

Keep on smiling

Questions on immaterial labour

Introduction: a colourful necklace

Toni Negri and Michael Hardt's recent works, *Empire*¹ and *Multitude*², have earned these authors great popularity in the Anglo-Saxon world. Negri is known in Italy for belonging to *autonomia operaia* in the '70s and for being on the receiving end of political persecution by the Italian state at the end of that decade. His earlier work (above all *Marx Beyond Marx*)³ was a valid contribution to the understanding of the nature of capitalism and influenced many among us who sought an answer to Marxist objectivism and a theory of history based on class struggle.

However, Negri's earlier work circulated among a restricted public, via obscure publishers. The new Toni Negri for the 'new' era emerges in 2000 with *Empire*. A tome written with literature professor Michael's Hardt, *Empire* was warmly welcomed even by the bourgeois press.⁴

Negri's popularity is to be found above all in the fact that his new work addresses important questions, opened by the end of the cycle of struggles of the '70s. In particular: can we still speak about communism, the revolution, classes, in a world where the conditions for working class struggle seem to have been dismantled?

The new Negri proclaims the advent of a new, postmodern, phase of capitalism, in which orthodox Marxism no longer applies; and which needs a new theory: theirs. As Negri and Hardt say:

Social reality changes... then the old theories are no longer adequate. We need new theories for the new reality... Capitalist production and capitalist society has changed... (*Multitude*, p. 140)

Negri and Hardt's work to find a new theory for the 'new' world proceeds alongside other academics, such as Paolo Virno or Maurizio Lazzarato. Their effort contributed to the development of new concepts such as that of 'immaterial labour' and the 'multitude'.

An important reason for Negri and Hardt's popularity is that their work seems to integrate the most fashionable theories of the last twenty years: postmodernism, theories of post-Fordism, weightless economy, etc. - but it is also a theory that presents itself as revolutionary and anti-capitalist.

Another important reason for Negri and Hardt's success is that their theory is able to cover an enormous number of popular and urgent issues: globalisation, the retreat of

traditional class struggle, aspects of capitalist restructuring, the emergence of new social movements, the Zapatistas or the anti-GM peasant struggles in India.

We may perhaps be surprised that one book (or two: *Multitude* appears mainly to clarify *Empire's* arguments⁵) can contain all this. But Negri and Hardt have a secret: they employ a new, postmodern style suitable, as Maria Turchetto comments, 'for zapping' rather than for a systematic reading.⁶ Thanks to this style Negri and Hardt can swiftly touch upon a broad range of loosely interrelated issues, often in passing, often addressing the immediately obvious and the immediately agreeable. And indeed, for example, *Autonomy & Solidarity* notices that Negri and Hardt's attractiveness is in the unquestionable positivity of their 'demands for true democracy, freedom from poverty and an end to the war'.⁷

Although it has generated innumerable criticisms and comments, Negri and Hardt's theory of everything escapes a comprehensive critique simply because of this fractal nature.⁸ We, too, are obliged to focus, of course. But we choose an issue that seems to be the backbone of their whole construction: the concept of immaterial labour/production.

In *Empire* Negri and Hardt claim they contributed to an international theoretical effort of definition and understanding of the concept of immaterial labour, the new labour for the 'new' era.⁹ Initially conceived as labour based on the use of thought and knowledge, immaterial labour was later enriched by Negri and Hardt with the aspect of 'manipulation of affects'. And it was redefined in terms of its aims rather than the nature of its material activity in order to dodge obvious objections (any labour, let alone 'affective' labour like care, always involves physical activity, etc.).

By *Empire* then, the newest definition of immaterial labour was: labour whose aim is to produce immaterial goods (*Multitude*, p. 334). As Negri and Hardt explain in *Multitude*:

The labour involved in all immaterial production, we should emphasise, remains material... what is immaterial is its product. (*Multitude*, p. 111)

⁵ In fact *Multitude* seem to have been written with the aim to patch up the disastrous effect of the war in Iraq on their theory. Or to answer to a number of criticisms from the left: for example, to endorse not a revolution but decentralised micro-struggles.

⁶ 'L'Impero Colpisce Ancora', <http://www.intermarx.com/interventi/impero.html>.

⁷ http://auto_sol.tao.ca/node/view/1307. This review also praises their 'critical rethinking' of basic political concepts such as democracy, sovereignty, representation.

⁸ Among many articles on Negri and Hardt: Ugo Rossi, 'The Counter-Empire to Come', *Science & Society*, Vol. 69, no. 2, April 2005, pp. 191-217; Maria Turchetto, *L'Impero*; Paul Thompson 'Foundation and Empire: A Critique of Negri and Hardt', *Capital and Class* 86, Summer 2005, pp. 73-95.

⁹ In *Empire*, p. 29, they mention the work of 'Italian radicals' and quote the philosopher Virno as a reference. An important review of Negri's pre-*Empire* work is Nick Witherford's 'Autonomist Marxism and the Information Society', *Capital and Class* 52, pp. 85-125.

¹ Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, London, 2000.

² Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Multitude*, The Penguin Press, New York, 2004.

³ *Marx Beyond Marx*, Autonomedia, London, 1991.

⁴ For example, *The New York Times*, as socialist Alex Callinicos, embittered by Negri's attacks on traditional Marxism, reminds to us in 'Toni Negri in perspective', *International Socialism Journal*, Autumn 2001, <http://www.isj1text.ble.org.uk/pubs/isj92/callinicos.htm>

So defined, immaterial labour has two main aspects:

- a) it is 'manipulation of symbols' (i.e. IT work, production of knowledge, problem-solving, etc.) and/or
- b) it is 'manipulation of affects' (production of emotions, well-being, *smiles*, etc.).¹⁰

Despite this stress, in the course of their work Negri and Hardt freely use both the definitions considered above: immaterial labour as the creation of immaterial products *and* as any labour implying 'immaterial' practices (e.g. post-Fordism and computerisation).

If this conceptual freedom may confuse us, it is only because we still think of production in a traditional way: as production of commodities. A more open mind like theirs, which sees production as anything done in society, can easily conceive the communication between staff in a car factory as a product in its own rights. Thus post-Fordist production can be seen as immaterial production alongside services and IT.

In fact, under the 'hegemony' of immaterial production, all production, including material production, tends to become more immaterial - living in a world where immaterial production is central, we increasingly tend to produce all goods for their images and meanings rather than their material functionality.

Not only all production, but, Negri and Hardt repeat many times, society as a whole is shaped by immaterial production. Immaterial production defines the way we see the world and the way we act in the world - in Hardt's words, it has 'anthropological implications'.¹¹ As we read in *Multitude*, immaterial production shapes society in its image. It makes society more informationalised, intelligent, affective:

Our claim... is that immaterial labour has become hegemonic in qualitative terms and has imposed a tendency on other forms of labour and society itself... Just as in [the times of the 'hegemony' of industrial production] society itself had to industrialise itself, today 'society has to informationalise, become intelligent, become affective. (*Multitude*, p. 109)

Daring more, Negri and Hardt argue that not only does immaterial production influence society, but it actually produces it. This is true, they say, because this new production mainly aims at the production of communication and affects. Daily, tons of communication and affects are created by services, by selling 'with a smile', by the advertising industry, and *via* the Internet - not to speak about all the communication encouraged by Toyotism. Taking this production of communications and affects as a production of 'social relations and social life' in its entirety, Negri and

Hardt call immaterial production a 'biopolitical production', i.e. a production of life:¹²

It might be better to understand [immaterial labour] as 'biopolitical labour', that is labour which creates not only material goods but also relationships and ultimately social life itself. (*Multitude*, p. 111)

As we will see later in detail, immaterial production defines a 'new' form of capitalist exploitation by the new global capitalist regime, Empire. But it also makes a revolution against this regime possible. How? Immaterial production, being based on the powers of our thoughts and hearts, is already potentially autonomous from the capitalist they say. Only a little step then separates us from taking this production over from the parasitic capitalist and self-manage it.

We can appreciate then how immaterial production sustains Negri and Hardt's arguments and their political project. And, as we shall see below, it allows Negri and Hardt to construct a broad, universal theory that can present itself as radical. This is the reason why we will focus on immaterial production in this article. If we want to critique a multicoloured necklace it is not good enough to speak about the necklace as a whole and miss the beads - but it is not good enough too, to focus on one bead. *What we try to do is to have a go at the string.*

In this article we will argue that under the appearance of a revolutionary theory, Negri and Hardt's work hides a subtle apology for capital and constitutes an inverted version of the traditional Marxism that it was set to oppose.

In Section 1 we see how the concept of immaterial labour substantiates all the most interesting aspects of Negri and Hardt's theory and keeps apparently contradictory or incompatible elements of it together in an elegant unity.

In Section 2 we explore Negri and Hardt's idea of history as class struggle, specifically, the historical emergence of immaterial production.

In Section 3 we comment on Negri and Hardt's argument that immaterial production is inherently autonomous from the control of the capitalist, thus potentially free from capital and amenable to self-management.

In Section 4 we consider the origin of class antagonism in the case of immaterial production of ideas and knowledge. In Section 5 we consider the issue of class antagonism in the case of immaterial production of affections and communication.

¹⁰ Negri and Hardt stress that these two aspects are normally entangled. Elsewhere immaterial production is described as three-fold, regrouping their aspects differently. See, for example, Michael's Hardt's 'Affective Labour', *Makeworlds*, Friday 26 /12/2003, <http://www.makeworlds.org/node/60>.

¹¹ Michael Hardt, 'Affective Labour'.

¹² The term 'biopolitical' is borrowed from Foucault, but, as Maria Turchetto (*L'Impero*) shows, it is subverted from its original sense.

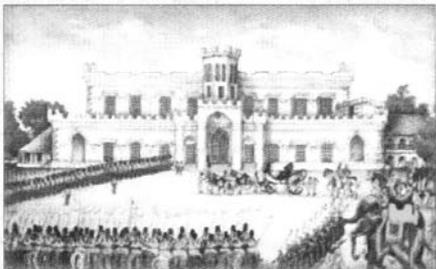
1 Immaterial labour and a new theory for the 'new era'

In this section we show that the concept of immaterial labour, or better, immaterial production, is the pivotal element for Negri and Hardt's analysis and for their popularity. On the one hand it allows them to subsume the bourgeois theories which, in the '80s, challenged traditional Marxism. But on the other hand it allows them to subsume these theories into a revolutionary, subjective, anti-capitalist theory. And it seems to offer an explanation for the new movements which sounds reasonable (and flattering) to the participants.

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1.1 Immaterial labour and the millennial theories

As we anticipated in the Introduction, immaterial labour plays a fundamental role in a central quality of Negri and Hardt's theory: its intellectual universality. Specifically, both *Empire* and *Multitude*, as well as Negri's pre-*Empire* work, successfully appropriate a large range of theories of the present among the most fashionable of the '80s and early '90s.¹³ As we will see, it is precisely the concept of immaterial production that enables this appropriation without making the result appear obviously eclectic.

In particular, Negri and Hardt adopt 'truths' from 'millennial' views of the present world which, in different ways and for different reasons say that we live in a 'new era':

¹³ In fact Negri and Hardt scan the *whole* history of bourgeois thought since Spinoza and (very!) freely appropriate concepts and observations of others.

a post-industrial, postmodern, post-Fordist, society. Let us make a short list of such theories:

a) Toyotism and post-Fordism

A widespread millennial theory is that we live in a 'new' era dominated by the transition from industrial/Fordist, production to post-industrial/post-Fordist production - with Toyotism as the champion of a new vision ('paradigm') of production.

This idea was theorised by the French Regulation School as early as the 1970s.¹⁴ By the end of the '80s such ideas were widespread in the intellectual world, having perhaps lost rigour but gained inter-cultural, multidisciplinary breadth. It was widely acknowledged that the 'new' paradigm of post-Fordist production dictated a new view of life as 'open networks' and had buried linear or structured views of seeing the world, connected to industrial production.

The western business world was intrigued by Toyotism in the '80s and early '90s. Toyota's methods such as 'just-in-time' (zero-stock) production and team work, together with plenty of ideological fripperies about 'integrating' the working class and winning their hearts and minds, were introduced in a number of factories e.g. Rover at Longbridge, UK, or FIAT at Melfi, Italy in the early '90s.¹⁵

However, this interest is in decline, if it has ever been that important at all.¹⁶ For example, FIAT's recent trends are to speed up conveyor belt work. Their notorious harsh method TMC2 has triggered recent fierce struggles in all their plants included Melfi!¹⁷ Although time moves on for the business, it does not for Negri and Hardt, who still consider Toyotism as 'hegemonic' in production - even when everybody else has given up the idea.

b) Information society theories and knowledge economy theories

Championed by academics (or popularisers) such as Brzezinski, Toffler and Ohmae 'information society theories' claim that the 'new' hi-tech production has led to a 'new' post-capitalist society.¹⁸ Similarly, academics and/or popularisers such as Robert Reich insist that we live in a

¹⁴ For the Regulation School (Aglietta, Coriat, etc.), Fordism and post-Fordism were periods of socio-political equilibrium reached around the two forms of productions. This is more sophisticated than just focusing on the simple material process of production. For a critique of these ideas see, Ferruccio Gambino, 'A Critique of the Fordism of the Regulation School', http://www.wildcat-www.de/en/zirkular/28/z28e_gam.htm.

