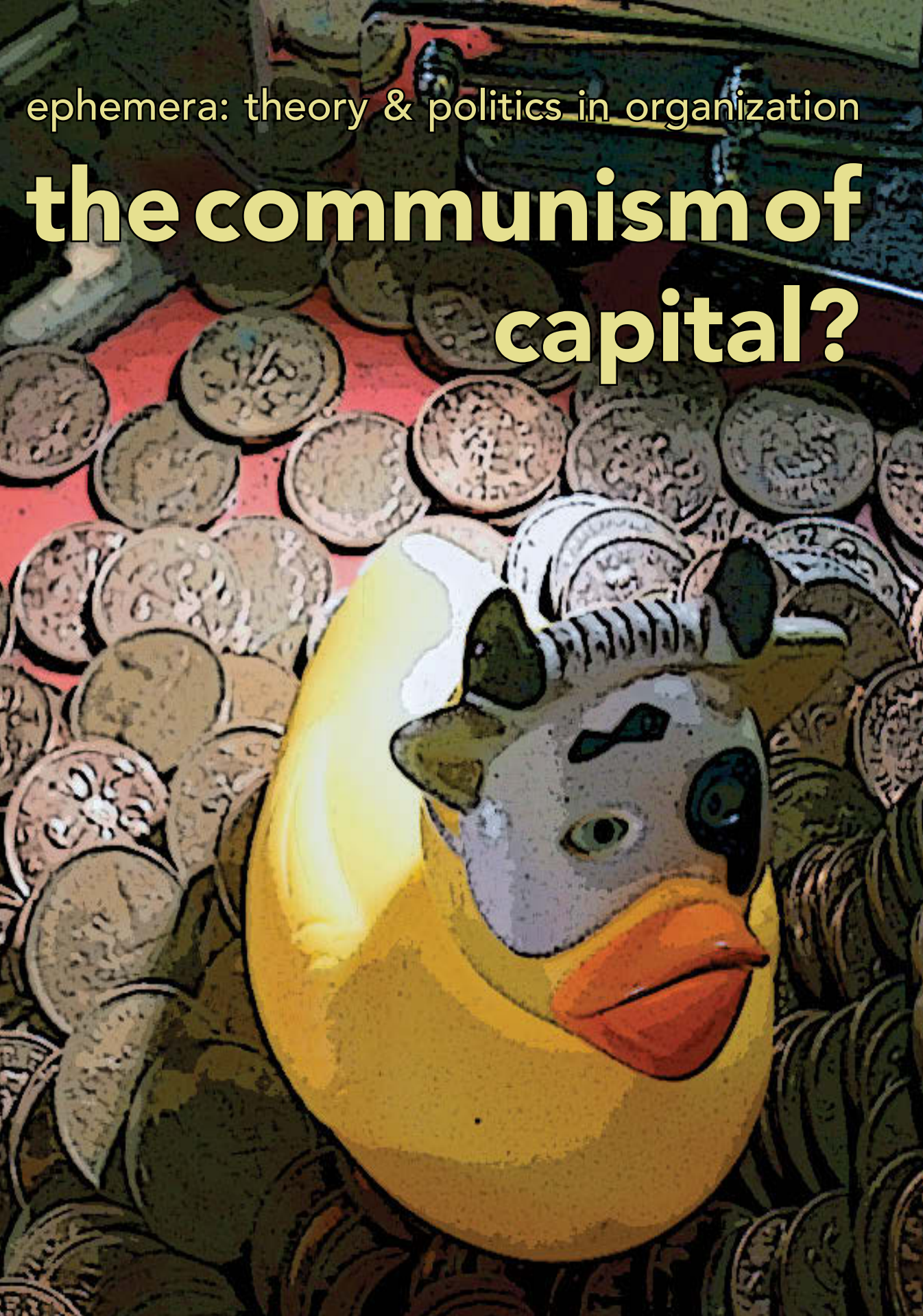


ephemera: theory & politics in organization

the communism of capital?



