

OF SENSE AND SENSIBILITY: IMMATERIAL LABOUR IN OPEN SYSTEMS

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- + As Marina Vishmidt has put it, '[I]n recent years, there have been myriad attempts in curatorial, critical and media sectors to index the characteristics of their fields to the wider structural transformations in the landscape of work. These have mainly been enunciated along the axes of 'creativity' and 'flexibility' once deemed endemic to the artist as constitutive exception to the law of value and now valorized as universally desirable attributes [...]' (2005: 93).

The concept of 'immaterial labour' has been central in this work of indexing. In as much as such a concept addresses the transformations undergone by labour in its post-industrial mode, it will be introduced here as a way to think through some of the themes discussed in this book: the decomposition of models of aesthetic production which relied on stable notions of the author, the work and the public; the crisis of spaces such as the museum or the gallery and figures such as the curator; and the challenges of a new mode of aesthetic production which operates through the semi-autonomous power of automated cybernetic systems - logarithms, algorithms and networks.

The introduction of a Marxist debate about labour in a context that deals with art is not meant to be reductive of 'art' to 'work'. On the contrary, the concept of immaterial labour challenges not only the modern emphasis on art as an autonomous sphere of existence, but also work as the only domain of economic relations and political struggle. I will thus focus on the genealogy of the notion

of ‘immaterial labour’, outline some of its key traits and speculate about how we might deploy this field of thinking to conceptualise the politics of aesthetic production and distribution within open systems. In doing so, I will draw mostly on the work of contemporary Italian Marxist thinkers, and in particular on recent work by Maurizio Lazzarato, Christian Marazzi and Paolo Virno.¹

Immaterial labour is a Marxist concept that aims at a redefinition of labour in the age of the general intellect - the age where the production of value is dependent on a socialised labour power organised in assemblages of humans and machines exceeding the spaces and times designated as ‘work’.² The notion of the ‘general intellect’ is the starting point for a reflection on the changes undergone by living labour and the production of surplus value in a context characterised by the saturation of mass markets. The overall tendency is identified in an expansion of the market for ‘information-rich’ commodities, which are not destroyed in the act of consumption but which persist and reverberate as events able to transform the sensorial basis of subjectivity - whereby subjective experience is seen as constituted mainly at the level of sense and sensibility. In this sense, the commodity in the age of the general intellect tends to become more akin to a work of art rather than a ‘material’ commodity.

It is important to highlight the fact that ‘immaterial labour’ is not intended as a sociological description of a new class formation. On the contrary, in the spirit of Marx’s formulation of the concept of class, it is intended as a political concept able to actively respond to the social transformations undergone by subjectivity in what have been called post-industrial, post-Fordist or network societies (Lazzarato 1997). As a concept, thus, it is a way of thinking outside the socialist obsession with work as the only political category worth thinking with, while at the same time by-passing some of the impasses that a general focus on signification and representation might cause in thinking the political dimension of postmodernity.³

This production of subjectivity, as Felix Guattari argued, is neither exclusively

signifying nor determined by an economic instance but it mobilises automated and autonomic processes involving non-linguistic and a-signifying semiotics. 'Considering subjectivity from the point of view of its production does not imply any return to traditional systems of binary determination - material infrastructure/ideological superstructure. The various semiotic registers that combine to engender subjectivity do not maintain obligatory hierarchical relations fixed for all time... Subjectivity is in fact plural and polyphonic... It recognizes no dominant or determinant instance guiding all other forms according to a univocal causality.' (1995: 1)

The genealogy of the concept of immaterial labour is thus Marxist and is an innovative development of Marx's notion of the 'general intellect' as described in the *Grundrisse*, in a section entitled 'Fragment on Machines' (1973). As summarized by Paolo Virno (1996), Marx identifies a future where increasingly the production of value resides not simply in the appropriation of the time of the worker, defined by units of time, but in scientific knowledge incarnated in the system of machines; and in a mass intellectuality understood as a living articulation of such machines. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx explicitly states that in the capitalist mode of production, the source of wealth is no longer the immediate work of the individual, but a general productivity of the social body - dispersed through technologies and human bodies, connected in new, shifting assemblages (the general intellect). In this context, the creation of wealth no longer depends on the working time narrowly defined, but coincides with the whole time of life. From the point of view of the evolution of the general intellect, it is the whole of social life - from child rearing to new forms of sexuality, from making music or videos on one's home computer to watching TV, from inventing new ways of dressing to making up a new way of speaking - that produces wealth. This is a socialised wealth, which cannot be measured by money but resides in the intensive value of relations, affections, modes of expressions, and forms of life. In this sense, the intrinsic drive of capital to look for cheaper labour can be interpreted as a strategy of formal subsumption - a strategy, that is, that relies on the incorporation of geopolitical regions which have been formed outside

the capitalist mode of production. However, in Marxist terms once the formal subsumption of pre-capitalist pockets is exhausted, we enter the age of 'real subsumption' - a qualitatively new phase in the evolution of capital, whereby the latter must reinvent itself in order to survive.⁴ The rush to cheapest labor in fact cannot counteract an overall drive to maximize profit by automation and by focusing on the identification of social needs and desires which exist in a virtual state - that is as potential future consumers markets. These needs, desires and relations are produced immanently, socially and cannot be measured through the notion of productivity of working hours. Thus, economists such as Christian Marazzi have challenged the ways in which notions such as wealth and productivity are measured by economic science. In 'post-material' economies, the primary matters are 'knowledge, intelligence, cognitive-immaterial qualities activated all along the productive processes'. This productivity cannot be measured either through the working hour or through the abstraction of exchange value: 'the quantity of [working] time can be the same... but in the same unit of measure we find lived historical subjectivities which are totally different. We can say that the ONE, the unit of measure, hides a difference, a multiplicity' (Marazzi 1999: 67).