¹⁵ See Valeria Pugliano, 'Restructuring of Work and Union Representation', *Capital and Class* 76, Spring 2002, pp. 29-63.

¹⁶ As Gambino finds out, there is numerical evidence that, between the end of the '80s and the end of the '90s in France, post-Fordist production did not displace convey-belt practices of work at all (Gambino *A Critique*).

¹⁷ If some aspects of Toyotism could be still in use, they are within a system which is essentially a conveyor belt system. For the struggles in Melfi see, e.g. http://www.marxismo.net/fm176/06_pomigliano.html.

¹⁸ These ideas went up and down in popularity according to the state of health of capitalism. For example, it was popular at the end of the '60s and '70s with Brzezinski, Bell and others (Witthoford, *op. cit.* pp. 86-8). See our review of Witthoford's *CyberMarx* in this issue.

'new era' where knowledge and analytical labour is central in a new weightless, advanced economy. These changes have abolished the contradictions of capitalism, exposed the Marxist concept of value as meaningless, and/or abolished the division of western society into classes.¹⁹

c) Millennial shift to service work

Extrapolations of some trends in production have long led to the claim that we live in a 'new era' where production has moved to the service sector, taking the lead from industrial production and changed the paradigms of production. In this 'new' era where service is central, it is argued, Marx's analysis of labour and value cannot be applied anymore - a view which we find in Rifkin, for example.²⁰

d) Postmodernism

Postmodernism suggest we live in a 'new' society characterised by a number of overlapping aspects, all of which imply that what has been said about capitalism is outdated. One aspect of the post-modern society is the fragmentation of identity and, crucially, the end of a working class identity. Another aspect, which we find for example in the work of Jean Baudrillard, is that since today production is centred on the symbolic meanings of commodities, the Marxist concept of 'use values', thus all Marxist analysis, is outdated.²¹

Negri and Hardt's summary of bourgeois thought

Let us see now how the concept of immaterial production allows Negri and Hardt to appropriate all the diverse theorisations or observations above in what appears one, elegant, unified theory.

First and most importantly, immaterial production is appropriately defined to include all the different activities (from IT to services) considered above.

Second, immaterial production appears to explain Baudrillard's observation that goods are increasingly produced and bought for their symbolic meanings. Indeed, as we said earlier, under the 'hegemony' of immaterial production the production of material goods is increasingly the production of images, ideas or affects.²²

¹⁹ It has to be added that after the deflation of the dot.com boom such theories have lost most of their puff.

²⁰ See George Caffentzis, 'The End of Work or the Renaissance of Slavery? A Critique of Rifkin and Negri', <http://korotonomedia.net/otonomi/caffentzis.html>.

The concept of service is in fact miscellaneous. It only means: anything except production of material products. Service includes also the financial sector, which diverts surplus value produced in mainly material production elsewhere (see our review of *CyberMarx* in this issue).

²¹ See, for example, *For a Political Economy of the Sign*, Telos Press, 1981. Baudrillard's argument conflates use value with the utility of an object. In fact for Marx 'the form of use value is the form of the commodity's body itself' ('The Value-Form' in *Debates in Value Theory*, Ed. Simon Mohun, The MacMillan Press Ltd, 1994).

²² This aspect is central in Maurizio Lazzarato's concept of immaterial labour. See, for example, 'General Intellect, Towards an Inquiry into Immaterial Labour', <http://www.emery.archive.mcmill.com/>

Third, under the 'hegemony' of immaterial production, which stresses 'communication' and 'cooperation', all material production tends to adopt post-Fordist methods of production such as, er... Toyotism. In fact Toyotism involves lots of communication, co-operation, use of 'synergy' etc. - at least if we believe in the Japanese-management-inspired business plans of the late '80s.

Last but not least, the hegemony of immaterial production on society explains the postmodernist observation concerning the present fragmentation of workers' identity. The new organisation of immaterial production in fact defines a new way, in general, that we interrelate in society: as networks of free 'singularities'. The party, and other such rigid structures made sense only within a paradigm of industrial production, and now are rejected. Negri and Hardt stick to the ideology of postmodernism, by celebrating the isolation of recent struggles, and suggest that their failure to spread could mean that they were 'immediately subversive in themselves' (*Empire*, p. 58). For Negri and Hardt, a new cycle of struggle will not be characterised by an extension of struggles, but by a constellation of individual struggles, which will be flexibly and loosely connected in networks (*Empire*, p.58.).²³

Thus 'immaterial labour' has elegantly embraced, explained and surpassed all the above theories and observations in one Unified Theory.²⁴

Negri and Hardt's appropriation of such postmodernist and post-Fordist bourgeois theories, no doubt earns them respect in the academic world. Indeed in the '80s and early '90s, grim times of retreat of class struggle, the balance of academic prestige tilted on the side of bourgeois, triumphant theories. It was the right time to proclaim the end of the working class and the end of history; to sneer at 'paleo-Marxism';²⁵ and propose individualistic, postmodern, post-industrial, 'new' theories for the 'new' world. Unlike the Marxists that tried to refute their theories, Negri and Hardt rather appropriate them. In doing this they do not side with the loser, with the paleo-Marxist - they side with the intellectual winners who have history on their side.

1.2 Immaterial labour, and the contradictions of capital

While on the one hand Negri and Hardt take onboard the bourgeois celebrations of the end of history and class struggle, on the other they are able to incorporate these views in a theory which still speaks about class struggle and still sees capital as a contradiction.²⁶ This again is made possible by the concept of immaterial production.

In fact for Negri and Hardt immaterial production is itself a contradiction for capital, precisely because of its

[public_html/immaterial/lazzarato.html](http://www.emery.archive.mcmill.com/public_html/immaterial/lazzarato.html)

²³ Negri thus appeals to those, among whom us, who object to the traditional working class organisation based on the party. However, it is not good enough to embrace postmodernist enthusiasm for fragmentation and isolation and delude ourselves that this is subversive.

²⁴ Of course, their theory is presented as superior to postmodernism and all the other theories they appropriate! See, for instance, how they discuss postmodernism in *Empire* p. 142-3.

²⁵ Term of insult given to Marxism by postmodern author Jean Baudrillard in his work.

²⁶ Withford, 'Autonomist Marxism', pp. 85-6; 88; 96-7 values Negri for his apparent capacity to supersede the bourgeois theories.

immaterial nature. Unlike material activity, Negri and Hardt suggest, the production of communication, ideas or affects escape capital's control and make labour increasingly autonomous from capital. Capital is thus trapped in a dilemma: on the one hand it needs to encourage heart and mind activities, on the other its control is undermined by them.

'Immaterial production' creates also another contradiction: it undermines private property.²⁷ Indeed, repeat Negri and Hardt *ad nauseam*, immaterial products, which are products of thought, are necessarily created in common as commons - 'no one thinks alone', they insist, and add: no production of ideas can exist without a socially shared world of ideas, shared languages and culture (*Multitude*, p. 147).

Facing this threatening form of production, capital, it is argued, has to strive to re-establish private property by appropriating, enclosing, controlling, what it is currently produced 'in common' (*Multitude*, pp. 149; 113). In trying to interfere and restrain the freedom of 'common' production, however, capital hinders its productivity. Capital then is trapped in a contradiction: that between the socialisation of the forces of (immaterial) production and the logic of private property.

1.3 Immaterial labour and subjectivity

The concept of immaterial production serves Negri and Hardt to have the cake of adopting bourgeois objectivistic theories and to eat them in a subjectivistic custard.

The post-Fordist and information theories which are taken onboard by Negri and Hardt are in fact essentially doctrines of autonomous technology or autonomous forms of production where technology or methods of production are the prime mover of history and capable of shaping subjectivity and society as a whole.²⁸ We can appreciate how attached Negri and Hardt are to these theories when we read, for example, that the present 'paradigm' of production 'dictates'... 'our ways of understanding the world and acting in it' (*Multitude*, p. 142). Or that: 'postmodernisation or informationalisation today marks a new way of becoming human' (*Empire*, p. 289).

On the other hand, while toying with such objectivistic ideas, Negri needs to give them a radical twist, in order to make his theory exciting and to be true to his revolutionary past. But how can Negri realise this twist? Thanks, we say, to the concept of immaterial production.

In fact, first of all, immaterial production is itself the product of subjectivity and class struggle. In fact it was born in the '60s and '70s, as the class's subjective, autonomous, experimentation with 'new ways of producing'. Capital was forced to move into immaterial production to dominate a new labour power that had redefined itself, autonomously, as creative, communicative and affective (*Empire*, p. 276).

Second, once established as dominant production, in its ongoing practice immaterial production has a subjective, autonomous, drive. It is immaterial, it is the result of out

thoughts, thus the result of our subjectivities and it is then inherently autonomous from capital. With immaterial production labour manifests its autonomy from capital, which *Autonomia* has always seen hidden behind capitalist production. As Witheford notices:

[For] Autonomist Marxism ... the worker is the active subject of production, the well-spring of the skills, innovation and co-operation on which capital must draw... Capital needs labour but labour does not need capital. Labour... can dispense with the wage relation... it is potentially autonomous. (Witheford, 'Autonomist Marxism', p. 89)

Immaterial labour hence produces a 'new' condition in which subjectivity has a central role as a prime mover of capital's innovations, today.

Having proclaimed that production is today driven by our autonomous subjectivity, Negri and Hardt can claim without appearing objectivistic that the paradigm of immaterial production shapes our subjectivity in turn. What's wrong in saying that our subjectivity is determined by something, if we have discovered that, ultimately, this something was created by our subjectivity itself?

Lastly, class struggle against capital is led by subjectivity too. We are shaped by production, but, Negri and Hardt add in a generosity of overdetermination, 'workers' subjectivity is *also* created in the antagonism of the experience of exploitation' (*Multitude*, pp. 151, our italic).

Exploitation? Did they not say that today immaterial labour is done 'in common, autonomously from capital'? Negri is clear indeed: in the 'new' era of immaterial production we can no longer speak of the real subsumption of labour. Today we are all free, independent craftsmen, all producing with our own means of production: our brain. If now, Negri says, 'we have all the tools we need to work in our heads... [then] capitalism today needs to make free men work - free men who have their own means, their own tools'.²⁹

But Negri and Hardt cannot deny the undeniable. Exploitation and capitalist control still exist – only, they explain to the increasingly confused reader, in a new form. Capital today superimposes and appropriates what we produce 'in common', as free and independent producers. As Negri says:

Capital must... superimpose itself on the autonomous capability of manufacturing knowledge... This is the form which expropriation takes in advanced capitalism (Toni Negri, *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the Twenty First Century*, Polity, Cambridge, 1989, p. 116)

In this conception, we are petty producers - or if we prefer, autonomous peasants - while capital only acts as a predator, an aristocrat who comes to the village and

²⁷ An important contradiction which we do not deal with here is that 'immaterial' production affects the substance of value since immaterial products can be duplicated - for Negri and Hardt this makes private property and the imposition of wage work increasingly untenable (*Multitude* p. 311).

²⁸ Witheford, 'Autonomist Marxism', p. 88.

²⁹ Toni Negri, interview with Mark Leonard, 'The Left should Love Globalisation' *New Statesman*, 28 May 2001, http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0FQP/is_4539_130/ai_75505896.

appropriates a part ('or all') of what we have produced.³⁰ This new form of exploitation is the cause of *antagonism*, a subjective spring of struggle.

1.4 Immaterial labour and viability of revolution - self-management

And what about the future communist world? Also here the concept of immaterial production plays an important role. Thanks to immaterial production, revolution becomes something feasible and rational.

How? Negri and Hardt explain: unlike previous production, the rationale and means necessary for immaterial production are increasingly inherent in labour practice itself - this means that immaterial production is already under our control and the capitalist already parasitical. Revolution as self-management is only the next feasible and rational step (*Multitude*, p. 336).

Beyond production our new society as a whole is also increasingly amenable to political self-management, thanks to immaterial production. This happens because, in Negri and Hardt's view, immaterial production is also production of life, biopolitical production. Their logic is straightforward: if immaterial production is increasingly autonomous from capital, society as a whole is too, because production is one with production of life and society. This, Negri and Hardt tell us, happens now, under our unbelieving eyes!³¹ Indeed today,

The balance has tipped such that the ruled *now* [sic] tend to be the exclusive producers of social organisation... the rulers become *even more parasitical* the ruled become increasingly autonomous, capable of forming society on their own.... (*Multitude*, p. 336)³²

In this optimistic view, the revolution will be the liberation, reached at a political level, of already developing immaterial forces of production and social relations from the parasitic control of already redundant capitalist rulers. This kind of revolution appears rational and viable, being based on something already present.

1.5 Immaterial labour and a reassuring new world

Revolutionary theories are normally rather scary - but this one is reassuring, thanks to immaterial production.

It is a theory which speaks about a future that is imaginable, thus acceptable: the revolution will not require radical subversions, jumps in the dark, too much imagination or other such uncomfortable things. In this view the future will simply be the completion of the present, based on already existing conditions created by immaterial production now.³³

³⁰ There is a distinct... neo-feudal flavour in today's privatisations', Negri and Hardt state in *Multitude* (p. 186).