What is *ephemera*: theory & politics in organization?

ephemera is an independent journal founded in 2001. *ephemera* provides its content free of charge, and charges its readers only with free thought.

theory

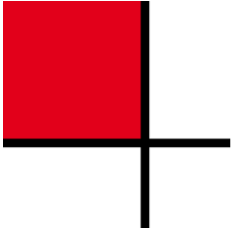
ephemera encourages contributions that explicitly engage with theoretical and conceptual understandings of organizational issues, organizational processes and organizational life. This does not preclude empirical studies or commentaries on contemporary issues, but such contributions consider how theory and practice intersect in these cases. We especially publish articles that apply or develop theoretical insights that are not part of the established canon of organization studies. *ephemera* counters the current hegemonization of social theory and operates at the borders of organization studies in that it continuously seeks to question what organization studies is and what it can become.

politics

ephemera encourages the amplification of the political problematics of organization within academic debate, which today is being actively de-politized by the current organization of thought within and without universities and business schools. We welcome papers that engage the political in a variety of ways as required by the organizational forms being interrogated in a given instance.

organization

Articles published in *ephemera* are concerned with theoretical and political aspects of organizations, organization and organizing. We refrain from imposing a narrow definition of organization, which would unnecessarily halt debate. Eager to avoid the charge of 'anything goes' however, we do invite our authors to state how their contributions connect to questions of organization and organizing, both theoretical and practical.



ephemera

theory & politics in organization

ephemera 13(3), August 2013

The communism of capital?

Armin Beverungen, Anna-Maria Murtola
and Gregory Schwartz

in association with:



www.mayflybooks.org

Published by the ephemera editorial collective: Anna-Maria Murtola, Armin Beverungen, Bent M. Sørensen, Bernadette Loacker, Birke Otto, Casper Hoedemaekers, Emma Jeanes, Ekaterina Chertkovskaya, Joanna Figiel, Kate Kenny, Lena Olaison, Matt Allen, Martyna Sliwa, Michael Pedersen, Nick Butler, Sara Louise Muhr, Stephen Dunne, Stevphen Shukaitis, Sverre Spoelstra

First published for free online at www.ephemeraweb.org and in print in association with MayFlyBooks (www.mayflybooks.org) in 2013.

ISSN (Online) 1473-2866

ISSN (Print) 2052-1499

ISBN (Print) 9781906948207

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

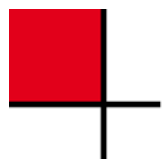


Table of Contents

Editorial

- The communism of capital? 483-495
Armin Beverungen, Anna-Maria Murtola and Gregory Schwartz

Articles

- Spectre of the commons: Spectrum regulation in the communism of capital 497-526
Rachel O'Dwyer

- Infecting capitalism with the common: The class process, communication, and surplus 527-554
David Carlone

- Pro Bono? On philanthrocapitalism as ideological answer to inequality 555-576
Mikkel Thorup

- Communism, occupy and the question of form 577-601
Saroj Giri

Notes

- Does capital need a commons fix? 603-615
Massimo De Angelis

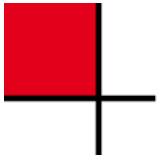
- Communicativity 617-626
Colin Cremin

- Common as silence 627-640
Peter Fleming

- Recomposing precarity: Notes on the laboured politics of class composition 641-658
Stephen Shukaitis

Reviews

Theorizing debt for social change <i>Miranda Joseph</i>	659-673
The spectre of anarchism <i>Thomas Swann</i>	675-681
Friendship and counter-conduct in the neoliberal regime of truth <i>Richard Weiskopf</i>	683-693
'Of luck and leverage' <i>Joyce Goggin</i>	695-700



The communism of capital?

Armin Beverungen, Anna-Maria Murtola and Gregory Schwartz

The ‘communism of capital’ – what could this awkward turn of phrase, this seeming paradox, mean? What might it signify with regards to the state of the world today? Does it have any relationship with the concept and reality of what we understand to be communism, and to what extent does it relate to the ways in which communist ideas, language and forms of organization are used presently? We can begin exploring the significance of the phrase by identifying some of the many conspicuous contexts in which elements of communism and capital meet today.

One such example can be found in the habit of major philanthropists today to see themselves as ‘liberal communists’, insinuating thereby that only the success of capitalism allows the promotion of classic goals of communism, such as the eradication of world hunger through the charity of the wealthy (see Žižek, 2008). In these instances it appears as if capital operationalised precepts of communism, such as the famous dictum popularised by Karl Marx: ‘From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!’ (2010: 347).