However, this situation has not created the conditions for a liberation of life from work: on the contrary, the paradox of immaterial labor in the age of the general intellect, is that the production of value increasingly takes place in what was supposed to be 'liberated time' and in 'free action', in as much as at least in late capitalist societies, this liberated, intensive time is the force that drives innovation in the information economy. 'It is society as a whole that produces, creates and innovates, but it is only here [in the information economy] that the realization of surplus value becomes visible, it is only here that one commands, organizes and captures this social surplus value' and creates the conditions for its accumulation in the form of property (Lazzarato 1997: 92).

Thus we can say, that within this interpretation of Marxism, the source of value is not only the alienated surplus labour of the individual worker, but also a more indeterminate activity which captures and re-combines features of aesthetic

experience and artistic experimentation - an engagement with the world which produces new ways of seeing and feeling, which brings the future into the present, which invests and transforms singular and common experiences and, like artistic production, does not distinguish between working time and free time. In a sense, we might say that productivity starts before one even goes to work and cannot be measured according to traditional criteria. Immaterial labour, in fact, is described as that which produces a relation, that which transforms subjectivity, and that which works as a process punctuated by singular moments named events. Immaterial, then, does not mean 'less than material' and is not something 'new' in the sense that it is related to the emergence of the informational commodity, but literally refers to what Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault among others called the 'incorporeal' (Deleuze 1990). If mind and body are two expressions of the same substance, but considered from two different perspectives, the incorporeal refers to the plane of events and transformations that affect the mind but also double up and interfere with the processes of composition affecting the relations among bodies and their modifications.⁵

Thus the immaterial does not exist in a space that is exclusively psychological. What is expressed on this immaterial/incorporeal plane is not an 'ideological evaluation, but rather an incentive, a prompt to assume a form of living, a way of desiring, having a body, communicating'. An immaterial commodity, to follow Lazzarato, is first of all an 'event, that is an encounter and a twofold one, which happens twice: one time it meets the soul, the other the body. It is a bifurcation of divergent series' (Lazzarato 2003). Immaterial production helps us to see how the postmodern emphasis on signification completely underestimated the power of this other mode of communicating, which is not so much about constructing the world through shared meanings, as about an excess of the world in relation to signification, opening up to the powers of the incorporeal or the leibnizian 'non-empirical sensible' - where the sensible indicates the exuberance of small sensations with relation to the sphere of self-reflection'. For Virno, 'the singular perceives more than apprehends, one is crowded by signals and impressions which do not refer to the synthesis of a self-conscious subject' (1995: 116).

This is a controversial point within Italian Marxism: is the emergence of this socialised production, no longer based on the extraction of surplus value from time as measure, the point where the potential emerges for a full emancipation of the social from the capitalist structure of the wage/work relation? If this is so, how can this new autonomy of a social that tends to liberate itself from the model of 'work' produce a new radical extension of social welfare - a welfare that does not lead to uneven accumulation of profit or control in the hands of the few at the expense of the many? What about the role of desire in determining different actualisations of this potential?

On the one hand, then, the full realisation of the potential inherent in this new recombinant form of production - simultaneously social, artistic, scientific and technical - is not guaranteed in advance by the intrinsic 'goodness' of the many as opposed to the few. Immaterial production, in as much as it addresses the incorporeal, mobilises relations between sense and sensibility which can be put at the service of accumulation and social control. It thus presents us with the challenge of a kind of generalised return of identity formations and social dynamics that are both archaic and futuristic, mystical and technological, paranoid and schizoid at the same time. These processes are by definition unstable: they can always veer off in unpredictable directions and thus they imply an active effort to invent new spatio-temporal political arrangements - which are not accumulative, reproductive and stratified, but dissipative, productive and open.

On the other hand, the emergence of this socialised production does not only imply a liberation from work. However, this situation has not created the conditions for a liberation of life from work: on the contrary, the paradox of immaterial labour in the age of the general intellect, is that the production of value increasingly takes place in what was supposed to be 'liberated time' and in 'free action' but also a mutation and intensification of exploitation. Maurizio Lazzarato, for example, remarks how immaterial labour is subject to more intensive forms of control as implied by the 'management mandate to be

‘active, that is to become subjects of communication’ (1996: 135). In the world of work, the new autonomous worker can always turn into the precarious worker subjected to archaic relations of ‘servitude’ to his/her boss, while the potential inherent in a symbiotic relation with the machine can always be turned into an exhausting form of machinic enslavement.

