Nonetheless, analyzing cybernetics as the managerial science of our times—what the French collective Tiquun (2001) has effectively described as “the life-sized *experimentation protocol* of the Empire in formation” (p. 43)—is a useful departure point, as long as the emphasis is laid not so much on the enclosure but on the *dynamic modeling of the social bios*.

My point is that the question is not whether cybernetic participation is captured, enclosed, and withdrawn from public scrutiny. Although data mining and the asymmetrical monitoring of Internet users are important political issues, from a capitalist perspective, the efficacy of the analytical machines is subordinated to the ability to develop software capable of attracting and modulating self-organizing processes that by definition cannot be enclosed and *should not be enclosed* at the cost of reducing their productivity and value. As Tiziana Terranova (2004) has pointed out, the intersection of the fields of information theory, cybernetics, artificial intelligence, and biological computing provides the background for “the emergence of an *abstract machine of soft control*—a diagram of power that takes as its operational field the productive capacities of the hyperconnected many” (p. 100). This abstract machine is oriented at modeling the behavior of open and chaotic living systems characterized by an *excess* of value, “an excess that demands flexible strategies of valorization and control” (Terranova, 2004, p. 100). This is particularly clear if we consider that over the past two decades a myriad social activities that are cooperative in character and were previously considered unproductive—such as playing games, dating, traveling, organizing social events,

and sharing music—have been mediated by online services that try to monetize and extract a value from their abstraction and deterritorialization.

This monetization is pursued through a number of strategies that break down intangible phenomena such as cooperation, affect, and social influence into comparable metrics (Google's PageRank and the emergence of "social buttons" for measuring social sentiment are notable cases in point). *These metrics, however, are not simply extrinsic to social cooperation, but they modulate social and affective dynamics by setting in motion specific processes of subjectification.* As Terranova aptly points out, such processes do not begin with an individual. Rather subjectification stems from the cooperative/competitive behaviors of an indivisible unit—what Richard Dawkins (1976) terms the "selfish gene" and Gilles Deleuze (1995) a "dividual"—"resulting from 'a cut' within the polymorphous and yet nondeterministic mutations of a multitude" (Terranova, 2004, p. 124). Dawkins' description of the gene as a calculating machine always weighing in the advantages of cooperating or competing can be easily extended to social network sites and blogging platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr wherein the users' ability to cooperate and compete with others is measured and rewarded through a variety of indicators (number of friends, followers, likes, links, etc). In this respect, Terranova is certainly right in stating that the selfish gene is not just a metaphor, but a technique and "a mode of capture of value produced by an increasingly interconnected and interdependent culture" (pp. 128-129).

But if this mode of capturing value is informed and modeled by the power to "close the open space of the multitude to a hole of subjectification" (Terranova, 2004, p. 126) the question is not so much whether the unbounded productivity of the common is corrupted and hampered by capital's attempt to segment, enclose, and privatize it. On the contrary, it is a matter of seeing the forms of communication and cooperation set in motion by the new cybernetic machines as already *tinged*, rather than existing in some ideal and uncorrupted state—as Hardt and Negri have it. My contention is that abstract cooperation and affective communication should be examined first and foremost for the media that enable them—that is, starting from the more or less visible set of constraints that have been built into them. The analysis of these constraints unveils the points of friction and thus the sudden deviations, the accidents, and the swerves a system cannot incorporate without risking to collapse. As Terranova (2004) points out,

the threat of these swerves, from the perspective of the engineers of control, is that by rejecting the system's most basic set of constraints, by rejecting the micro-moulding of dividualism, they might push it out of control, towards a new plateau, whose outcome cannot not only be predetermined but might also veer the system violently towards catastrophic transformations. (p. 128)

Two points need to be emphasized here. The first is that the engineer of control is the new figure of capitalist command in the network society. Neither the general in Marx's *Capital* who organizes the workers from above nor the watchman and regulator of the *Grundrisse*, the engineer of control is somebody who is able to deploy

micro-mechanisms of control *inside* the flexible networks of cooperation. By breaking down the continuity of the social bios into dividual sessions and transactions, the engineer of control produces what Franco Berardi (2009) calls a “cellularized” info-time, an abstract time that is no longer attached to the body of any specific individual but generated by the automated recombination of dividual fragments of time in the network.

And yet, this segmentation and fractalization of the social still produces (dividual) processes of subjectification. The second element I want to discuss in Terranova’s argument is whether the “micro-molding of dividualism” should be simply “rejected,” as she claims, in order to bring about a catastrophic transformation of the system, or whether dividualism can give rise to nonintegrated processes of subjectivation. Such an option is in my opinion already on the table, as the recomposition of “co-dividual” forms of subjectivity can arise from “a post-consensual practice that is dissociated from integrated modes of decision-making, and that prepares the ground for productive internal struggle” (Miessen, 2010, p. 15). This postconsensual practice is evident for instance in phenomena such as the massive exodus from social network sites (Cox, 2010), anonymous forms of cooperation occurring in Wikis and image boards (Bernstein et. al, 2011), the creation of P2P currencies decoupled from central issuing authorities (Sakamoto, 2009), and the emergence of codividual subjectivities such as the hacker network Anonymous (Coleman, 2011). These nonintegrated, postconsensual forms of cooperation valorize relationships of affinity and conflict within the multitude rather than reducing them to a predictable variable. Florian Schneider (2005) defines these practices as “collaborative” rather than cooperative to emphasize their wild, illegitimate character and the autonomy of the heterogeneous parts partaking in the collaboration. In a similar vein, Berardi (2009) argues that it is a matter of valorizing forms of communication and processes of subjectivation that are conjunctive rather than connective—a *conjunction of round bodies that imply a process of becoming other* rather than a functional, repeatable, algorithmic interconnection of smooth parts (pp. 86-87).

Whether collaborative, conjunctive, or postconsensual, these processes of subjectivation are not rooted in an ideal notion of the common, in a separate alternative sphere where forms of cooperation liberated from capitalist command blossom. Rather, they traverse nomadically networked spaces of cooperation that are informed by varying degrees of control. When confronted with these practices, some components of the machine of soft control are able to mutate in order to accommodate and envelop these differences, while others rigidify. But in choosing to enforce rigid rules they are always at risk of reverting to a military conception of command, thereby condemning themselves to irrelevance. The challenge for the resistant practices in the society of control is how to transform spaces that are organized to standardize cooperation into spaces that cannot absorb the unbounded productivity of the common without ceasing to function as apparatuses of capture.

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1. I am referring here to the recent development of software and APIs such as Facebook Connect, Google Friend Connect, and the OpenID protocol that let users log onto third-party web sites and applications through the same user ID and password. Even though these services have been developed after Andrejevic's book was published, they bespeak the fact that Web 2.0 companies prefer to follow and modulate the whereabouts of their users rather than trying to enclose them.

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Bio

Marco Deseriis holds a PhD from the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University and he is currently a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow at Eugene Lang College New School for Liberal Arts, New York. His doctoral dissertation explores the historic conditions of possibility for the emergence of the "improper name," defined as the adoption of the same pseudonym by organized collectives, affinity groups, and individual authors. Along with Giuseppe Marano, he has coauthored *Net.Art: L'arte della Connessione* (Shake, 2003-2008) and has published several book chapters and articles in edited collections and journals including *Software Studies* (MIT Press, 2008), *Mute*, Vol. 2. No. 12 (with Brian Holmes, 2009), and *Thamiris/Intersecting: Place, Sex, and Race*, Vol. 21 (Rodopi, 2011).