³¹ 'The biopolitical social organisation begins to appear absolutely immanent... the various elements present in society *are* able collaboratively to organise society themselves (p. 337).

³² Or, on p. 339: 'Just as the multitude produces in common... it can produce... the political organisation of society' (p. 339).

³³ See *Multitude*, p. 354, sentence cited later. The shortcomings of revolutionary utopia is 'solved' by Negri and Hardt by proposing a

Crucially we are reassured that the future will be democratic and egalitarian. The present un-democracy and inequality are effects of a distortion - of the fact that capital overlaps and channels our production, creating despotism and spurious selectivity on our capacities, thus inequality of rewards.³⁴ But this is not, they insist, inherent in immaterial production in itself. Indeed, the relations currently created by immaterial production *are* 'civil processes of democratic exchange', democratic in nature (*Multitude*, p. 311) and confer on us 'equal opportunity of struggle' - and thus the equal opportunity to negotiate power in the future society.

The most attractive aspect of Negri and Hardt's theory is that 'immaterial labour has the quality to be about unquestionably *positive things*: democracy first, but also creativity, affections, communication, and so on. Communism as the self management of the present will be based on all these unquestionably good things. Who would not like the idea of communism if this means lots of good things?

1.6 Immaterial labour, and the new movements

The concept of immaterial labour also serves Negri and Hardt to appeal to those from the advanced western countries involved in current anti-capitalist protests, the movements for global 'social justice', etc.

In the present times of defeat and weakness, the demonstrations in Genoa and Seattle, the anti-war movement, and many large or small radical activities are indeed a demonstration of power, but they do not, because they cannot, challenge our daily work relations and reproduction as an immediate target.

This audience wants to hear about the end of capitalism, but through democratic values and practices which are the only values and practices that seem conceivable in our conditions. As we have seen already, Negri and Hardt can satisfy them with their stress on 'ideal' democracy.

This audience want a theory which explains their struggles, which are not struggles for bread and butter. Negri and Hardt fit the bill. In a 'new era' which focuses on immaterial rather than material goods, it is no surprise that the new struggles are not about bread and butter issues anymore, but over the control of 'communicational resources'; over 'the communal appropriation of computer and media networks, over the freeing of educational and research resources...'. (Witthford, 'Autonomist Marxsim', p. 110) Or we can always see any present struggle as an expression of 'biopolitical' production of communication and affects, if we want to.

In Negri and Hardt's theory these 'new struggles' have then a centrality in history, they are part of the very revolution which leads us to communism. For a protester who is told by the Marxist that what he does is historically epiphenomenal, Negri and Hardt's theory is the best doctrine around. What can be more exciting to be told: 'Well done, you are in the driving seat of History'?

future which is based on what we have now! These two views are in fact two sides of the same coin the one as bad as the others.

³⁴ As Witthford in 'Autonomist Marxism' explains, pp. 110-1.

2. The origin of immaterial labour as class struggle

In this section we comment on one of the central issues in Negri and Hardt, that immaterial production is itself the result of the struggles of the '60s and '70s, when the class experimented with 'new productivity', and autonomously redefined itself as creative, flexible, communicative labour power. We agree that the emergence of what Negri and Hardt call immaterial production should be analysed as class struggle, but we argue that immaterial production is an aspect of the domination of capital over labour, though contradictory and unstable. We then question Negri and Hardt's vision of immaterial production as having inherent anti-capitalist aspects in itself and their view of a communist future based on its self-management.

2.1 Immaterial labour as the result of subjectivity and class struggle - myth and reality

How did immaterial labour come about? According to *Empire*, during the struggles in the '60s and '70s against large scale industry, the working class produced its 'paradigm'. The mass worker was so strong that they could fold its arms and stop capital exploiting them. Many proletarians, still students, refused to enter the factory. This free people, Negri and Hardt say, embraced Bohemian life, artistic activity and psychedelic production in LSD (which is, we admit, immaterial *per excellence*).

Thus, Negri and Hardt conclude, the class redefined itself, autonomously, as creative, communicative, flexible labour power, forcing capital to adopt immaterial production in order to exploit it. This marks the birth of immaterial production according to Negri and Hardt: capital had to abandon the large scale factory, its linear production, its inflexible working day and its mechanistic logic and employ open networks and flexi-time and give space to creativity. Since then immaterial production becomes 'hegemonic'.

Negri and Hardt's theory is unproblematically subjective, exciting and revolutionary. It tells us that there is something inherently positive in the present hegemonic production, and that this is the result of our autonomous vitality. Do we agree with this exciting history of immaterial production as class struggle? We agree, of course, with the principle that history is the history of class struggle, and that the dynamics of capital are aspect of this struggle, but we are sceptical about the specific way in which *Empire* seems to apply this principle.

Let us then consider the emergence of immaterial production more closely, and see how this articulates with class struggle. What we will see will no doubt inspire less feel-good effects to our readers than Toni Negri's inspiring, rose tinted optimism. But, as we will discuss later, the reality of capital as a contradiction is not that we feel good in it but that we inescapably feel *bad*.

2.2 A class struggle analysis of the origin of immaterial labour as the creation of ideas and knowledge

Let us consider first the aspect of immaterial production as the creation of ideas and knowledge.

Against traditional Marxism, which saw history as driven by the development of the forces of production, *Autonomia*, with Mario Tronti in particular, re-proposed in the '70s that history is a history of class struggle and that the objectivity of capital is a result of this struggle.³⁵ The laws of capital hide the continual necessity to undermine working class resistance, its entrenchment in their existing skills. This is why capital needs to continually innovate and rationalise production, in order to deskill labour and weaken the working class. This is class struggle which appears, *post facto*, crystallised in the objective laws of capital or in the objective rationale of innovation, progress and development of capitalist production. However, this objectification is the

result of a continuous process of impositions and rebellions, which obliges capital into compromises and makes it vulnerable to further struggles.

The emergence of immaterial production as the production of ideas and knowledge can be explained as part of this process. Since the beginning of capitalism, this continuous battle



has led to the need to separate mental from manual labour. With Wedgwood's pottery manufacture, we have an important example of how craft work was separated from its elements of autonomy and creativity. Making pots became a painting-by-numbers activity, while *design* emerged as an alien ruler, a tool for the subsumption of the worker's labour.

While in the transition to capitalism the capitalist Wedgwood has a role of master craftsman, later the capitalists farmed out his creative role to independent or waged designers, specialists, engineers and managers. We have now the new figure of a creative professional worker, unthinkable in the past.

Increasingly, the place where ideas and organisational frameworks were devised was separated off. This eventually gave rise to what Negri and Hardt call immaterial production: the production of designs, IT systems, etc. as

³⁵ See Witheford, 'Autonomist Marxism', p. 89.

'commodities' in their own rights. These are sold to other capitalists for the second stage of production: execution.

With the commodification of immaterial products we have the beginning of a trend to rationalise immaterial production itself. This is the next stage of class struggle: increasingly, we see the multiplication of figures such as the engineer who just calculates elasticity factors within a project on which he has no control. Increasingly, being a qualified designer may not mean to have a highly paid, secure and creative job.

As we will see later, the dynamic which separates creative from executive labour involves antagonism. Thus this process starts and ends with class struggle.

2.3 A class struggle analysis of the ideology of weightless design

The bourgeois ideology of the 'new' era of immaterial production is the celebration of the production of weightless goods as today's main or fundamental product.

It is possible to make sense of this ideology. In a world where ideas and execution are separated and the latter deskilled, the bourgeois economist correctly considers the production of ideas and design as the most valuable and costly part of all production. In turn, the bourgeois ideologue can generalise this interest and conclude that what is 'mainly' produced today is ideas and design.

In fact if we consider the material reproduction of society as a whole, we can be satisfied that our reproduction cannot happen only through the production of pure ideas. We do not eat, drive or wear ideas. Pure ideation can exist as such only because there is a stage of pure execution somewhere else. Thus behind the partial truth of the bourgeois (and the Marxian simpleton) we discover a more concrete, important, truth: what is mainly produced and reproduced today is not ideas and knowledge, but *a specific division of labour*.

That Negri and Hardt uncritically adopt the postmodern and bourgeois fetishism of weightless production means quite a lot: their inability to see the existence of immaterial production as a class relation.

2.4 An answer to traditional Marxism - and to Negri and Hardt

Negri and Hardt's incapacity to understand the emergence of immaterial production as the imposition of a specific division of labour leads them to see immaterial production as something natural, and potentially autonomous from capital. To them we raise the same objection that Italian workerists raised to traditional Marxists. Against a vision of production as neutral and potentially good for self-management, Raniero Panzieri warned that this conception hid an uncritical acceptance of capitalism. Of socialist background, Panzieri accepted self-management as a reasonable step in the revolution, but he gave a warning: communism needs a rethinking of society which necessarily leads to a rupture with its processes of production.³⁶

³⁶ Raniero Panzieri, 'The Capitalist Use of Machinery: Marx Versus the Objectivists', <http://www.geocities.com/cordobakaf/panzieri.html>.

Wanting a rupture does not mean to be Luddite. In our daily struggle we are bound to twist and use capital's resources and exploit its contradictions. For example, deskilling the typographers

Of course, Negri and Hardt would say: history moves and things change. Immaterial production is different from the industrial production of traditional Marxist times. We may not argue (here) with this 'truth', but this does not change what we have said. Rather, it makes what we said more compelling. If our 'new' times are characterised by immaterial production then the new revolution for the 'new' times will have to imply a rupture, precisely, from immaterial production!³⁷

2.5 A class struggle analysis of the origin of immaterial labour as the creation of communication and affects

We have so far focused on the emergence of immaterial production as the creation of knowledge and ideas.

But it is also possible to account for the emergence of post-Fordist methods of production in terms of class struggle. In the face of the strength of the mass workers centred in the large scale industry in the '70s, restructuring meant to fragment industrial production. Team work was a way to separate the workers within the same industry and disintegrate their solidarity. Outsourcing, moving production abroad, re-divided labour on a world scale. This process, too, separated the workers not only physically but more importantly in terms of their interests, employment contracts and working conditions.

It is possible to account for the recent shift of capital into the service sector as class struggle, too. We can see how the restructuring at the end of the '70s indeed led to a substantial shift of capital into service, where workers were still unorganised and thus more compliant.

Again, our account of the origin of immaterial is miles away from Negri and Hardt, from the fairytale that immaterial production emerged in response to our autonomous redefinition as 'flexible' and immaterial.

2.6 Technological determinism or autonomous subjectivity?

Negri and Hardt's rather peculiar account of the emergence of immaterial production is based on a peculiar axiom: that history is moved by an autonomous will, the will of the autonomous class. This assumption, which traces its intellectual authority to one of the founding fathers of bourgeois philosophy (Spinoza), has already been shown to be undialectical.³⁸

Allegations of being non-dialectical should not be taken as a banal insult. Being non-dialectical would not be too bad

has allowed the thickest of us to be a poster designer for our political campaigns.

³⁷ Our idea of revolution is that of supersession: This is not a banal abolition of the present but a qualitative subversion that can only be realised *from within and against* the present. The abolition of immaterial production for us is not the abolition of creativity but the reintegration of the unity of aims and execution in the production of our life.

³⁸ For the non-dialectical approach in Negri and Hardt see, John Holloway, 'Going in the Wrong Direction, or Mephistopheles, Not Saint Francis of Assisi', <http://www.slash.autonomedia.org/analysis/02/10/26/1536243.shtml>.

Despite the reservations we have about John Holloway's thought (see our review article in *Aufheben*, # 11, 2003, pp. 53-56), we think his critique of Negri is sound, clearly expressed, and very close to our criticism.

in itself, if this did not create serious problems in Negri and Hardt's theorisation.

Indeed, a view of history as pure will and subjectivity is bound to smash its head against its non dialectical counterpart: a view of history as pure objectivity - the bourgeois idea that we are 'shaped' by the paradigms of production. To the non-dialectical mind this second aspect of reality appears as compelling as the first, and still cannot find a place in their theorisation except as a juxtaposition. *Empire* and *Multitude* confuse the reader with contradictory assertions which are presented without any serious effort to resolve their contradictions. Do we create history as autonomous subjects? Or are our thoughts and actions dictated by the paradigms of production - then is history determined at every paradigmatical moment?³⁹

The clash of one truth and its anti-truth and the consequent explosive annihilation of the whole theoretical construction is however, safely and cleverly prevented by keeping these 'truths' separated in time and space. Thus, Negri and Hardt say: *today*, in the mundane present, we are shaped by production in our hearts, minds and actions (this will please our academic colleagues in the literature department); *yesterday*, during the mythical '68, we lived a moment of absolute freedom to redefine ourselves outside existing paradigms (this will please Nick Witheford).

Negri and Hardt's method of juxtaposition, however, is not good enough to convince the experienced and knowledgeable readers who have associated talks about paradigms of production and technology with bourgeois and conservative literature.