Immaterial labour is thus a bit of a paradox, in as much as it expresses the moment where the productive qualities of this instrumental action that used to be work, something performed by workers, literally is freed up in order to become something that is no longer work, something that feels more like Art, albeit a reconfigured art suited to the age of the cybernetic machine. This mode also signals the emergence of new machines of control and subjectification which reimpose hierarchical relations at the service of social reproduction and the production of surplus value. These are movements which turn qualitative, intensive differences into quantitative relations of exchange and equivalence; which enclose the open and dissipative potential of cultural production into new differential hierarchies; which accumulate the rewards for work carried out by larger social assemblages; which exorcise the perceived threat of nonlinear movement by imposing a kind of hyper-disciplinarian cybernetic control.

Immaterial labour, in fact, is not immune to new diagrams of control, on the contrary. As the experience of the digital economy and network culture demonstrate, such diagrams work by reimposing centres and hierarchical distinctions against a much larger background of continuous variation (as the work on scale free networks demonstrate); by preemptively assigning objectives, outcomes and deadlines against the uneven temporality of processes of autonomous organisation which do not always follow their rhythm (as in the software industry); by channeling desire to prop up identities against the threat of dissipation (as in movements such as evangelical and nationalist blogs); by policing the rights of property against the indiscipline of nonlinear circulation (as in the legal wars against peer-to-peer systems).

What we are dealing with is not a dialectical opposition, but the schizophrenic coexistence of a bifurcation, of diverging tendencies that tend to resonate and interfere. This bifurcation does not produce a simple clash of two distinct and differentiated modes of production, one free and the other controlled, but messy local assemblages and compositions, subjective and machinic, characterised by different types of psychic investments, that cannot be the objects of normative, pre-made political judgments, but which need to be thought anew again and again, each time, in specific, dynamic compositions (Parisi & Fuller 2004).

In this sense the figure of an immaterial labour force organised in open systems allows us to think more concretely about the dynamics of such processes of bifurcation, resonance and interference between the corporeal and the incorporeal, the material and the immaterial, dissipation and accumulation, and auto-organisation and control. Open cybernetic networks, as a specific instantiation of the dynamics of open systems, show a tendency to constitute a singular field of interaction that is not enclosed by limits which separate it from the Outside, but is radically exposed to it from all sides. Contrary to what early discussions of cyberspace pointed out, in the open network the outside is everywhere and keeps flooding in as if in a cascade of waves (Terranova 2004). Open cybernetic networks are radically open to the Outside, that is, they are relentlessly traversed by a flow of matter that is informationally compressed in logarithms, organised by algorithmic code and modulated by technical machines. The open network is thus more than a collective space, where collaborations between individual actors take place through the mediation of technical machines at the service of the production of value. On the contrary, it is a space of permutations radically open to the Outside - to the intensive temporalities which underlie the real time of networked, global communication, to the fabric of incorporeal events and corporeal modifications, to the creative destruction unleashed by the real-time, stratified, global interplay of the technological, the social and the cultural. There is no outside, not even the outside of aesthetic experience in relation to the world of production or that of open modes of organisation as outside the world of closed institutions - because the outside is everywhere. ◊

NOTES:

1. On contemporary Italian Marxist thought see Paolo Virno & Michael Hardt (eds.) (1996); and Saree Makdisi, Cesare Casarino & Rebecca E. Karl (1996). Both texts offer useful introductions to the post-Gramscian turn in Italian Marxism, which took as its main point of reference the 'minor' Marx of the *Grundrisse* rather than Marx's main work in *Capital*.
2. The concept of the general intellect is developed by Marx in the section on the machine (1973). See also Paolo Virno 'Notes on the general intellect', in Makdisi, Casarino & Karl (1996),
3. An important strand of postmodern theory focused on the question of the signifying value of signs and their importance in determining the social construction of reality. From this perspective, the politics of postmodernism involve an active confrontation with the power of representations to construct a meaningful experience of the world – including the experience of other cultures and identities. See Stuart Hall (1996) and Linda Hutcheon (1989).
4. The notion of 'real subsumption' is crucial to Hardt and Negri's thesis in *Empire* where the difference between formal and real subsumption is repeatedly returned to (2000).
5. Following his work on Baruch Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze was very interested in the notion of a parallelism between mind and body - understood as attributes of a single substance, working simultaneously rather than against each other, as in the Cartesian notion of the two substances (one for the mind/soul; the other for the body). In this sense, every event befalling a body would affect it twice: as body and as mind/soul. Insofar as an event affects a body, it affects it in terms of its relation of composition and decomposition with other bodies, which cause it to pass onto a higher or lower degree of perfection, corresponding to its nature or essence; insofar as an event simultaneously affects a mind, it doubles as an incorporeal event, which operates at the level of sense, and hence, we might add at the level of subjectification, that is, the production of subjective ways of living (see Deleuze 1988 and 1990). From this perspective, every encounter (with a sound or an image for example) happens, so to speak, twice; it moves from one plane to the other simultaneously but not in the same way. It is in the interference between these two planes that the work of subjectivation unfolds.

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