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Radical machines against the techno-empire

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Everyone of us is a machine of the real, everyone of us is a constructive machine.
Toni Negri

Technical machines obviously work only if they are not out of order. Desiring machines on the contrary continually break down as they run, and in fact run only when they are not functioning properly. Art often takes advantage of this property by creating veritable group fantasies in which desiring production is used to short-circuit social production, and to interfere with the reproductive function of technical machines by introducing an element of dysfunction.
Gilles Deluze, Felix Guattari, *L'anti-Oedipe*

What is knowledge sharing? How does the knowledge economy function? Where is the general intellect at work? Take the cigarettes machine. The machine you see is the embodying of a scientific knowledge into hardware and software components, generations of engineering stratified for commercial use: it automtically manages fluxes of money and commodities,

substitutes a human with a user-friendly interface, defends private property, functions on the basis of a minimal control and restocking routine. Where has the tobacconist gone? Sometimes he enjoys free time. Other times the company that owns the chain of distribution has replaced him. In his place one often meets the technician. Far from emulating Marx's *Fragment on machines* with a *Fragment on cigarette machines*, this unhealthy example is meant to show how postfordist theories live around us and that material or abstract machines built by collective intelligence are organically chained to the fluxes of the economy and of our needs.

Rather than of general intellect we should talk of *general intellects*. There are *multiple* forms of collective intelligence. Some can become totalitarian systems, such as the military-managerial ideology of the neocons or of Microsoft empire. Others can be embodied in social democratic bureaucracies, in the apparatus of police control, in the maths of stock market speculators, in the architecture of our cities (every day we walk on concretions of collective intelligence). In the dystopias of *2001 Space Odyssey* and *The Matrix*, the brain of machines evolves into self-consciousness to the point of getting rid of the human. 'Good' collective intelligences, on the other hand, produce international networks of cooperation such as the network of the global movement, of precarious workers, of free software developers, of media activism. They also produce the sharing of knowledge in universities, the Creative Commons open licenses and participative urban planning, narrations and imaginaries of liberation.

From a geopolitical perspective we could figure ourselves in one of Philip Dick's sci-fi paranoia: Earth is dominated by one Intelligence, but inside of it a war unfolds between two Organisations of the general intellect, opposed yet intertwined.

Used to the traditional *representative* forms of the global movement we fail to grasp the new productive conflicts. Concerned as we are about the imperial war, we do not appreciate the centrality of this struggle. Following Manuel Castells, we define the movement as a *resistance identity* that fails to become a *project identity*. We are not aware of the distance between the global movement and the centre of capitalist production. Paraphrasing Paolo Virno, we say that there already is too much politics in new forms of production for the politics of the movement to still enjoy any autonomous dignity. [1]

The events of 1977 (not only in Italy but also in the punk season) sanctioned the end of the 'revolutionary' paradigm and the beginning of that of movement, opening new spaces of conflict in the fields of communication, media and the production of the imagery. These days we are discovering that the 'movement' as a format needs to be overcome, in favour of that of network.

Three kinds of action, well separated in the XIXth century - labour, politics and art - are now integrated into one attitude and central to each productive process. In order to work, do politics or produce imaginary today one needs hybrid competences. This means that we all are workers-artists-activists, but it also means that the figures of the militant and the artist are surpassed and that such competences are only formed in a common space that is the sphere of the collective intellect.

Since Marx's *Grundrisse*, the general intellect is the patriarch of a family of concepts that are more numerous and cover a wide range of issues: knowledge-based economy, information society, cognitive capitalism, immaterial labour, collective intelligence, creative class, *cognitariat,* knowledge sharing and postfordism. In the last few years the political lexicon has got rich of interlaced critical tools

that we turn over in our hands wondering about their exact usefulness. For the sake of simplicity, we only accounted for the terms that inherited an Enlightenment, speculative, angelic and almost neognostic approach. But reality is much more complex and we wait for new forms to claim for themselves the role that within the same field is due to desire, body, aesthetics, biopolitics. We also remember the quarrel of *cognitive* vs. *precarious* workers, two faces of the same medal that the *precogs* of Chainworkers.org describe in this way: "cognitive workers are networkers, precarious workers are networked, the former are brainworkers, the latter chainworkers: the former first seduced and then abandoned by companies and financial markets, the latter dragged into and made flexible by the fluxes of global capital".[2]

The point is that we are searching for a new collective agent and a new point of application for the rusted revolutionary lever. The success of the concept of multitude also reflects the current disorientation. Critical thought continuously seeks to forge the collective actor that can embody the *Zeitgeist* and we can go back to history reconstructing the underlying forms of each paradigm of political action: the more or less collective social agent, the more or less vertical organisation, the more or less utopian goal. Proletariat and multitude, party and movement, revolution and self-organisation.