To convince us that there is a revolutionary logic in saying that we are shaped by paradigms of production, Negri and Hardt manipulate our sense of respect for our elders and invoke the authority of old Marx himself. For Marx too, they say, 'of course [sic] everything starts with production' (*Multitude*, p. 143). For him too, they say, 'production makes a subject for the object' (*Multitude*, p. 109). This no doubt will defuse most objections.

Since we in *Aufheben* are not confused by any sense of respect for our elders, we bothered to check on old Marx. We found simply that Negri and Hardt had cut quotes out of their context and twisted their original meanings!

In fact for Marx everything starts with 'the real individuals and their intercourses'.⁴⁰ Marx's *Capital* does not start from modern industry to explain society but it starts from our relations of exchange to explain modern industry.⁴¹

Marx himself would agree, of course, that all starts with production; but only if we intend production as something concrete, embedded in a social relation: *as production of commodities for the market*. As such, production is the

reproduction of our social relations as market relations and as such it reproduces us as proletariat. However, this is miles away from what Negri and Hardt simplistically meant.

By dismissing (and rewriting) Marx's theory of labour, sadly, Negri and Hardt dismiss a theory that can effectively oppose technological determinism as well as understand its aspects of truth. This theory sees the real individual in their social relation with others as the concrete reality behind both the apparent objectivity of production and our continual challenge to this objectivity. This view, importantly, does not need any desperate separations of mythical past and mundane present, because it sees history as a continuous process and a continuous struggle.

3. Immaterial labour and capital as objectification

In this section we comment on Negri and Hardt's thesis that immaterial production is ripe for self-management since this 'new' production is inherently independent from the individual capitalist. We argue that the apparent objectivity and autonomy of immaterial labour from the capitalist is only evidence that immaterial production is an aspect of capital. We argue that Negri and Hardt's uncritical naturalisation of the present production system derives from their lack of understanding of capital as an objectified social relation. We will see that this problem is mirrored by a parallel, opposite one: Negri and Hardt's lack of critical understanding (and celebration) of capital as the product of bourgeois subjectivity.

3.1. Production as inherent in the practices of labour

Negri and Hardt tell us that there is something interestingly new in immaterial production that material production did not have - something that can really change our future and allow us to create a communist world based on the self-management of the present production.

Indeed, we read, immaterial production has disposed of external means of production and of the despotic direction of the capitalist. By its nature, immaterial production is in fact increasingly inherent in the same practice of labour:

The central forms of productive co-operation are no longer created by the capitalist as part of the project to organise labour but rather emerge from the productive energies of labour itself. (*Multitude*, p. 113)⁴²

In immaterial production, continue Negri and Hardt, the capitalist is increasingly redundant as the organiser of production and the one responsible for innovation:⁴³

[While in the past] the capitalist calls workers to the factory... directing them to collaborate and communicate in production and giving them the means to do so, in the

³⁹ Some readers like Maria Turchetto (*L'Impero*) blamed an alleged 'dialectic' in Negri and Hardt for the apparent contradictions in their theorisation. In fact these contradictions are due to an undialectical juxtaposition.

⁴⁰ Karl Marx, 'The German Ideology' in *Early Writings*, Ed. Lucio Colletti, Pelican, London 1975.

⁴¹ Marx never held a material theory of labour, which started from material aspects of production or the products, but a *social* theory of labour. His 'materialism' was a theory that saw society as a material starting point, in opposition to idealism which started from ideas.

⁴² See also: 'Such new forms of labour... present new possibilities for economic self-management, since the mechanisms of cooperation necessary for production are contained in the labour itself.' (*Multitude*, p. 336)

⁴³ Also: 'We can see numerous instances in which unitary control is not necessary for innovation and that on the contrary innovation requires common resources, open access... [e.g.] in the sectors that have most recently emerged as central to the global economy, such as information knowledge and communication' (*Multitude*, p. 337)

paradigm of immaterial production, in contrast, labour itself tends to produce the means of interaction, communication and co-operation for production (*Multitude*, p. 147).

Is there an element of truth in Negri and Hardt's claim that today labour itself produces the means for production? That production becomes increasingly inherent in the process of labour itself and autonomous from the capitalist? The answer is: yes, but this has always been true!

It is true in fact that in capitalism labour itself produces the means for other labour and production. In capitalism, more than any other previous form of production, nobody can produce without using the result of other people's labour. The figure of the autonomous craftsman who uses his own self-created tools is unthinkable today. This is what traditional Marxism used to call the 'socialisation of labour'.

Also, it is true that in capitalism the logic of production is increasingly inherent in the practices of labour. This was not obvious in previous modes of production, where labour was deployed because of some human need (often the need of the ruling class) - only in capitalism do we have this peculiar fact: labour is demanded and necessitated by previous labour, production stimulates production, invention demands invention, according to a logic of expansion and development that goes beyond the will and control of the individual human being.

Crucially, it is important to stress, this logic goes beyond our own will and control. For example, our call centre labour is commanded by phones ringing and a computer programme that tell us what to say. This is the result of previous work. The labour of an IT worker is normally demanded by a gigantic project which asks for work done in a certain way and with a certain pace. This is the result of past IT work. Labour in a traditional factory is demanded by a machine. This was, too, the result of someone else's past labour. A worker in a post-Fordist team works according to organisational systems which were devised *by the thinking work of other people*.

All our work in capitalism is given a logic, a pace, a necessity, by the result of other people's work. It does not matter how immaterial or material this latter labour was. What matters for us is that it is *dead labour*: previous labour, alienated from us, which has turned to be our ruler: capital.

Negri and Hardt seem to know what dead labour is for Marx. They say that Marx would call Empire a regime of accumulated dead labour. (*Empire*, p. 62) However, they insist that labour, if immaterial and 'biopolitical', has a special, fresh, everlasting vitality. Living labour is, they say, 'the ability to engage the world actively and create social relations'. And they add that living labour is a 'fundamental human faculty', an input of the human being, not something pertinent to capital as such.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Living labour, the form-giving fire of our creative capacities. Living labour is the fundamental human faculty: the ability to engage the world actively and create social life. Living labour can be corralled by capital and pared down to the labour power that is bought and sold and that produces commodities and capital, but living labour always exceeds that' (*Multitude*, p. 146). Marx said this, they claim. Believe them.

More mundanely, and less poetically, living labour is labour which is presently done for capital, for dead labour.⁴⁵ Living labour cannot be naturalised as an a-historical 'fundamental human faculty' as Negri and Hardt say, for the simple reason that living labour and dead labour are two faces of the same reality: capitalist alienation. In communism there will be no reason to speak of dead labour, thus there will be no reason to speak of living labour either.⁴⁶

Negri and Hardt's incapacity to understand capital as objectification of our (living) labour implies their incapacity to understand capital as objectification *tout court*.

3.2 It's capital: this is why it does not need the capitalist

The objectification of capital is a real objectification for all humans, *including the capitalist*.

This is why the capitalist is not the initiator of a technical innovation: in front of capital with its inherent laws of self-expansion, the capitalist has no choice. He has to follow hard necessity and innovate in the rush for competition when others innovate. Or he goes bankrupt.

We can also see how the capitalist is 'redundant' not only as initiator but as organiser of the labour process. The more production is advanced the more the organisation of labour becomes integrated in complex organisational system - production is better run by 'objective' mechanisms, laws or business principles which reflect more closely the laws of capital. The capitalist as an individual, with his whims and idiosyncrasies, can even be disruptive for his own capital.

Toyota's system is presented in *Empire* as an example of the new immaterial production that can dispense with the capitalist and which 'seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism' (*Empire*, p. 294).

The lure of Toyotism is that it presents itself to the post-Fordist simpleton as a gigantic automated feedback system from demand to production. In its original idea, Toyotism is similar to a fast-food shop: customer A demands a piece of work from worker B. Worker B writes down an order for the materials he need to serve A on a tag (called 'kanban') and passes the tag to worker C upstream. In turn, worker B becomes the 'customer' of worker C and commands worker D, etc.⁴⁷ Hence Toyotism may seem to be a system of production free from centralised command.

⁴⁵ See, John Holloway 'Time to Revolt – Reflections on *Empire*', *Dissonance*, Issue 1, http://www.messmedia.net/dissonance/issues/issue01/issue01_9.htm: 'Living doing is subjected to past done. Living doing is subjected to the things made by past doing, things which stand on their own and deny all doing'.

⁴⁶ We object that 'labour' is not a 'human faculty' – 'labour power' is. The conflation of labour power with labour in Negri is not due to imprecision, but is ideological. In a new mode of production that needs only our brain as a tool, the faculty of labouring can be immediately conflated with the deployment of labour.

⁴⁷ For a description of Toyotism and a (really) rational consideration of the contradictory authoritarian and liberal aspects in it see, Andrew Sayer, 'New Developments in Manufacturing: The Just-in-Time System', *Capital and Class*, 30, Winter 1986, pp. 43-72.

In fact subtly, Negri and Hardt⁴⁸ do not say that Toyotism has no authoritarian aspects. Only, the alienating aspects of Toyotism are contingent, due to capital's control, while the good aspects of Toyotism are inherent in this 'new' immaterial form of production.

We cannot share such excitement. We see Toyotism, first of all, as an effective way to produce more closely in response to market demand.⁴⁹ What makes it different from Fordism and so special for the liberal heart is that it simply perfects the liberal dream of 'customer sovereignty' within a perfected market society.

Having observed that Toyotism is a production system devised for satisfying the market, we cannot simplistically think that the liberal aspects of Toyotism (the apparent autonomy given to the workers) are inherent while the illiberal ones (the overall control) are contingent. The demand of the market is something alien from the individual worker's desires, needs or aspirations: Toyotism is necessarily a system aimed to rein the workers' will and activity towards an alien aim - only, it is devised in a different way than Fordism.⁵⁰ On closer inspection, in fact, it is not difficult to see that Toyota's workers are free to do or suggest only what is already harmonising with the strategies of production - and crucially its overall system is devised to be structurally inaccessible to changes from the bottom.

Any further illusion of the inherent liberalism in Toyotism is exposed by its development: its increasing computerisation, which allows the Toyota managers to dispose of the *kanban* system and plan production in detail.

Thus Toyotism inevitably mirrors the nature of capital itself. As such, that it has a liberal face and a despotic face does not surprise us at all: capital has indeed a democratic face and an authoritarian face, each necessary to the other. None of these two faces is a distortion of the other, and none can be 'rescued' from the other.

The democratic face of capital, which we find mirrored in the democratic face of Toyotism, is nothing else than our submission to impersonal forces, to the market. It is our individual freedom to be slaves under the intangible despotism of the customer's sovereignty.

Negri and Hardt's inability to see how capital dominates us through impersonal forces prevents them, paradoxically,

from seeing that immaterial production *needs* the capitalist in order to stay in existence. Let us look closely at this point.

3.3 It's capital: this is why it needs the capitalist

A production system that demands labour from us because of its own rationale cannot be nothing else but our old enemy: capital as value valorising itself through the exploitation of labour. As we have seen in Section 2, capital's self-valorisation implies for capital the need to overcome workers' resistance and the striving to subsume, rationalise, deskill and command labour. The existence of immaterial production itself, we have seen, is one with this striving.

In Section 4 we will see in detail that this same process implies, for the worker, daily pain and boredom, thus daily resistance. The consequence of this is that capital necessitates a 'capitalist' class. Or, better, capital needs a class of people who materially gain from the daily alienation of others and are ready to exert violence in order to keep the others under capital's command.⁵¹

In their view present (immaterial) production increasingly does not need the capitalist and thus does not need force exerted on us, Negri and Hardt seem only to echo the bourgeois delusions of the '80s, which sought the integration of the working class in production as possible and non-contradictory.

This ideology was applied in Europe through experiments with Toyotism and other post-Fordist methods in the early '90s. These methods tried to encourage workers to take individual responsibility in improving the quality of production and identify themselves with the business.

But they all inevitably failed. An interesting example of this failure was that of the Rover factory in Longbridge. With the project *Rover Tomorrow*, work was initially organised in teams, with leaders elected among the team. The imaginable result was that the workers never respected the commands of their team leaders, so that the leaders had to be appointed by the company as someone above them (Pugliano, 'Restructuring of Work', pp. 38-9). The workers' disrespect for peers with a leadership role was not just something cultural: it is in the contradictory nature of capital that we cannot identify ourselves with capital without contradictions.

But why does Negri and Hardt's talk about the increasing possibility of self-management seem to make sense? When we speak about 'immaterial labour', normally our mind goes to certain administrative, creative or professional jobs where there is a real experience of identification and self-direction. Self-management was realisable and desirable, for example, for the highly skilled workers at Lucas Aerospace in the UK and at Toshiba-Amplex in Japan, who went on a strike to demand autonomous control of production from their managers (Witheyford, 'Autonomist Marxism', pp. 103-4).

Can we speak about autonomy of production in this case? Not at all. In fact, the existence of autonomy in certain privileged activities does not mean that this activity is autonomous from capital but the other way round: that the professional or creative workers identify so much with the aims and interests of their business that they can become the

⁴⁸ As well as other fetishists of Toyotism like Maurizio Lazzarato ('General Intellect...').

