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What is the Meaning of Autonomy Today?

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Subjectivation, Social Composition, Refusal of Work

I do not intend to make an historical recapitulation of the movement called autonomy, but I want to understand its peculiarity through an overview of some concepts like "refusal of work", and "class composition".

Journalists often use the word "operaismo" to define a political and philosophical movement which surfaced in Italy during the 60s. I absolutely dislike this term, because it reduces the complexity of the social reality to the mere datum of the centrality of the industrial workers in the social dynamics of late modernity.
The origin of this philosophical and political movement can be identified in the works of Mario Tronti, Romano Alquati, Raniero Panzieri, Toni Negri, and its central focus can be seen in the emancipation from the Hegelian concept of subject.
In the place of the historical subject inherited from the Hegelian legacy, we should speak of the process of subjectivation. Subjectivation takes the conceptual place of subject. This conceptual move is very close to the contemporary modification of the philosophical landscape that was promoted by French post-structuralism. Subjectivation in the place of subject. That means that we should not focus on the identity, but on the process of

becoming. This also means that the concept of social class is not to be seen as an ontological concept, but rather as a vectorial concept. In the framework of autonomous thought the concept of social class is redefined as an investment of social desire, and that means culture, sexuality, refusal of work.
In the 60s and in the 70s the thinkers who wrote in magazines like Classe operaia, and Potere operaio did not speak of social investments of desire: they spoke in a much more Leninist way. But their philosophical gesture produced an important change in the philosophical landscape, from the centrality of the worker identity to the decentralisation of the process of subjectivation. Félix Guattari, who met the operaismo after 77 and was met by the autonomous thinkers after 77, has always emphasized the idea that we should not talk of subject, but of "*processus de subjectivation*". From this perspective we can understand what the expression refusal of work means.
Refusal of work does not mean so much the obvious fact that workers do not like to be exploited, but something more. It means that the capitalist restructuring, the technological change, and the general transformation of social institutions are produced by the daily action of withdrawal from exploitation, of rejection of the obligation to produce surplus value, and to increase the value of capital, reducing the value of life.

I do not like the term "operaismo", because of the implicit reduction to a narrow social reference (the workers, "operai" in Italian), and I would prefer to use the word "compositionism". The concept of social composition, or "class composition" (widely used by the group of thinkers we are talking about) has much more to do with chemistry than with the history of society.
I like this idea that the place where the social phenomenon happens is not the solid, rocky historical territory of Hegelian

descent, but is a chemical environment where culture, sexuality, disease, and desire fight and meet and mix and continuously change the landscape. If we use the concept of composition, we can better understand what happened in Italy in the 70s, and we can better understand what autonomy means: not the constitution of a subject, not the strong identification of human beings with a social destiny, but the continuous change of social relationships, sexual identification and disidentification, and refusal of work. Refusal of work is actually generated by the complexity of social investments of desire.

In this view autonomy means that social life does not depend only on the disciplinary regulation imposed by economic power, but also depends on the internal displacement, shiftings, settlings and dissolutions that are the process of the self-composition of living society. Struggle, withdrawal, alienation, sabotage, lines of flight from the capitalist system of domination.

Autonomy is the independence of social time from the temporality of capitalism.

This is the meaning of the expression refusal of work. Refusal of work means quite simply:I don't want to go to work because I prefer to sleep. But this laziness is the source of intelligence, of technology, of progress. Autonomy is the self-regulation of the social body in its independence and in its interaction with the disciplinary norm.

Autonomy and Deregulation

There is another side of autonomy, which has been scarcely recognized so far. The process of the autonomisation of workers from their disciplinary role has provoked a social earthquake which triggered capitalist deregulation. The deregulation that entered the

world scene in the Thatcher-Reagan era, can be seen as the capitalist response to the autonomisation from the disciplinary order of labour. Workers demanded freedom from capitalist regulation, then capital did the same thing, but in a reversed way. Freedom from state regulation has become economic despotism over the social fabric. Workers demanded freedom from the life-time prison of the industrial factory. Deregulation responded with the flexibilisation and the fractalisation of labour.