In the current imaginary the general intellect (or whatever you want to call it) seems to be the collective agent, its form being the network, its goal creating a plane of self-organisation, its field of action being biopolitical spectacular cognitive capitalism.

We are not talking about multitude here, because it is a concept at once too noble and inflated, heir of centuries of philosophy and too often called for by marching megaphones. The concept of

multitude has been more useful to exorcise the identitary pretences of the global movement, than as a constructive tool. The *pars construens* will be a task for the general intellect: philosophers such as Paolo Virno, when they have to find a common ground, the lost collective agent, reconstruct the Collective Intelligence and Cooperation as emerging and constitutive properties of the multitude.

In a different paranoid fable, we imagine that technology is the last heir of a series of collective agents generated by history as in a matryoshka doll: religion - theology - philosophy - ideology - science - technology. This is to say that in information and intelligence technologies the history of thought is stratified, even though we only remember the last episode of this series, i.e. the network that embodies the dreams of the previous political generation.

How did we come to all this? We are at the point of convergence between different historical planes: the inheritance of historical vanguards in the synthesis of aesthetics and politics; the struggles of '68 and '77 that open up new spaces for conflict outside of the factories and inside the imaginary and communication; the hypertrophy of the society of the spectacle and the economy of the logo; the transformation of fordist wage labour into postfordist autonomous precarious labour; the information revolution and the emergence of the internet, the net economy and the network society; utopia turned into technology. The highest exercise of *representation* that becomes molecular *production*.

Some perceive the current moment as a lively world network, some as an indistinct cloud, some as a new form of exploitation, some as an opportunity. Today the density reaches its critical mass and forms a global radical class on the intersection of the planes of

activism, communication, arts, network technologies and independent research. What does it mean, to be *productive* and *projectual*, to abandon mere *representation* of conflict and the *representative* forms of politics?

There is a hegemonic metaphor in political debate, in the arts world, in philosophy, in media criticism, in network culture: that is Free Software. We hear it quoted at the end of each intervention that poses the problem of what is to be done (but also in articles of strategic marketing.), whilst the twin metaphor of open source contaminates every discipline: open source architecture, open source literature, open source democracy, open source city...

Softwares are immaterial machines. The metaphor of Free Software is so simple for its immateriality that it often fails to clash with the real world. Even if we know that it is a good and right thing, we ask polemically: what will change when all the computers in the world will run free software? The most interesting aspect of the free software model is the immense cooperative network that was created by programmers on a global scale, but which other concrete examples can we refer to in proposing new forms of action in the real world and not only in the digital realm?

In the '70s Deleuze and Guattari had the intuition of the machinic, an introjection / imitation of the industrial form of production. Finally a hydraulic materialism was talking about desiring, revolutionary, celibate, war machines rather than representative or ideological ones.[3]

Deleuze and Guattari took the machine out of the factory, now it is up to us to take it out of the network and imagine a post-internet generation.

Cognitive labour produces machines of all kinds, not only software: electronic machines, narrative machines, advertising machines, mediatic machines, acting machines, psychic machines, social machines, libidinous machines. In the XIXth century the definition of machine referred to a device transforming energy. In the XXth century Turing's machine - the foundation of all computing - starts interpreting information in the form of sequences of 0 and 1. For Deleuze and Guattari on the other hand a desiring machine produces, cuts and composes fluxes and without rest it produces the real.

Today we intend by machine the elementary form of the general intellect, each node of the network of collective intelligence, each material or immaterial dispositif that organically interlinks the fluxes of the economy and our desires.