⁴⁹ Negri and Hardt admit that they are aware of *caveats* by the Frankfurt School (Habermas), that a transmission of 'market data' is somehow impoverished. However, they add, the service sector presents a richer model of productive communication, in that this production aims to produce more immaterial products. And in a footnote they suggest that Habermas's ideas are surpassed and critiqued (*Empire*, p. 290).

⁵⁰ In their account of the struggle in Fiat Melfi, Mouvement Communiste explain how Toyotism was introduced to improve exploitation and impose massacring shifts within a conveyor-belt production. In order to introduce this system without resistance Fiat employed in Melfi mainly young people with no experience of organised struggle from a region which had a very high unemployment level. However this failed to stop increasing resignations and resistance. ('Fiat Melfi: La Classe Ouvrière d'Italie Contre-Attaque', *La Lettre de Mouvement Communiste*, 13, May 2004, BP 1666, Centre Monnail 1000, Bruxelles 1, Belgique).

⁵¹ In general capital needs a class who has an interest in imposing its rule on the others. See, 'What was the USSR?' in *Aufheben* # 6-9, 1997-2000.

managers of it themselves, in the same way as a petty bourgeois is the manager of his own business.

Negri and Hardt's idea that we can all become the managers of ourselves, that we can take the present system of production over and self-manage it, is then a petty bourgeois delusion that does not acknowledge the imposition of capital's command only because it is used to internalise it.

3.4 Subjectivity and the invisible hand of... immaterial labour

We have seen that a doubt arises, that Negri and Hardt cannot see that the apparent objectivity of the present production system, rather than being evidence of its autonomy from the capitalist, is instead evidence of its nature as capital. Negri and Hardt's incapacity to grasp objectivity in capitalism makes us suspicious about their insight in the other, opposite, concept: subjectivity. Let us then focus on their idea of subjectivity and collective consciousness.

We have said that for Negri and Hardt immaterial production potentially escapes capital, being the result of our individual subjectivities: thoughts, decisions, desires and 'democratic exchanges'.⁵² The multitude, which is our collective consciousness, is the ultimate result of this same dynamic - of innumerable individual interactions which take place within the present immaterial production. Negri and Hardt's theory is hence both the theorisation and the celebration of a 'new' world which is ultimately shaped in its collective consciousness, and driven in its productivity, by subjectivity itself.

Subjectivity for Negri and Hardt is then nothing else than the ensemble of each individual's desires and thoughts. In fact, it is unquestionable that desires and thoughts come out of free subjects. But this is, precisely, where Negri and Hardt have caught reality totally wrong. Capital is, and has always been, the result of innumerable, perfectly free, democratic exchanges, decisions, desires and thoughts of individual subjectivities! The fact that capital is created by the will and actions of individuals however does not make it less objective and less powerful - instead, its power lies in our individual freedom of choice and exchange itself.

Negri and Hardt do not speak of a new world at all. The Multitude, a by-product⁵³ of immaterial production seems, in fact to be, merely, socially-shared bourgeois consciousness: the socially-shared belief that the only way to produce and reproduce ourselves is through acts of 'democratic exchange' and the only way to see ourselves is as free individuals⁵⁴ engaged in such exchange. This collective consciousness is only an aspect of the same process that creates the objectivity of capital! This collective consciousness is objectified as capital itself, since it emerges as an unconscious result of innumerable exchanges and activities, in the same way as the invisible hand of Adam

Smith emerges from innumerable exchanges based on individual greed.⁵⁵

Negri and Hardt's naturalisation of bourgeois relations is so uncritical that they even see their preservation as a 'creative' aspect of struggles which are not able to go beyond them! In *Multitude*, Negri and Hardt hail recent struggles which are, they say, 'positive and creative'. Why? Because, for example, as we read with dismay in Argentina people *invented new forms of money* (*Multitude*, p. 216).

Again, Negri and Hardt's problem is their ideological rejection of dialectics. In the dialectic of capital, subjectivity and objectivity play opposite but interrelated parts. An undialectical approach that takes 'subjectivity' as something positive on its own is bound to misunderstand both subjectivity and objectivity. It is bound to confusingly celebrate capital as bourgeois subjectivity (not recognising that capital is the product of individual free subjects). And it is also bound to confusingly celebrate present production as autonomous from capital (not recognising that we are ruled by objectified and impersonal forces).

Such an approach is also bound to encourage passivity. Seeing Empire (capital) as something that develops in separation from us and 'opens up spaces for struggle' by itself, Negri preaches to us not to resist 'globalisation' and vote 'yes' for the neoliberal European Constitution in France.⁵⁶ In fact the 'space for struggle' is created by capital's development and its dialectical counterpart: our *resistance* to it - such as the struggles against gas privatisation in Bolivia and the riots in Argentina.

To conclude, considering Negri and Hardt's inability to see the relation between objectivity and subjectivity in capitalism, we cannot be too surprised then when we see them move along a conceptual parabola: start from shouted, crass subjectivism and dive head down into a crass objectivism, a neo-traditional-Marxist fetishisation of the present immaterial forces of production.⁵⁷ And, to close the parabola into an ellipse, they teach us that our subjectivity is, after all, the result of the paradigm of immaterial production itself - something objective.⁵⁸

⁵² Negri and Hardt celebrate the ideal freedom of democratic exchange. If there is something wrong in our real exchanges and communications, they argue, this is due to an undue overlap of capital's control: 'exchanges and communications dominated by capital are integrated into its logic' (*Empire*, p. 363).

⁵³ Sorry: bio-product?

⁵⁴ Sorry: singularities?

⁵⁵ To get rid of the objectivity of capital it is not good enough to give a different name (*potenza*) to our potentially autonomous power and another name (*potere*) to the power of capital, as if they really existed side by side and if it were only a matter of becoming aware of our existing power!

⁵⁶ See, for example, Roberto Sarti, 'Toni Negri Against the Empire... For a Capitalist Europe!', *Interactivist Info Exchange*, May 30, 2005 <http://info.interactivist.net/article.pl?sid=05/05/31/0447208&mode=nested&tid=4analysis/05/05/31/044720.s.html?tid=4>.

⁵⁷ Negri and Hardt resurrect a theory which pivots on potentially free and powerful subjective 'will' from one of the first founders of bourgeois thought: Spinoza.

⁵⁸ While Negri and Hardt conflate the object into the subject ('all is due to subjectivity'), *Theorie Communiste*, (we surely do not need to remind our readers of them), as Negri's negative mirror image, end up conflating the subject into the object ('all is due to the relations of capital and labour'), and appear to assert the same millennial gospel but for completely opposite reasons: due to forces that are beyond our individual consciousness and will, we now live in a 'new' era when the revolution is possible. For a critique of such theories which claim that our collective subjectivity is somehow 'forced' towards a certain historical direction (the revolution) by

4. Immaterial labour and the mind of capital

We now consider the subjective side of immaterial production i.e. how immaterial production is related to class antagonism and the necessity of the revolution. Negri and Hardt say that antagonism emerges from our resistance against capital's efforts to tamper with our potentially autonomous deployment of creativity and to enclose what we produce in common. To this view we oppose that antagonism arises from the unacceptability of a division of labour that imposes our daily deprivation of creativity, and we explain why immaterial production is part of it.

4.1 The contradictions of immaterial production as the contradictions of capital

Negri and Hardt's theory has the interesting aspect of speaking about subjectivity. Against bourgeois objectivism it tells us that the development of capital and its contradictions are the result of antagonism, of subjectivity. As we have seen in Section 1, for Negri and Hardt antagonism is triggered by capital's attempt at imposing its command and control over immaterial production, which is increasingly done in common and which produces commons.

We wholeheartedly agree that history is moved by class struggle, and that class struggle is triggered by antagonism. However, we cannot find ourselves at ease with Negri and Hardt's explanation. We have seen that the immaterial production of ideas and knowledge is an aspect of capital's power to subsume our labour – that is, an aspect of the power of the bourgeoisie over the working class. What we want to explore now is the subjective side of this subsumption, i.e. how antagonism arises.

4.2 The ontological inversion

Marx's *Capital* is an account, chapter by chapter, of how capital as value valorising itself implies the deprivation of labour from its organisational, creative, knowledgeable sides.⁵⁹ Paradoxically, capital is produced by us but in this production we become its appendage; it acquires our human powers and we lose them, becoming subjects of its power. This inversion of powers, of who is the subject of the production of human activity and who is the object, who is the ruler and the ruled, has been called the 'ontological inversion'.

The solution of this inversion only lies in a real subversion of the present system of production. It is not a question of re-interpreting reality. It is not a question of observing that since value is actually created by the working class then the working class must be a productive and creative subject. It is not a question of simply observing that 'capital needs labour but labour does not need capital', so we must be somehow the initiators of production and innovation – even if we are not really aware of it. In fact capital is real

alienation and real power. Although capital needs labour, this is labour done in an historically specific form; a labour that is really subsumed and really deprived of knowledge, initiative and creativity. We will see that forgetting this important point is forgetting the very dynamics that makes the subversion of capitalism a possible reality.

4.3 Who shares the mind of capital?

As capital does not go to the market with its own legs but it needs the capitalist to circulate, capital is incapable of thinking, designing, organising, as well: it needs man for this. This, at the beginning, was the capitalist himself: Wedgwood for example.

But Wedgwood's creativity is the creativity of capital. This creativity is free insofar it has introjected the needs of capital, the objective constraints of the market and its laws. Indeed, what is thinkable is what is objectively realisable within a landscape of undeniable, objective constraints: the finances available, the reality of market demand, the availability (in terms of cost!) of means, materials, labourers; the reasonability (in terms of cost!) of the design itself; the state of competition, etc.

This is an aspect of bourgeois 'alienation': the need to adhere to an 'objective' reality external to the individual. Bourgeois alienation may be experienced as a burden, but all bourgeois stop whinging in front of the wealth and social power this alienation also means for them.

With the development of capitalism, the capitalist farmed out creative and organisational work to special categories of privileged workers: managers and professionals, who worked within their productive project or as independent professionals.

Today the state finances a large part of scientific research and the development of knowledge. Modern science could only develop through the influx of state funds because the capital needed for the expansion of modern scientific research would be too big for any reasonable capitalist venture. Also IT developed thanks to generous US state finance.⁶⁰ Within these fields, the socialisation of labour, one aspect of capitalist production, was encouraged, while the fetters of private property were overridden by public finance. Sadly, this is not the norm but the exception that confirms a fundamental norm in capitalism.

The professionals, the top designer, the researcher share the effects of formal alienation with Wedgwood. They have to face competition. In a world based on exchange they have to produce for strangers who do not share a project or common interests with them.⁶¹ But they normally feel fulfilled by their practice. They can see their work as creative and, as far as they identify themselves with the 'objective' requirements of their profession, autonomous. They can praise the present world as a world of 'creativity' and 'intelligence' because they do contribute to the creativity and intelligence of capital.

However, unlike the bourgeois, for the waged creative and professional workers their privileged position in society

capital itself see, Gilles Dauvé, 'To Work or not to Work? Is That the Question?', <http://troploin0.free.fr/biblio/lovlabuk/>

⁵⁹ Capitalist subsumption of labour has consequences for society as a whole, inside and outside the workplace, so that many activities which are done outside production are reshaped according to the pace and character of productive labour. For a discussion of how housework is affected by capitalist production, see 'The Arcane of Productive Reproduction' in *Aufheben* # 13, 2005, pp. 20-36.

⁶⁰ In the context of the military Star Wars project. See our article on China in this issue.

⁶¹ For the alienation of the university professor, see Harry Cleaver 'From Operaismo to Autonomist Marxism: A Response: <http://www.eco.utexas.edu/~hmcleave/AufhebenResponse2.pdf>.

is not due to the power of their own capital at all: they are unable to live without selling their (very dear) labour power to capital, or without a wage or grant from the state. The recent retreat of social democracy has implied a retreat of the state from financing academia and the sciences. Squeezed by the lack of financial perspective, some of the intelligentsia have moved to radical anti-capitalism. This is indeed a 'new' era, when precisely the 'new' gospel by radical academics Negri and Hardt can sell lots of books.

For the unprivileged, large mass of donkey workers who do not create but execute, there is another story.

4.4 The subjective side of real subsumption

The (either material or immaterial!) donkey worker who works under the command of blueprints, organisational IT frameworks, designs, etc. does not share the mind of capital or any creative 'pleasure' from it. In the ontological inversion, the information and knowledge of capital means the opposite for the worker.

There is a good example from recent news. By June this year transport and delivery workers in warehouses across Britain had started complaining of having to wear computers on their wrists, arms and fingers which instructed them in their daily work. As GMB spokesman Paul Campbell said: 'We are having reports of people walking out of their jobs after a few days work, in some cases just a few hours. They are all saying that they don't like the job because they have no input. They just follow a computer's instruction.'⁶² Informationalisation has not made delivery more intelligent or autonomous, but more brain-numbing and controlled.

As clever computerised systems are sold as gadgets for personal consumption, society at large tends to become less intelligent too! Try a trip in a car which has the new-fangled satellite-driven pilot in it, and experience the feel of divesting yourself of your geographical and orientation skills!

