06 2009

The Power of Living Knowledge

Crises of the Global University, Class Struggle and Institutions of the Common

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Should customers of the telephone company 3 need online assistance, they will be surprised by what they find on the dedicated area of its website. Those that respond to them are not in fact technicians paid by the company, but rather – through a free forum – other customers. For the best responses 3 rewards the contributors with modest prizes. Above all, the firm draws up monthly charts in which those that contribute to the forum can see their own value and merit recognised. If, however, posts are made that insinuate doubt about 3's use of unpaid work, within a few minutes the message gets deleted from the forum.

This anecdote represents the functioning of an increasingly hegemonic entrepreneurial model present not only in the field of telecommunications and demonstrates the central elements necessary to an analysis of contemporary capitalism. It shows, firstly, the ideological nature of the figure of the *prosumer*, diffused in the post-modern narrative of knowledge society: it is not the worker that becomes consumer, but on the contrary, the consumer

who gets put to work. Moreover, the subjects of social cooperation become burdened with cuts of labour costs, and this reproduces in them patterns of individual competition – this is the meaning of the monthly charts of 3. The prosumer, therefore, is continually separated from the common appropriation of that which is produced in common. After all, as the most insightful neo-liberal theorists of the web have noted for many years, intellectual property is in danger of becoming an obstacle for innovation and the production of knowledge, which is the main resource of contemporary capitalism. To ensure its survival, it is necessary to build a 'horizontal production based on common goods'[1], to valorise the characters exalted in media activist movements: sharing, the centrality of non-proprietary strategies, the surplus of cooperation in relation to the market. The political economy of knowledge can only survive in a 'capitalism without property' – exemplified by Web 2.0 and the clash between the models of Google and Microsoft - , that is, by capturing what is produced in common. The problem is not the purity of will, critical consciousness, or the morality of one's actions, which is what's at stake between *open source* and *free software* activists. The problem is exploitation. In this decisive gap the Marxian move is the design of social movements: the shift from moral critique to the critique of capitalist social relations.

Finally, the conclusion of the anecdote illustrates the ultimate truth of capital: it might do without property, but not without command. The only people paid by 3 are the new guardians and spies of the 'knowledge factories'. They are parasitic figures with no function other than that of controlling the continuous separation of the workers from the collective command on their product, of invigilating exploitation and the dispositifs of segmentation within social cooperation.

The new space-time coordinates of cognitive capitalism

In July 2007, a few days after the impressive queue of US consumers to buy the iPhone, the *New York Times* showed how its production is not reducible to the classical division of software and components between 'first' and 'third' world countries. Companies in Taiwan play a decisive role in technological innovation; they are the *silent hands (and brains) behind the iPhone*. On the other hand, the project development on American soil is largely based on the work of Indian 'techno-migrants'. Sajit exemplifies the common case
of Indian engineers who moved to the United States through a *body shop*[2], a system of intermediation that allocates low-waged labour to *high-tech* markets.[3] Arriving in California after working in a software company in Houston, like many of his countrymen, Sajit also works as a taxi driver, a temporary measure towards the realisation of his own 'American dream', a dream hard to realise for Sajit as for other white engineers of Silicon Valley hit by the *déclassement* at the time when their companies opted for *outsourcing* to Bangalore, India.

These brief flashes show the dissolving of the traditional image of the international division of labour that is rooted in the principles of political economy developed by Ricardo and the Smithian analysis of the wealth of nations, retraced on the colonial division between 'advanced' and 'backward' zones. In global capitalism the dialectics of centre and periphery no longer holds: from Shanghai to Milan, Hyderabad to Silicon Valley, San Paolo to Johannesburg we can observe, in different degrees, clearly, the whole spectrum of contemporary forms of production and labour. However, the disappearance of a centre-periphery dialectics primarily determined by the mobility of living labour does not mean a plane of

indeterminacy. On the contrary, it describes what was once defined as 'first' and 'third world' within the spatio-temporal coordinates of the metropolis as immediately global places. Here centre and periphery coexist and are determined time and again, as are 'advanced' and 'backward' forms of production, modes of extraction of absolute and relative surplus value, processes of real and formal subsumption, all 'enlightened' – to say it with the Marx of the *Grundrisse* – by a new paradigm of accumulation. The '*cognitive*' adjective of contemporary capitalism constitutes precisely this paradigm.[4]