At a higher level, the network can itself be regarded as a mega-machine of assemblage of other machines, and even the multitude becomes machinic, as Negri and Hardt write in Empire: "The multitude not only uses machines to produce, but also becomes increasingly machinic itself, as the means of production are increasingly integrated into the minds and bodies of the multitude. In this context reappropriation means having free access to and control over knowledge, information, communication, and affects because these are some of the primary means of biopolitical production. Just because these productive machines have been integrated into the multitude does not mean that the multitude has control over them. Rather, it makes more vicious and injurious their alienation. The right to reappropriation is really the multitude's right to self-control and autonomous self-production". [4]

In other words in postfordism the factory has come out of the factory and the whole of society has become a factory. An already machinic multitude suggests that the actual subversion of the productive system into an autonomous plane could be possible in a flash, by disconnecting the multitude from capital command. But the operation is not that easy in the traditional terms of 'reappropriation of the means of production'. Why?

Whilst it is true that today the main means of labour is the brain and that workers can immediately reappropriate the means of production, it is also true that control and exploitation in society have become immaterial, cognitive, networked. Not only the general intellect of the multitudes has grown, but also the general intellect of the empire. The workers, armed with their computers, can reappropriate the means of production, but as soon as the stick their nose out of their desktop they have to face a Godzilla that they had not predicted, the Godzilla of the enemy's general intellect.

Social, state and economic meta-machines – to which human beings are connected like appendixes - are dominated by conscious and subconscious automatisms. Meta-machines are ruled by a particular kind of cognitive labour which is the administrative political managerial labour, that runs projects, organizes, controls on a vast scale: a form of general intellect that we have never considered, whose prince is a figure that appears on the scene in the second half of the XXth century: the *manager*.

As Bifo tells us recalling Orwell, in our post-democratic world (or if you prefer in empire) managers have seized command: "Capitalism is disappearing, but Socialism is not replacing it. What is now arising is a new kind of planned, centralised society which will be neither capitalist nor, in any accepted sense of the word,

democratic. The rulers of this new society will be the people who effectively control the means of production: that is, business executives, technicians, bureaucrats and soldiers, lumped together by Burnham, under the name of *managers*. These people will eliminate the old capitalist class, crush the working class, and so organise society that all power and economic privilege remain in their own hands. Private property rights will be abolished, but common ownership will not be established. The new *managerial* societies will not consist of a patchwork of small, independent states, but of great super-states grouped round the main industrial centres in Europe, Asia, and America. Internally, each society will be hierarchical, with an aristocracy of talent at the top and a mass of semi-slaves at the bottom".[5]

At the beginning we mentioned two intelligences that face one another in the world and the forms in which they manifest themselves. The multitude functions as a machine because it is inside a scheme, a *social software*, thought for the exploitation of its energies and its ideas. Then, the techno-managers (public private or military) are those who, whether consciously or not, plan and control machines made up of human beings assembled with one another. *The dream of General intellect brings forth monsters.*

Compared with the pervasive neoliberal techno-management, the intelligence of the global movement is of little importance. What's to be done? We need to invent virtuous revolutionary radical machines to place them in the nodal points of the network, as well as facing the general intellect that administers the imperial meta-machines. Before starting this we need to be aware of the density of the 'intelligence' that is condensed in each commodity, organization, message and media, in each machine of postmodern society.

Don't hate the machine, be the machine. How can we turn the sharing of knowledge, tools and spaces into new radical revolutionary productive machines, beyond the inflated Free Software? This is the challenge that once upon the time was called reappropriation of the means of production.

Will the global radical class manage to invent social machines that can challenge capital and function as planes of autonomy and autopoiesis? Radical machines that are able to face the techno-managerial intelligence and imperial meta-machines lined up all around us? The match *multitude vs. empire* becomes the match *radical machines vs. imperial techno-monsters*. How do we start building these machines?

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[1] Paolo Virno, A Grammar of the Multitude, Semiotext(e), New York 2003. Orig. ed. Grammatica della moltitudine, Derive Approdi, Roma 2002.

[2] Chainworkers, Il precognitariato. L'europrecariato si è sollevato, 2003, published on www.rekombinant.org/article.php?sid=2184. See also www.chainworkers.org and www.inventati.org/mailman/listinfo/precog.

[3] Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, L'anti-Oedipe, Les Éditions De Minuit, Paris 1972.

[4] Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, Empire, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2000.

[5] George Orwell, Second Thoughts on James Burnham, 1946, quoted in Franco "Bifo" Berardi, Il totalitarismo tecno-manageriale

da Burnham a Bush, 2004, published on www.rekombinant.org/article.php?sid=2241.