This ontological inversion is one with a subjective experience of boredom and pain.⁶³ Morris denounced the new pain created by the expropriation of creativity and autonomy from craft work with manufacture, i.e. the beginning of capitalist production. Since the dawn of capitalism many people experienced hatred of design. For example, the typographer Koch, whose ideas were close to Morris's, fantasised about, and experimented with, a 'design-less typography' as an unconscious reaction to the sufferance of the present. In the 'new' era of immaterial production, this same pain has compelled many British transport workers to leave their job after just a few hours of computer-commanded work!

4.5 Hatred as contradiction of capital

With *Autonomia* and Mario Tronti in particular, the concrete experience of labour under subsumption was seen as the trigger of antagonism. For Tronti the labour which is commanded and made meaningless by real subsumption implies the disaffection of the worker from their daily

activity: it implies *hatred*. This process was associated by Tronti with the fact that labour under capitalism is abstract labour, the source of value – capital as self-valorising capital needs then to rationalise and deskill concrete labour against our resistance in order to extract surplus value.⁶⁴

Hatred is then the subjective aspect of the objective existence of capital as self-valorising value – and of a real subsumption which has to be reimposed continually and is continually challenged because it is incompatible with a fulfilling life. Hatred is the inherent *unacceptability* of the present system of production and the present division of labour. Hatred is the feel-bad factor in our optimistic view of capital as an unsolvable contradiction.

4.6 Negri and Hardt's conception of immaterial labour as 'abstract labour' and the contradictions of capital

Negri and Hardt cannot deny the undeniable. For example, in *Empire* they cannot deny that IT is a means to control and deskill labour in the new service sector.⁶⁵ The deskilling based on IT, they add, turns all concrete labours into 'abstract labour', a homogenised jelly of manipulations of symbols (*Empire*, p. 292). Are we perhaps unfair to Negri and Hardt, if they seem to repeat word by word what we have just said?

No. In fact, if we carry on reading, we find a twist. Through the practice of computer work, they continue, all labour becomes an undifferentiated jelly of the same activity: an abstract 'manipulation of [computer] symbols'. This, they conclude, is the concept of 'abstract labour'.

Although Negri and Hardt seem to consider deskilling and real subsumption, they focus their attention on the material aspects of labour, the bare manipulation of symbols. The social context of this manipulation (for whom, why, under what plans, etc.) becomes inessential. If we all press computer keys when we work, immaterial labour becomes the same jelly of abstract activity, i.e. the same for Professor Negri as it is for everybody else. The theory of immaterial labour then becomes universal and dismisses the distinction about who shares the mind of capital and who executes.

Hatred, which hardly applies to the top designer or for Professor Negri, has no place in this theory. If hatred has no place here, the contradiction of capital as its unacceptability has no place either. Where is then the main contradiction of capital for Negri and Hardt? It arises, they explain, not from the inherent unacceptability of the present production, but from its inherent positivity. Antagonism arises, they explain, from our will to develop the present system of production and franchise it from the capitalist.

This is indeed a theory which does not see the need for a rupture, which is a rupture with a convenient division of labour. No surprise that for Negri and his followers a struggle for 'the subversive reintegration of execution and

⁶² David Hencke, 'Firms Tag Workers to Improve Efficiency', *The Guardian*, June 7, 2005.

⁶³ We deliberately used Autonomist De Angelis's words 'boredom and pain' that he uses to describe the effects of real subsumption in 'Beyond the Technological and the Social Paradigms', *Capital and Class* 57, Autumn 1995, pp. 107-134.

⁶⁴ See Mario Tronti, 'Social Capital', <http://www.geocities.com/cordobakaf> Following this initial suggestion, other Autonomist Marxist authors, such as Massimo De Angelis, later adopted the concept of 'abstract labour' for the concrete 'boring and painful' experience of labour under real subsumption (in De Angelis, 'Beyond the Technological'). Although we do not agree with such use of the concept of 'abstract labour', we agree with the Autonomist understanding of the basis for antagonism.

⁶⁵ See also Witheford, 'Autonomist Marxism', p. 92.

conception' is exemplified by the struggles of IT workers for the right of self-management of their very skilled labour (Witheyford, 'Autonomist Marxism', p. 104). No surprise that for Negri and Hardt what counts for our anti-capitalist struggles is not a subversion of the present division of labour but the banal question of who controls the results of labour (information, the GM code, 'communicational resources', etc.) as it is divided now!

4.7 An outdated theory?

Negri and Hardt will say, no doubt, that all that we have said so far, in our analysis of antagonism and hatred based on the real subsumption of labour is outdated. Today, they will say, immaterial production has broken out with labour confined in the workplace and is done in the street, within unspecified 'communities', by anti-capitalist protesters, even tribes on small islands in the Pacific Ocean, by consumers who collectively help create the meanings of their commodity world, etc.⁶⁶ The list is never-ending.

Today, then, there is no such thing as real subsumption anymore. As we have already said, for Negri and Hardt today society at large organises our communication and co-operation, while capital only overlaps on them and by overlapping it 'controls, commands and channels our actions'.⁶⁷

Another reason why we are wrong, and Marxism is outdated, Negri and Hardt will say, is because not only is production delocalised, but the product exceeds the commodity. What's this 'excess'? As immaterial workers in the service sector, we may make friends in our immaterial job with the customers, above all if we smile a lot: this is an 'excess'. As migrants, our first language and our links with our relatives are excesses too. As unemployed, our skill in making houses of cards is an excess too. And in general, as workers and poor, we produce lots of excesses in the forms of *needs and desires* (*Multitude*, p. 148).⁶⁸

Is this true - and, consequently, is our theory outdated? In fact all the above is true, but has always been true in capitalism and has never denied the dynamics of capital and real subsumption. Capitalist production has always thrived on given social and cultural backgrounds. The very concept of use value has always been rooted in society and its culture.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ However, to patch up the gap between their theory and reality, Negri and Hardt add: 'the impersonal rule of capital extends throughout society... the places of exploitation, by contrast, are always determinate and concrete.' (*Multitude*, p. 100-101) A theory that says one thing and its opposite is the best theory ever.

⁶⁷ Negri, *Politics of Subversion*, p. 116 cited in Witheyford, 'Autonomist Marxism', p. 101. Negri safely adds that capital even 'anticipates' our production 'in common' (*Politics of Subversion*, p. 116). This genially explains why this 'production in common' is never actually observable in reality!

⁶⁸ On how productive the 'poor' is see also, *Empire*, p. 158. In the concept of 'excess' there is a moment of truth for the skilled creative worker. This excess has a value today and can make the difference between who guides and controls a struggle and who does not tomorrow. We cannot see how, instead, the McDonald worker's skills in showing servile niceness all the time gives to them 'equal opportunities of struggle'.

⁶⁹ Marx mentioned in his times the human (i.e. social) meaning of food in opposition to something that serves only to fill the stomach.

If the above is true, however, Negri and Hardt make a logical leap and claim that this background for capitalist production, today, is production in its own rights, production *tout court*:

Insofar as life tends to be completely invested by acts of production and reproduction, social life itself becomes a productive machine. (*Multitude*, p. 148)

In this interpretation of production which incorporates non-production, then all can be production.

We do not need to waste more words on this distortion of reality. Negri and Hardt's logical leap which conflates all activity with production has already been criticised by Caffentzis who stressed that there is a difference between labour, as a specific activity, and any odd activity.⁷⁰

We also do not need to waste more words to convince the reader that real subsumption is still a reality today – everyone can experience it. As Gilles Dauvé says:

Managers know their Marx better than Toni Negri: they keep tracing and measuring productive places and moments to try and rationalise them even more. They even locate and develop "profit centres" within the company. Work is not diffuse. It is separated from the rest ('To Work or Not to Work?')

Only, what we are concerned with here, is the ideological conclusions of a theory of 'general intellect'. First of all, this theory seems democratic and egalitarian but hides a sneaking contentment for the present. In a society where all is productive, there is no distinction between the owners of the means of production and the proletariat. There are no classes, only one large class of productive producers, some of goods and some of needs. Second, this theory seems to flatter us about our creative and knowledgeable inputs into society, but hides contentment for a situation where in reality we have no input. We may work 43 hours a week in a call centre, but Negri and Hardt give us a word of consolation: in the information we employ, in the spreadsheet we use, there is a drop of our socially-shared creativity – we are the co-creators of it. What we need is only to become aware of this.

In conclusion, we are confident that the questions we put forward are not outdated! There is no easy escape for Negri and Hardt from these questions into a dream world of happy general intellectual and excessive production.

5. Immaterial labour and the heart of capital

We have focused so far on immaterial production as the production of knowledge and ideas. Another, central, aspect of immaterial production as defined by Negri and Hardt is the production of affects, communication and cooperation. In this section we address Negri and Hardt's view that this production, which is capitalist production, is 'elevated to the level of human relations' and criticise their inability to understand the ontological inversion that turns affects and

See, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844)' in *Early Writings*, Pelican, London 1975, p. 353.

⁷⁰ George Caffentzis, 'Immeasurable Value? An Essay on Marx's Legacy', *The Commoner*, 10, p. 97, 1997. And by us in *Aufheben* # 13.

communication into abstract powers of capital and into our disempowerment.

5.1. 'Immaterial production of communication and affects and subversion

Capital and affects, it seems, do not go along too well.

For Negri and Hardt capital was simply forced to incorporate affects and other subjective powers like communication and cooperation into production (*Empire*, pp. 275-6). Without the struggles of the '60s and '70s, they say, capital would have been content with conveyor belts and mechanical production. In fact, we are made to believe, by incorporating communication and affects in its production, capital incorporated its own gravediggers: what is subjective and human is inherently subversive and anti-capitalist by nature.

Hardt concedes that, in incorporating affects and human relations in production, capital 'contaminated' them. In his article 'Affective Labour' we read:

In a first moment in the computerisation of industry... one might say that... human relations... have been instrumentalised.⁷¹

But, this is not the end of the story. Quite the contrary, capitalist production has been humanised in turn, by this subsumption of human faculties:

Through a reciprocal process... production has become communicative, affective, de-instrumentalised and elevated to the level of human relations. ('Affective Labour')

Negri and Hardt seem to propose something refreshing. From the Frankfurt School to Foucault, we have read plenty of pessimistic literature about how we are helplessly de-humanised by mass production or by the whole construction of power. Adorno endlessly moaned that capitalist production creates false ideology through a specific production of mass culture. Foucault, perhaps even more pessimistically, observed that our only subjectivity is inevitably the one created by power.

Negri and Hardt agree with Foucault that present production creates our collective subjectivity and society, and this happens, they add, because present production is the production of affects, affective labour. As Hardt writes:

Affective labour is itself and directly the constitution of communities and collective subjectivities... the processes whereby our labouring practices produce collective subjectivities... society itself. ('Affective Labour')

But, they add, this production is not negative, it is positive. It makes society 'more affective' and 'more communicative'. And, since this is the result of immaterial labour, it is at odds with capital itself, it is human and potentially subversive. Negri and Hardt invert the pessimism of grumpy Foucault and Adorno into a euphoric adherence to the present.

Do we want to share this euphoria? Let us consider deeply the issue of communicative and affective labour, and what it means for us.

5.2. Immaterial production of communication and affects and real subsumption

The first question we ask is what happens to the nature of certain activities which involve primarily communications and affects (e.g. care, communication and entertainment) when they become productive for capital. There is only one answer. The integration of such activities as profit-making activities imply real subsumption and rationalisation.

As Taylor did with material production, new studies now analyse human cooperation in terms of abstract principles, organisational schemes amenable to standardisation and automation. As the machine for manual work the new technology of communication allows for standardisation, rationalisation and control of communication.⁷² And, importantly, the imposition of efficiency in cost and time means the imposition of factory pace on affective activities such as hospital care.

5.3. Immaterial production of communication and affects and the ontological inversion

If we now consider the effect of this change for the worker, we will not be surprised to discover that we will find a similar pattern as the one seen in Section 4 for manufacture: de-humanisation.

But is there a difference between the subsumption of craft work and the more recent subsumption of other 'communicative and affective' activities? Negri and Hardt seem to point at the fact that these latter have something special in their original, natural immateriality, and that, unlike craft work, their subsumption must have a reverse humanising effect on production.

In fact these arguments seem to contain a basically wrong assumption. Thinking that nursing has something more specially social and human with respect to, for example, pot making and that, consequently, its subsumption implies something new and different for capitalist production, means to fall into an ideological trap. *It means to take the established result of capitalist production on human activity as something natural.*

In fact pot making, as all human activities including care, was fully social, communicative and affective before its subsumption by capital. It involved imagination and problem solving, a socially-shared conception of aesthetics and utility and a social relation between the creator and the user. Capital took over all these human powers and, truly, 'for a reciprocal process' (which we call the ontological inversion!) assumed them as its powers. This 'reciprocal process' and humanisation of capital is not, however, a silver lining of real subsumption but a curse for us, since it is one with our real experience of de-humanisation.

Going back to the subsumption of service and communication, we wonder if we are not in the presence of some more of this incorporation and subsumption of human activity and powers.

⁷¹ In *Makeworlds*, <http://www.makeworlds.org/node/60>.

⁷² In the '70s and '80s many, following Braverman, focused their analysis of IT as being the new machine (see Nick Witheford, 'Autonomist Marxism' and our review of *CyberMarx* in this issue).