Creative class and precariousness: for a critique of the politics of recognition

When speaking of cognitive labour we place two concepts, in part superposed and in part distinguished, under tension: on the one hand the cognitivisation as a total process of transformation, the watermark and 'general illumination' through which one can read the whole of the composition of labour and new processes of hierarchisation; on the other hand, cognitive labour as individuation of specific figures. Working in a factory and working in a university research centre do not amount to the same thing at all: but the common trait around which the new cognitive division of labour is organised is their finalisation towards knowledge production, permanent innovation and the valorisation of technological development. In this transformation, the very definition of *skill* tends to lose its descriptive value and exclusively assume a function of division and command. Let us take for instance the Indian 'techno-migrants' and Sajit: their definition as *high* or *low skill* labourers does not respond to their abilities or the activity they engage in, but rather to the need companies have to blackmail them by means of the politics of visas.

In light of this, the credit enjoyed in areas of the movement by categories such as ‘creative class’, forged by the consultants of capitalist capture, is surprising.[5] The question is not changed by the use of terms such as cognitariat, hacker class or even middle class: the question is to think that the subject of change is simply the cast of the structure of the labour market. In particular, in the stratifications determined by the distribution of social knowledge, the referents are exclusively the figures engaged in the sectors that intensively mobilise knowledge, from arts to research, from teaching to finance: both Richard Florida and many activists thus try to instil their knowledge of being the bearers of ‘human capital’ and of a new conception of labour capable of developing the post-Fordist economy. It would suffice to reveal to him and them, through the billions of the multinationals or the artisans’ politics of the communicative imaginary, what is already sociologically given and technically constructed by the ‘natural’ hierarchies of capitalism. That is to say, to reclaim only the recognition of one's own ‘value’ as individuals or segments of class. Here we can retrace the signs of ‘justice discourse’, a disquieting shadow hovering on the composition of precarious labour and the language of ‘meritocracy’ through which it speaks. So if one does not want to risk turning precariousness into a sweetened word that softens the harsh materiality of relations of exploitation, or even worse, the lexicon of a class that affirms its own creative identity, the problem is to grasp the material node around which these rhetoric are organised, that is the *deskilling*, the central terrain of struggle of university movements, to overturn it within the whole transformation of class composition. In other words, the problem is not the lack of recognition of merit, but the imposition of the law of value and wage labour through which the hierarchies of exploitation are redesigned and that takes on precisely the form of precariousness.

The production of living labour in edu-factory

At this point, having traced the new spatio-temporal coordinates of capital and the changes of its paradigms, we must, once again, follow Marx and go deeper into the 'secret *laboratory of production*'.[6] Inside the processes of cognitivisation this entails an investigation of the production of *living knowledge*.[7] It is clear how, for Marx, knowledge was central to the relation between living and dead labour: however, objectified in the system of machinery, it ended up being completely separate from the worker who produced it. The category of living labour does not merely describe the central role of science and knowledge in the productive process but also focuses on their immediate socialisation and direct incorporation in living labour.[8] Intellectual labour, whose composition has been enervated since the 1960s and 1970s by the struggles for mass education and the fleeing from factories and wage chains, is on the one hand hit by the misfortune of becoming a productive labourer[9]; on the other hand it tends towards autonomy from the automatic system of machines.[10]

Then, the *general intellect* is no longer objectified, at least in temporally stable processes, in dead labour, but it is inseparable from the subjects that compose it. Variable capital tends to absorb fixed capital. So the need to reduce living knowledge to abstract knowledge, that is, to the possibility of measuring it, forces capital to impose units of time that are completely artificial, and we can find an ample range of them in universities and education systems. The excess thus becomes the constitutive trait of cognitive production. The crisis of the law of value is embodied in the permanent tension between autonomy and subordination, self-valorisation and *enclosure*. The production of living knowledge must thus be understood in the double meaning of the

genitive[11], one the one hand as constitution of subjectivity, on the other hand as its productive power, not only for capital but also autonomously; and this needs to be historically situated in the contemporary transition where struggles over the production of subjectivity are immediately struggles against exploitation and vice versa. Better still, today they are the concrete form through which the actuality of class struggle is re-qualified.