The autonomy movement in the 70s triggered a dangerous process, a process which evolved from the social refusal of capitalist disciplinary rule to capitalist revenge, which took the shape of deregulation, freedom of the enterprise from the state, destruction of social protections, downsizing and externalisation of production, cutback of social spending, de-taxation, and finally flexibilisation. The movement of autonomisation did, in fact, trigger the destabilisation of the social framework resulting from a century of pressure on the part of the unions and of state regulation. Was it a terrible mistake that we made? Should we repent the actions of sabotage and dissent, of autonomy, of refusal of work which seem to have provoked capitalist deregulation?
Absolutely not.
The movement of autonomy actually forestalled the capitalist move, but the process of deregulation was inscribed in the coming capitalist post-industrial development and was naturally implied in the technological restructuring and in the globalisation of production.
There is a narrow relationship between refusal of work, informatisation of the factories, downsizing, outsourcing of jobs, and the flexibilisation of labour. But this relationship is much more complex than a cause-and-effect chain. The process of deregulation was inscribed in the development of new technologies

allowing capitalist corporations to unleash a process of globalisation.
A similar process happened in the media-field, during the same period.
Think about the free radio stations in the 70s. In Italy at that time there was a state-owned monopoly, and free broadcasting was forbidden. In 75-76 a group of media activists began to create small free radio stations like Radio Alice in Bologna. The traditional left (the Italian Communist party and so on) denounced those mediactivists, warning about the danger of weakening the public media system, and opening the door to privately owned media.

Should we think today that those people of the traditional statist left were right? I don't think so, I think they were wrong at that time, because the end of the state-owned monopoly was inevitable, and freedom of expression is better than centralized media. The traditional statist left was a conservative force, doomed to defeat as they desperately tried to preserve an old framework which could no longer last in the new technological and cultural situation of the post-industrial transition.
We could say much the same about the end of the Soviet Empire and of so-called "real-socialism".
Everybody knows that Russian people were probably living better twenty years ago than today, and the pretended democratisation of Russian society has so far mostly been the destruction of social protections, and the unleashing of a social nightmare of aggressive competition, violence, and economic corruption. But the dissolution of the socialist regime was inevitable, because that order was blocking the dynamic of the social investment of desire, and because the totalitarian regime was obtruding cultural innovation. The dissolution of the communist regimes was inscribed in the social composition of collective intelligence, in the imagination

created by the new global media, and in the collective investment of desire. This is why the democratic intelligentsia, and dissident cultural forces took part in the struggle against the socialist regime, although they knew that capitalism was not paradise. Now deregulation is savaging the former soviet society, and people are experiencing exploitation and misery and humiliation at a point never reached before, but this transition was inevitable and in a sense it has to be seen as a progressive change.

Deregulation does not mean only the emancipation of private enterprise from state regulation and a reduction of public spending and social protection. It also means an increasing flexibilisation of labour.
The reality of labour flexibility is the other side of this kind of emancipation from capitalist regulation. We should not underestimate the connection between refusal of work and the flexibilisation which ensued.
I remember that one of the strong ideas of the movement of autonomy proletarians during the 70s was the idea "precariousness is good". Job precariousness is a form of autonomy from steady regular work, lasting an entire life. In the 70s many people used to work for a few months, then to go away for a journey, then back to work for a while. This was possible in times of almost full employment and in times of egalitarian culture. This situation allowed people to work in their own interest and not in the interest of capitalists, but quite obviously this could not last forever, and the neoliberal offensive of the 80s was aimed to reverse the rapport de force. .
Deregulation and the flexibilisation of labour have been the effect and the reversal of the worker's autonomy. We have to know that not only for historical reasons. If we want to understand what has to be done today, in the age of fully flexibilised labour, we have to

understand how the capitalist takeover of social desire could happen.

Rise and Fall of the Alliance of Cognitive Labour and Recombinant Capital

During the last decades the informatisation of machinery has played a crucial role in the flexibilisation of labour, together with the intellectualisation and immaterialisation of the most important cycles of production.
The introduction of the new electronic technologies and the informatisation of the production cycle, opened way to the creation of a global network of info-production, de-territorialized, de-localised, de-personalised. The subject of work can be increasingly identified with the global network of info-production.
The industrial workers had been refusing their role in the factory and gaining freedom from capitalist domination. However, this situation drove the capitalists to invest in labour-saving technologies and also to change the technical composition of the work-process, in order to expel the well organised industrial workers and to create a new organisation of labour which could be more flexible.
The intellectualisation and immaterialisaton of labour is one side of the social change in production forms. Planetary globalisation is the other face. Immaterialisation and globalisation are subsidiary and complementary. Globalisation does indeed have a material side, because industrial labour does not disappear in the post-industrial age, but migrates towards the geographic zones where it is possible to pay low wages and regulations are poorly implemented.
In the last issue of the magazine *Classe operaia*, in 1967, Mario Tronti wrote: the most important phenomenon of the next

decades will be the development of the working class on a global planetarian scale. This intuition was not based on an analysis of the capital process of production, but rather on an understanding of the transformation in the social composition of labour. Globalisation and informatisation could be foretold as an effect of the refusal of work in the western capitalist countries.