For example, the activity of 'spreading information' was practised in the courtyards and village squares and based on common understanding and experience. Taken over by capital, it becomes the task of helping strangers in exchange for a wage - first from 'help desks' in the same town; later, by phone. Eventually, from a distant country. Automation comes next: robots now phone us or answer our phone calls; web sites, i.e. automated interactive systems replace our interaction effectively. Meanwhile the content of information is made increasingly alien to both the ones who receive it and those who convey it.

This process increasingly distances the communicators concretely, in 'affects' as well as in life and struggle. People from two sides of a desk can still find common grounds of understanding and struggle, for example through sharing social milieus outside alienating customer relations. *Brighton Against Benefit Cuts* benefited from the wealth of Brighton life: this created friendship and understanding and allowed for the build-up of solidarity among the more militant dole workers and the unemployed in a common struggle against dole privatisation. But the possibility of building solidarity on common grounds is more difficult the more people are delocalised and estranged.⁷³

In the sector of entertainment, the manipulation of affects must be able to leave the producer and be consumed by strangers. This transforms collective events of the past (fairs, storytelling etc.) which involved complex interplay of full human relations, into the consumption of commodities.

The experience of affects in care is de-humanised too. For example, the direct relation of the village doctor and his patients, or women neighbours in midwifery roles and new mothers, etc. gets increasingly standardised by privatisation. The nurse who deals with patients in a conveyor-belt system cannot know them personally: his 'manipulation of affects' is necessarily depersonalised. A surgery under economic pressure now tends to rotate patients among doctors so that even the flimsy relation between the individual patient and 'his' doctor is sacrificed on the altar of economic efficiency. Eventually, hospital consultants will be asked to interact with their patients through TV monitors on wheels.

In front of this systematic denial of communication and socialisation inherent in a profit-making process, and in front of the parallel build-up of 'communicative' and 'affective' powers of capital, Negri and Hardt do not flinch. It does not matter if our contact is automated or virtual, Hardt says, 'not for that reason is [it] any less real' ('Affective Labour'). It does not matter if it is very difficult today to realise the conditions for communication and solidarity among individuals or groups in struggle: this is communication anyway - only it is a 'new' kind of communication, *vertical instead of horizontal*.⁷⁴

The question that immediately comes to our mind is: in a historical moment when most of us have to keep our heads down in our 'flexible' jobs as call centre workers, waiters, carers, bank employees, receptionists, etc., how subversive is

it to tell us that the alienated and alienating 'communication' and 'affects' we produce are nonetheless real?

5.4. Post-Fordism and the ontological inversion

The clearest example of how Negri and Hardt turn a blind eye to the ontological inversion of communication and affects in immaterial production is their enthusiastic approach to post-Fordist methods of production. Post-Fordism is welcomed by Negri and Hardt as an aspect of immaterial production, being based on exchange of information and cooperation between interrelated work units - thus it demands and stimulates communicativity in the worker.

In fact, as we argued earlier, post-Fordism aimed to fragment the large-scale factory production process. This fragmentation needs a stress on 'communication' at a managerial level however, since the company finds itself with the need to sow the bits of production back together. Of course the Japanese-oriented business brochures of the '80s made a big fuss about 'communication' and 'synergies'. They had to.

But, as it was more clear to the workers themselves than to Negri and Hardt, the breakdown of production into teams increased managerial-controlled communication to the extent that it reduced the possibility for uncontrolled, antagonistic, communication across the factory.

For example in Longbridge, where as we have said earlier Rover production was restructured, the separation of work into units increased face-to-face 'communication' between the workers and their own team (group) leader while curtailing the mobility of the shop stewards (Pugliano, 'Restructuring of Work', pp. 39-41).⁷⁵ Rather than encouraging new alternative, anti-capitalist communications, simply and sadly, this system individualised the workers and encouraged them to look to their leaders for the solutions to their grudges. At the same time it discouraged them to look for collective and antagonistic solutions, even if in the mild form of union disputes. This is another example of ontological inversion, whereby the development and increase of capital's 'communication' is realised through the denial of ours.⁷⁶

5.5. Immaterial production of networks of social relations and alternative networks

Besides the production of communication and affects, the 'networks' of social relations that results as a by-product of 'serving with a smile' cannot but harmonise with capital.

For example, the social niceness produced between hostesses and aeroplane passengers is an ephemeral connection founded on money transaction. The real nature of this relation appears in full when it is broken down during a strike - then the passengers affectively turn against the strikers, having lost their value for money. If we accept that a

⁷³ The call centre worker is in the front line in a relation between clients and their providers of service, and often take the brunt for this alienating situation. See Amelia Gentleman, 'Indian Call Staff Quit Over Abuse on the Line' *The Observer*, 28 May 2005. So much for the... creation of affects.

⁷⁴ Paraphrased from *Empire*, p. 55.

⁷⁵ Pugliano notices that also in the FIAT factory in Melfi the establishment of increased inter-personal communication between workers and their leaders or other persons in key roles in the factory reduced oppositional activity to the minimum (Pugliano, 'Restructuring of Work', p. 47).

⁷⁶ As *Mouvement Communiste* notice in Fiat Melfi, the introduction of Toyotism, with its heavy shifts, destroyed all 'possibilities of any social life outside the factory' for the workers. So much for the creation of social relations...

negative affect is an affect, it is worth while to paraphrase Hardt and say that consumers' resentment *is by no means less real*. Indeed, social relations of bourgeois exchange are real and imply real oppression and repression.

Networks of social relations alternative to those of 'democratic exchange' can instead emerge in the very moment in which we deny capitalist social relations. This can even be a humble strike or a street protest limited in time and aims. Or it may be something even humbler and more limited. When we steal time from our 'affective' job in our service office and hang about in the corridor with our colleagues, this is the moment in which we build up affections beyond work relations, affections that can be a basis for future solidarity.

Only if we can build up and rely on direct social relations alternative to those of exchange can we concretely dispose of capitalist relations. The more we break away from capital, the more we defetishise its power, the more important these alternative relations become for our survival and victory. The revolution, the final triumph and abolition of the proletariat will only be possible on the basis of social relations consciously built through struggle - surely not on the basis of our smiles to passengers or hamburger eaters.⁷⁷

5.6. How subversive is immaterial production and what does this actually mean?

Perhaps, again, we have considered the wrong example: i.e. that of a 'traditional' strike - or a 'traditional' micro-struggle such as hanging-out in the corridor with our colleagues.

In the famous confrontation between Toni Negri and Socialist Workers Party intellectual, Alex Callinicos, at the Paris European Social Forum in 2003, Callinicos criticised Negri for allegedly not including 'strikers' in the 'multitude' and for having thus abandoned a working class perspective. Negri easily rebuffed these allegations: he never excluded strikers, he said, and he always speaks about the antagonistic class.⁷⁸ However, what we read about immaterial labour poses serious doubts about what, precisely, Negri's view of class struggle is.

Indeed, for a theory which sees immaterial production as anti-capitalist in itself, the real, effective struggle cannot be found in refusing and disrupting immaterial production.⁷⁹ The 'new' era thus opens up, in this view, possibilities for 'new' positive and exciting struggles that create and develop immaterial production. For many of us this idea does not make much sense. But it makes really good sense for the radical academic or the radical top designer. They can consider struggles based on their writing and designing. They can use their skills against capital, and, at the same

⁷⁷ We notice that the recent BA strike in support of Gate Gourmet workers (a catering outsource of BA) was based on 'networks' of friendship and family relations created outside work. Importantly, those who showed solidarity with the Gate Gourmet workers were the 'material' baggage handlers and not the 'immaterial' hostesses and stewards.

⁷⁸ For the debate, see e.g., J. Walker, 'ESF: Another Venue is Possible: Negri vs. Callinicos', <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2003/11/280632.html>.

⁷⁹ See our review of *CyberMarx* in this issue for examples of 'effective' forms of struggles suggested to us by the Negrian Nick Witheford.

time improve their CV and 'self-valorise' their privileged labour power.⁸⁰

Although Callinicos made the mistake of not acknowledging Negri's subtleties seriously enough, in his allegations there is a moment of truth. It is true that Negri still speaks about the 'antagonistic' class, but he has emptied this concept of meaning. For him class is simply a cultural belonging, a re-groupment created by (any) struggle. When anybody can be 'the class', including top designer Oliviero Toscani, the concept of class becomes meaningless. Thus Negri's world of the multitude becomes in practice a classless society. This is why Negri can find a basis for academic collaboration, with post-modernists who have, more openly (and honestly) just disowned a class perspective.⁸¹

In the next and last subsection we will show how Negri and Hardt, as new ideologues for the 'new' era, manage to present their particularistic theory as universal.

5.7. Immaterial production as the apology for the ontological inversion

Like all bourgeois theories, a theory that can only reflect the perspective of a privileged part of society must nevertheless present itself as universal. The easiest way of achieving universality is to speak about unquestionably and universally good things. Like what? Like capital itself.

Capital can be seen as an unquestionably and universally good thing indeed. The secret of the bourgeois apologist of capital is in fact to exploit the ontological inversion. Does capital deny our creativity, affections, communication? Never mind. The other side of this coin is a real production of the same human powers, but now assumed by capital as its own, and appearing to us as 'creativity', 'affections' or 'communication' of a vaguely defined 'society' (or 'new' era). The fact that none of them actually belongs to the McDonald's waiter can be then swiftly dismissed as a contingent disfunction of this unquestionably positive society (or 'new' era). When Negri and Hardt talk about 'creativity', 'affections' or 'communication' we cannot avoid thinking of the old bourgeois apology for capital as 'progress', 'culture' or 'civilisation'. This old apology is now re-proposed in a 'new' Toyotaistic and cybernetic salad dressing.

Mitchell Cohen has already noticed that Negri and Hardt tend to attribute to us the powers and dynamics of capital itself. Commenting on their enthusiasm for the freedom of circulation of migrants, he says, lucidly:

Poor migrants in our globalising world don't pursue "continuous movement" as an end in itself; they seek places in which to live decent and secure lives. *Only capital pursuing profits can live in restless movement.* (Well, perhaps cosmopolitan intellectuals can too when

⁸⁰ Radical-chic tutors of design encourage young, would-be graphic designers to have a few anti-capitalist ad-busting works in their portfolio.

⁸¹ Lazzarato hails the end of the class system 'as a model of action and subjectivation' (Maurizio Lazzarato, 'What Possibilities for Action Exist Today in the Public Sphere?', <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-1-9908/msg00067.html>).

they chase conferences and international celebrity. But they also want – and need – the security of tenure).⁸²

The broadness and abstractedness of concepts such as ‘communication’ and ‘affects’ has also another interesting function. It serves Negri and Hardt in the creation of a cheap Theory of Everything in One Book that can explain any facts ever observed and incorporate anything ever written. If this seems too easy, however, Negri and Hardt pay a price. The price is the appalling meaningless of a theory that can say only something too general or too abstract.⁸³

Reading Negri and Hardt, we find lots of abstract truths. Our labour is so communicative and affective today. Of course this is true. All we can possibly do or we could have ever done since we came down from the trees can be categorised as communication or affections! Our production creates social relations. Of course this is true. All production, as an aspect of our social relations, has always implied the reproduction of social relations! Today language is fundamental for production because ‘we could not interact... in our daily lives if languages... were not common’ (*Multitude*, p. 188). Of course this is true too and has always been. Does all this prove Negri and Hardt’s theory of everything is true, or it is only the case that we are in front of trans-historical banalities?

Conclusion: a bad string makes a bad necklace

New old categories for the ‘new’ era

In the course of this article we have addressed the inadequacy of Negri and Hardt’s concepts of material and immaterial labour for the understanding of capitalism and its contradictions – the string of their fascinating necklace.

Negri and Hardt’s categories of material and immaterial labour replace the old categories of manual and mental labour of traditional Marxist times.⁸⁴ The latter were intended to conceptualise the ‘manual’ as a potentially revolutionary agent of class struggle. It is important to notice that the essential distinction between those who create and those who execute within production – thus a distinction in roles and privileges – became conflated with ‘mental’ and ‘manual’ work, i.e. the type of work done.

The increasing investment of capital into what Negri and Hardt call immaterial production and the consequent increasing rationalisation of mental labour has now put this categorisation into question. ‘Mental’ labour now cuts across the lines of privileges and proletarianisation and includes, side by side, the call centre worker and the top designer.

⁸² In ‘An Empire of Cant, Hardt, Negri and Postmodern Political Theory’, *Dissonance*, Issue 1, <http://www.messmedia.net/dissonance/index.htm>

⁸³ In ‘Alma Venus’ Negri avoids spelling out how he conceives the transition to communism by speaking rather of ‘leaning further beyond the edge of being’. This pure abstractedness is, we suspect, convenient (http://www.messmedia.net/dissonance/issues/issue01/issue01_4.htm). Let us notice that all human thought is based on abstractions. Bourgeois thought, however, uses abstract concepts as *starting points*, to explain reality in separation from its context.

⁸⁴ To be fair to traditional Marxism, we should specify that Negri and Hardt seem to have absorbed and re-elaborated *vulgar* Marxism.