In this context, can the university be a central place for the production of living knowledge? The trans-national project edu-factory (www.edu-factory.org) bets that it can. But it is best to clarify: the university is not a factory, if we observe its concrete functioning. The allusion is correct if by edu-factory we indicate the becoming immediately productive of the university, its peculiar traits of organisation and control of living labour, the change of its role in contemporary capitalism. Paradoxically, the university can be paradigmatic precisely to the extent that it loses its centrality as a place of transmission of knowledge; it pervades the whole metropolitan space-time, and moulds the new forms of cognitive labour by modelling the organisation of the enterprise. Above all, we are interested in grasping the political urgency of that allusion: how can we organise ourselves in the crisis of the university *as if* it was a factory? Or better still: how to situate the political node that the evocativeness of the comparison between university and factory implies, starting from the incommensurable difference of their concrete functioning and of the spatio-temporal coordinates, inside the new composition of living labour, and after the exhaustion of forms of representation?

Production and institutions of the common

Let us return to the anecdote of 3, which allows us to affirm that the *common*, not as a historically indeterminate concept, but in the specificity of the contemporary capitalist transition, has a double status: it is simultaneously what living labour produces and what capital captures, the material basis of a new social relation and the objective of accumulation through rent. In other words, it is the deadly threat and desperate resource of capitalism in crisis. The common, defined in the relation between singular and multiple, must constantly be translated by capital in the abstract language of value and measure. Here the tension between the autonomy conquered by living knowledge and the re-articulation of capitalist command is expressed. Here, we find the arcane of the making of surplus value, and the material basis of a new social relation based on the reinvention of freedom and equality.

So, here we also place the challenge opened by processes of turning universities into businesses and of the *global university*. As the movements and struggles at the global level demonstrate, no nostalgia or defence of the existing state of things is allowed, where the public and private are finally revealed as two faces of the same capitalist coin. What is at stake is a new organisation of labour today: autonomous institutions, *hic et nunc*, of *university of the common*, in the collective appropriation of what the power of living knowledge produces in the destruction of the dispositifs of capitalist capture.

There is no exaltation of the event here, or even worse of an event without process. The core issue is to institute a new temporal relation between event and sedimentation, between crisis and decision, between constituent process and concrete political forms, between rupture and organisation. That is assuming that the event is a result and never an origin. The principle is always the resistance and organisation of the production of the common, an

institutional thought of the present and of the event itself. A relation that, in so far as it is immanent to the class composition and temporality of the conflict is constantly traversed by the possibility of its subversion. And given that the critique of knowledge becomes immediately critique of political economy today, conflicts over education are fully conflicts over labour: the excess and dis-measure of living labour cease to be simple descriptive data and reacquire the constituent power of new institutions, in order to rethink, radically and anew, class struggle and communism in the contemporaneousness.

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[1] Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks*, Yale Press, 2006. Also online http://www.benkler.org/wonchapters.html.

[2] Xiang Biao, *Global "Body Shopping": An Indian Labor System in the Information Technology Industry*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2007.

[3] Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty,* Duke University Press, Durham, NC – London, 2006.

[4] Cfr. Carlo Vercellone (ed.), *Capitalismo cognitivo. Conoscenza e finanza nell'epoca postfordista,* Manifestolibri, Roma 2006.

[5] Alberto De Nicola, Gigi Roggero, Benedetto Vecchi, 'Contro la creative class' [Against the creative class], in *Posse*, October 2007, p. 84-94; transversal 02/07, "creativity hypes", http://eipcp.net/transversal/0207/denicolaetal/it.

[6] Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1*.

[7] Gigi Roggero, *La produzione del sapere vivo. Crisi dell'università e trasformazione del lavoro tra le due sponde dell'Atlantico* [The production of living knowledge. Crisis of the university and changes of labour between the two Atlantic shores], ombrecorte, Verona 2009.

[8] See Romano Alquati (ed.), "L'università e la formazione: l'incorporamento del sapere sociale nel lavoro vivo" [University and formation: the incorporation of social knowledge in living labour], in *Aut Aut*, n. 154, July- August 1976.

[9] Cfr. Romano Alquati, Nicola Negri, Andrea Sormano, *Università di ceto medio e proletariato intellettuale*, [Middle class university and intellectual proletariat] Stampatori, Torino 1978.

[10] Cfr. J. Read, *The Micro-Politics of Capital. Marx and the Prehistory of the Present*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2003.

[11] Cfr. Hans Jürgen Krahl, *Costituzione e lotta di classe* (1971) [Constitution and class struggle], trad. it. Jaca Book, Milano 1973.