During the last two decades of the twentieth century we have witnessed a sort of alliance between recombinant capital and cognitive work. What I call recombinant are those sections of capitalism which are not closely connected to a particular industrial application, but can be easily transferred from one place to another, from one industrial application to another, from one sector of economic activity to another and so on. The financial capital that takes the central role in politics and in the culture of the 90s may be called recombinant.

The alliance of cognitive labour and financial capital has produced important cultural effects, namely the ideological identification of labour and enterprise. The workers have been induced to see themselves as self-entrepreneurs, and this was not completely false in the dotcom period, when the cognitive worker could create his own enterprise, just investing his intellectual force (an idea, a project, a formula) as an asset. This was the period that Geert Lovink defined as dotcommania (in his remarkable book Dark Fiber). What was dotcommania? Due to mass participation in the cycle of financial investment in the 90s, a vast process of self-organization of cognitive producers got under way. Cognitive workers invested their expertise, their knowledge and their creativity, and found in the stock market the means to create enterprises. For several years, the entrepreneurial form became the point where financial capital and highly productive cognitive labour met. The libertarian and liberal ideology that dominated the (American) cyberculture of the 90s idealized the market by

presenting it as a pure environment. In this environment, as natural as the struggle for the survival of the fittest that makes evolution possible, labour would find the necessary means to valorise itself and become enterprise. Once left to its own dynamic, the reticular economic system was destined to optimise economic gains for everyone, owners and workers, also because the distinction between owners and workers would become increasingly imperceptible when one enters the virtual productive cycle. This model, theorised by authors such as Kevin Kelly and transformed by Wired magazine in a sort of digital-liberal, scornful and triumphalist *Weltanschauung*, went bankrupt in the first couple of years of the new millennium, together with the new economy and a large part of the army of self-employed cognitive entrepreneurs who had inhabited the dotcom world. It went bankrupt because the model of a perfectly free market is a practical and theoretical lie. What neoliberalism supported in the long run was not the free market, but monopoly. While the market was idealised as a free space where knowledges, expertise and creativity meet, reality showed that the big groups of command operate in a way that is far from being libertarian, but instead introduces technological automatisms, imposing itself with the power of the media or money, and finally shamelessly robbing the mass of share holders and cognitive labour.

In the second half of the 90s a real class struggle occurred within the productive circuit of high technologies. The becoming of the web has been characterised by this struggle. The outcome of the struggle, at present, is unclear. Surely the ideology of a free and natural market turned out to be a blunder. The idea that the market works as a pure environment of equal confrontation for ideas, projects, the productive quality and the utility of services has been wiped out by the sour truth of a war that monopolies have waged against the multitude of self-employed cognitive workers

and against the slightly pathetic mass of microtraders.
The struggle for survival was not won by the best and most successful, but by the one who drew his gun - the gun of violence, robbery, systematic theft, of the violation of all legal and ethical norms. The Bush-Gates alliance sanctioned the liquidation of the market, and at that point the phase of the internal struggle of the virtual class ended. One part of the virtual class entered the techno-military complex; another part (the large majority) was expelled from the enterprise and pushed to the margins of explicit proletarization. On the cultural plane, the conditions for the formation of a social consciousness of the cognitariat are emerging, and this could be the most important phenomenon of the years to come, the only key to offer solutions to the disaster.
Dotcoms were the training laboratory for a productive model and for a market. In the end the market was conquered and suffocated by the corporations, and the army of self-employed entrepreneurs and venture microcapitalists was robbed and dissolved. Thus a new phase began: the groups that became predominant in the cycle of the net-economy forge an alliance with the dominant group of the old-economy (the Bush clan, representative of the oil and military industry), and this phase signals a blocking of the project of globalisation. Neoliberalism produced its own negation, and those who were its most enthusiastic supporters become its marginalized victims.
With the dotcom crash, cognitive labour has separated itself from capital. Digital artisans, who felt like entrepreneurs of their own labour during the 90s, are slowly realizing that they have been deceived, expropriated, and this will create the conditions for a new consciousness of cognitive workers. The latter will realise that despite having all the productive power, they have been expropriated of its fruits by a minority of ignorant speculators who are only good at handling the legal and financial aspects of the