Having thus lost its original rationale, it is now a bad category.

Negri and Hardt’s ‘new’ category of ‘immaterial’ labour, however, does not seem to be better than this. Like ‘mental labour’, we have seen that immaterial labour includes, side by side, the call centre worker and the top designer too. Using the wrong category, Negri and Hardt give themselves a hard time in trying to convince us why this category correctly encircles the potentially subversive ‘new subject’: why the migrant, although he does manual work, is immaterial, and why the top designer, who is included in the category, is a revolutionary subject.

The problem of bad categories can be solved either by looking for more appropriate categories – or by making the bad category elastic enough to patch up all its shortcomings. Negri and Hardt choose the second solution. The old concept of mental labour excluded manual labour, thus it was far too rigid. Negri and Hardt define the new concept, immaterial labour, in a more comprehensive way: as any possible human activity – either manual or mental, either done inside or outside the workplace – that produces ideas, communication or affections, either as product or a by-product. With this definition, immaterial labour can include anything. Indeed, what human activity is not an expenditure of thoughts, affects or an act of communication after all? Even the production of nothing can be seen as production of something: needs and desires, which are indeed human forms of affects and communication.

The convenient elasticity⁸⁵ of the category of ‘immaterial’ labour allows Negri and Hardt to sneak into and out of the ‘subject’ of immaterial labour the ‘right’/ ‘wrong’ groups according to the current rating of sympathy scored in the liberal-leftist world. Thus black ‘communities’, tribes in the Pacific, housewives, students, Indian farmers fighting against the genetic industry, protesters involved in the anti-capitalist movement, workers in flexible jobs, economic migrants, the radical student and the academic like Negri are all in.⁸⁶

Being amenable to include what is ‘cool’ and exclude what is ‘dated’, the new categories for the ‘new’ era have the power to please and flatter a large range of readers. Their elasticity is good for ‘explaining’ anything as effects or acts of immaterial production.

This is the secret behind the intellectual universality of Negri and Hardt. When anything can be described as the creation of ‘communication’ or ‘affects’; when anything, even the production of nothing at all (sorry: needs), can be considered as ‘production’, we have found the Holy Grail of the theorist, the magic key for the Theory of Everything capable of accommodating everything and in the end explaining nothing.

A new fetishism of production for the ‘new’ era

By inheriting the traditional Marxist categorisation, although having turned them into stretchable rubber, Negri and Hardt uncritically inherit assumptions and values which were implicit in their use.

⁸⁵ Sorry: flexibility?

⁸⁶ The most popular social group for the intellectual world is the intellectual world. This is immaterial by default.

First of all, they inherit the tendency to attribute some form of moral value to the role of 'producer' in capitalism. For the traditional Marxist there was a moral value to be a productive manual worker - for Negri and Hardt, turning the scale of moralistic 'value' upside down, there is a moral value in being a productive immaterial worker. Negri and Hardt try very hard to convince the reader that tribes of the Pacific islands are productive (of herbal remedies) and that those excluded from the labour market are productive (of needs and desires). For people like us who do not share this same productivist moralism (in either its straight or inverted form) this is just a waste of ink.⁸⁷ We noticed that this construction serves, no doubt, an ideological agenda. Behind the appearance to reclaim moral 'value' for the dispossessed it feeds us in fact with a petty bourgeois vision of a society of equally worthy 'producers': some of valuable pieces of design, some of needs and desires.

Together with uncritical productivism, Negri and Hardt inherit an uncritical fetishism of the productive forces - again, turned upside down. The traditional Marxist trusts the development of (industrial) forces of production as neutral and potentially fit for future self-management; Negri and Hardt trust the development of (immaterial) forces of production as inherently subversive and potentially fit for self-management. But now the machine is substituted by a loose entanglement of networks of social relations.

We have stressed that like traditional Marxism and like much bourgeois thought, Negri and Hardt cannot see our social relations, i.e. capital, behind the apparent objectivity of production. This blindness reaches the climax when they mistake the apparent autonomy of production from the individual human, which is evidence of its nature as capital, as evidence of its autonomy from capital!

In fact Negri and Hardt draw a curtain of simplistic enthusiasm over reality. By addressing immaterial production overlook what the existence of production of pure ideas and communicational frameworks actually implies: the separation of the creative side from the executive side of human activity; real subsumption of labour; the daily boredom and pain lived by the worker who is engaged in activity that has been subsumed. And crucially it is one with the existence of privileged producers of designs, IT frameworks and all the apparatus of control over the labour of others. The fact that members of society who partake of such privileges cannot see this problem is perhaps not a coincidence.

Consistent with their uncritical acceptance of the present, Negri and Hardt do not see the contradictions of capitalism in its inhumanity and unacceptability, in its denial of creativity, intelligence or affections for us, *and in our hatred*. Instead, for them the main contradiction of capitalism is in the humanity, creativity and affections that immaterial production develops; in the inherent goodness of the present conditions, which we should not resist but enhance.

A new paleo-Marxism for the 'new' era

But let us be fair to Negri and Hardt. They do not replicate old Marxism: theirs is a 'new' old Marxism for a

'new' era. It is a vulgar Marxism turned upside down, which inverts the 'worthiness' from the manual worker to the immaterial worker. Coherently with a preference for a 'new' category for the revolutionary 'subject' which includes the middle class, this doctrine embraces perfect middle-class liberal values: the idealisation of bourgeois democracy, the dream of consumer sovereignty as the best solution for the future, the rejection of the despotism of past working class organisation, and so on.⁸⁸

Despite trying to appear to oppose old Marxism and to be new and exciting, however, Negri and Hardt's theory smells musty already! Not only because it is based on old fads such as the enthusiasm for Toyotism, already long out of fashion. But also because Negri and Hardt cannot get out of the impasse of traditional Marxism, since they share the same fundamental problems: a lack of understanding of capital as objectification of social relations and the consequent hopeless *cul-de-sac* of intending revolution as self-management of the present production.

Objectivism and subjectivism for the 'new' era

Negri and Hardt's uncritical acceptance of apparently objectivistic ideas may surprise us, since their books are full of subjectivistic assertions of Autonomist inheritance.

However, in this article we have seen that at a closer inspection Negri and Hardt's conception of subjectivity is as mistaken and confused as their conception of objectivity. We have argued that the subjectivity that Negri and Hardt celebrate as the 'multitude' is merely bourgeois consciousness, the product of our bourgeois relations of exchange. This subjectivity is precisely that which creates capital as an objectivity. Thus Negri and Hardt end up celebrating the coin of capital in both its two faces: the objectivity of immaterial production and the intriguing vitality of bourgeois subjectivity and democratic exchanges.

This shows, we said, a lack of dialectical understanding. This is why under the sheep's clothes of Negri and Hardt's shallow subjectivism we discover the wolf of uncritical objectivism, which is, ultimately, bourgeois. We cannot be too surprised then if Negri and Hardt uncritically adhere to post-Fordist technological determinism, and proclaim that the paradigms of immaterial production can shape us down to our marrows. Despite their apparent supersession of those bourgeois theories, Negri and Hardt simply adhere to them and only give them some incoherent and decorative radical twist.

The silver linings of capital: optimism and pessimism for the 'new' era

We have seen that Negri and Hardt are able to present their theory as excitingly subjectivistic. 'We' created immaterial labour in our autonomous struggle, 'we' imposed it on capital. Behind the power of capital we have got our own unofficial but effective power.

Against this view we have presented a history of capitalist development that sees restructuring and class compromises as the re-imposition of the domination of capital on labour. It won't be of any use for us to deny that

⁸⁷ In 'Must Try Harder' and 'The Arcane of Productive Reproduction', *Aufheben* # 13, we similarly criticised as moralistic the autonomist attempts to convince the world that the unwaged produce value.

⁸⁸ And Michael Hardt's acrobatics to condemn the anarchists' attacks against Starbucks' windows in Seattle - as well as his passive acceptance to call these attacks 'violence'.

we still live in capitalism as Negri and Hardt do.⁸⁹ But for us the reality of capitalism as the present domination is double-sided. The positive side of restructuring is not something that doubles its negative side but it is an aspect of it – it is the increasing unacceptability of capital, now extended more deeply to the globe. That immaterial labour has contradictions inherent in itself is true, but they are not its inherent goodness, but its potential fragility. The new weapons used by capital to subsume us make capital more crucially dependent on our compliance: within the practice of immaterial production, for example, the zero-stock policies or the volatility of smiles and sense-of-humour required in team work are rather vulnerable points. And, with the flight of capital abroad, the working class involved in (any and mainly industrial) production in the globe has

Negri and Hardt's striving to find a hidden silver lining in capitalist production is real pessimism instead. Their celebration of unquestionably good things as aspects of the present system of production is in fact the celebration of the human powers that capital has assumed, disempowering and dehumanising us in the ontological inversion. This celebration is an ideological capitulation - which we have equated with bourgeois enthusiasm for 'progress' and 'civilisation'.

A 'new' religion for a 'new' era: the doctrine of Negative Reality Inversion⁹⁰

Once the string of Negri and Hardt's necklace has been cut we can still be fascinated by the single, colourful beads. We have read about a world where we are overwhelmingly

and hegemonically surrounded by immaterial production done in common, and escaping subsumption and control. No doubt many assertions in Negri and Hardt's books are exciting and consolatory. So exciting that it is hard to raise our head from their books and look around us.

In fact what is described in Negri and Hardt's work is not the world we know. It is not our daily experience of commodification and subsumption. But we are told: although what we see is the opposite, we have to believe that what we see around is simply a distortion due to capital's overlap with an otherwise free and autonomous process of production and ideal democratic exchange.

If we have to abandon Marxism, which seemed to correctly describe the present world, for a doctrine which correctly describes what we cannot actually see, we need *faith*: Negri and Hardt's doctrine is indeed a new religion for a 'new'

world. Like all religion, we are told not to look at the world and our experience, but to something beyond, which we cannot see. In fact, we can entirely apply to Negri and Hardt, one by one, Marx's words about religion:

[Negri and Hardt's work] is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement,



increased, increasing the potentials for uncontrollable new cycles of struggle at a global level.

To stress how capitalist production is bad for our health and happiness, to stress that immaterial production is contradictory and bound to be dismantled with the revolution, this is the real answer to pessimism.

⁸⁹ 'I don't deny, it's nice to dream, but it is less nice to have hallucinations. Seeing a fallen empire and a triumphing communism where, instead, there is an aggressive capitalism... more than a beautiful utopia this seems to me, frankly, hallucination' (Maria Turchetto, 'L'Impero').

⁹⁰ We assume Alexiej Sayle and his company don't mind if we have freely adopted the concept of Negative Reality Inversion presented in 'Sick', *The Young Ones*, series 2.

and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the *fantastic realization* of the human essence since the *human essence* has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against [Negri and Hardt's work] is, therefore, indirectly the struggle *against that world* whose spiritual *aroma* is [the creativity and communicativity of immaterial production] (Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Introduction, italics from the original.⁹¹).

The new religion for the 'new' times, however, can present itself only as rational and based on 'facts'. Thus it can be only based on a skilful capacity to find facts as evidences of their inverse, and indeed Negri and Hardt are very skilled in this. We call this the method of Negative Reality Inversion.

Does our work get increasingly commanded through IT means? This means that the 'intelligence' of IT 'permeates' us and makes us 'more informationalised' and 'more intelligent'.

Do we interact through automated systems? This does not mean that our communication is not real, it is only virtual.

Do scientists complain about the recent increasing privatisation of research, previously supported by state funds - e.g. patenting DNA, etc.? This is evidence that production is 'increasingly' made in common.⁹²

Are services increasingly privatised and increasingly run like businesses? This means that today all production is increasingly run like services!⁹³

Does Toyotism imposes stricter managerial control over the communication between workers? This means that Toyotism has increased communication because the control of it is central in production.

Are recent struggles such as the Los Angeles riots, the revolt in Chiapas, etc. isolated explosions that do not communicate in an 'era' of communication and cooperation? This means that they are communicative - but it's a new communication, not horizontal but... vertical (*Empire*, p. 55).

Are the propertyless deprived of the power to produce? This means that they are productive (of needs).

Are the poor 'subjugated'? This means that they are 'powerful, always more powerful' (sic, *Empire*, p. 157).

To conclude, we invite readers to recall their healthy suspicions about priests. *The critique of religion is the prerequisite of all critique.*

⁹¹<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>. See also *Early Writings*, p. 244.

⁹² See *Multitude*, pp. 337-8 and pp. 185-6.

⁹³ The prescription to run businesses like services, popular in the business literature of the '80s, were nothing other than the re-edition of old the bourgeois ideology of the 19th century. The prescription to run production for profit like a service, or simply to understand it as a service, hides the delusion to abolish its inherent contradictions *as a production for profit* through a change of the staff's attitude towards the customer or towards themselves. Instead, the recent increasing privatisation of state-run services like the British National Health Service is a concrete change of a service into a profit-making machine. This has really concrete effects, it is not simply the ideological prescription of a change in attitude. But Negri and Hardt, who pay respect to business guru prescriptions, do not bother about these much more relevant changes in the 'new' era of increasing privatisation!