productive process. The unproductive section of the virtual class, the lawyers and the accountants, appropriate the cognitive surplus value of physicists and engineers, of chemists, writers and media operators. But they can detach themselves from the juridical and financial castle of semiocapitalism, and build a direct relation with society, with the users: then maybe the process of the autonomous self-organisation of cognitive labour will begin. This process is already under way, as the experiences of media activism and the creation of networks of solidarity from migrant labour show. We needed to go through the dotcom purgatory, through the illusion of a fusion between labour and capitalist enterprise, and then through the hell of recession and endless war, in order to see the problem emerge in clear terms. On the one hand, the useless and obsessive system of financial accumulation and a privatisation of public knowledge, the heritage of the old industrial economy. On the other hand, productive labour increasingly inscribed in the cognitive functions of society: cognitive labour is starting to see itself as a cognitariat, building institutions of knowledge, of creation, of care, of invention and of education that are autonomous from capital.

Fractalisation Despair and Suicide

In the net economy flexibility has evolved into a form of the fractalisation of labour. Fractalisation means fragmentation of time-activity. The worker does not exist any more as a person. He is just the interchangeable producer of micro-fragments of recombinant semiosis which enters into the continuous flux of the network. Capital is no longer paying for the availability of the worker to be exploited for a long period of time, is no longer paying a salary covering the entire range of economic needs of a

working person. The worker (a mere machine possessing a brain that can be used for a fragment of time) is paid for his punctual performance. The working time is fractalised and cellularised. Cells of time are on sale on the net, and the corporation can buy as many as it needs. The cell phone is the tool that best defines the relationship between the fractal worker and recombinant capital. Cognitive labour is an ocean of microscopic fragments of time, and cellularisation is the ability to recombine fragments of time in the framework of a single semi-product. The cell phone can be seen as the assembly line of cognitive labour.

This is the effect of the flexibilisation and fractalisation of labour: what used to be the autonomy and the political power of the workforce has became the total dependence of cognitive labour on the capitalist organisation of the global network. This is the central nucleus of the creation of semiocapitalism. What used to be refusal of work has became a total dependence of emotions, and thought on the flow of information. And the effect of this is a sort of nervous breakdown that strikes the global mind and provokes what we are accustomed to call the dotcom-crash.
The dotcom-crash and the crisis of financial mass-capitalism can be viewed as an effect of the collapse of the economic investment of social desire. I use the word collapse in a sense that is not metaphorical, but rather a clinical description of what is going on in the western mind. I use the word collapse in order to express a real pathological crash of the psycho-social organism. What we have seen in the period following the first signs of economic crash, in the first months of the new century, is a psychopathological phenomenon, the collapse of the global mind. I see the present economic depression as the side-effect of a psychic depression. The intense and prolonged investment of desire and of mental and libidinal energies in labour has created the psychic environment for

the collapse which is now manifesting itself in the field of economic recession, in the field of military aggression and of a suicidal tendency.
The attention economy has became an important subject during the first years of the new century.
Virtual workers have less and less time for attention , they are involved in a growing number of intellectual tasks, and they have no more time to devote to their own life, to love, tenderness, and affection. They take Viagra because they have no time for sexual preliminaries.
The cellularisation has produced a kind of occupation of life. The effect is a psychopathologisation of social relationships. The symptoms of it are quite evident: millions of boxes of Prozac sold every month, the epidemic of attention deficit disorders among youngsters, the diffusion of drugs like Ritalin among children in the schools, and the spreading epidemic of panic..

The scenario of the first years of the new millennium seems to be dominated by a veritable wave of psychopathic behaviour. The suicidal phenomenon is spreading well beyond the borders of Islamic fanatic martyrdom. Since WTC/911 suicide has became the crucial political act on the global political scene.
Aggressive suicide should not be seen as a mere phenomenon of despair and aggression, but has to be seen as the declaration of the end.
The suicidal wave seems to suggest that humankind has run out of time, and despair has became the prevalent way of thinking about the future.

So what? I have no answer. All we can do is what we are actually doing already: the self-organisation of cognitive work is the only way to go beyond the psychopathic present. I don't believe that the world can be governed by Reason. The Utopia of Enlightenment

has failed.
But I think that the dissemination of self-organised knowledge can create a social framework containing infinite autonomous and self-reliant worlds.
The process of creating the network is so complex that it cannot be governed by human reason. The global mind is too complex to be known and mastered by sub-segmental localised minds. We cannot know, we cannot control, we cannot govern the entire force of the global mind.

But we can master the singular process of producing a singular world of sociality.
This is autonomy today.