The frequent use of communist imagery in marketing provides another example, such as in Mercedes-Benz using the image of Che Guevara to promote car sharing (see Cederström and Marinetto, 2013). Here, the implication is that by relying on the world of commodities we can not only avoid environmental catastrophe, typically associated with unbridled capitalism, but even help overcome private property itself by way of sharing.

Yet another example concerns the rise in production that relies on ‘free work’ (see Beverungen et al., 2013). This includes, most prominently, peer production of open source software and other Internet-based collaborative work, but also more widely work associated with creativity, intellectual labour, and explicitly

collaborative production and decision-making (see Ross, 2004; Terranova, 2004). The discourse of authenticity in the workplace (Fleming, 2009) likewise reiterates communism's promises of free and non-alienated work.

The task of this issue, then, is to take stock of these developments of a contradictory, sometimes promissory, typically incomplete, elusive and complex, but also often hypocritical communism of capital. This, if not to recover the rational kernel from its mystical shell, then at least in order to shed light on its political implications.

From the socialism to the communism of capital

The first thing to establish is the relative novelty of the idea of the 'communism of capital'. The phrase 'socialism of capital' was used from the late nineteenth century onwards to denote the socialisation of capital, i.e. the way in which the socialist threat of organized labour was suddenly confronted with the concentration of capital in the emerging modern corporation and with the abstractions of finance. While Marx in the third volume of *Capital* does not directly use the phrase 'socialism of capital', he notes the rise of the joint-stock company, in which private property is conceptually transformed into social property, as stocks came to be held by a greater number of people in common. He also notes how the credit system on the one hand intensifies capitalist exploitation of labour and the exploitation of 'social wealth' by the few, while on the other hand it 'constitutes the form of transition towards a new mode of production' (1991: 572).

What this socialisation of capital meant politically was certainly hotly contested. US President Grover Cleveland warned against 'the communism of combined wealth and capital, the outgrowth of overweening cupidity and selfishness', which he considered 'not less dangerous than the communism of oppressed poverty and toil'¹. Adolf Berle and Gardiner Means, in contrast, in the 1930s suggested different political consequences of the rise of monopoly capital. Because of the structure of the modern corporation in which the interests of individual investors are subordinated to those of capital as a whole, they argued, the corporate director 'more nearly resembles the communist in mode of thought than he does the protagonist of private property' (1991: 245). Coupled with the threat of socialism and growing organizational power of the workers, which forced the capitalist state to promote welfare, this was to define a capitalism

1 See http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Grover_Cleveland%27s_Fourth_State_of_the_Union_Address.

marked by restraint. More recently, and in a different twist, Peter Drucker noted that the considerable investments of pension funds on the stock market practically mean that employees own the means of production, which in turn makes the United States ‘the most “socialist” country around’ (1993: 6).

That this socialisation of capital does not serve socialist ends – even less so after the political threat of socialism dissipated and the welfare state could be dismantled – was once more made evident by the events associated with the financial crisis of 2008. The socialisation of losses in the aftermath of the financial crisis led *Newsweek* to announce that ‘we are all socialists now’ (Meacham, 2009). To be clear, socialism here does not refer to the extraction of surplus wealth from the corporation to put to social uses. Rather, it came to define the opposite: the state withdrawing social wealth in order to bail out failed banks. Austerity merely extends this socialism of capital.

If the socialism of capital describes the power of capital in the form of finance and the corporation in contrast to the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ associated with the socialism of labour, the term ‘communism of capital’ is meant to denote how capital has managed to approximate communism. The ‘communism of capital’ is perhaps most prominently mobilised by Paolo Virno to characterise post-Fordism (2004; see also Marazzi, 2010). For him, the phrase coins a dynamic of the 1980s and 1990s in which capital reorganised itself, mobilising ‘for its own benefit precisely those material and cultural conditions which would guarantee a calm version of realism for the potential communist’ (2004: 110). In doing so capital hijacked ideas traditionally considered communist and morphed them into something recognisable yet uncanny.

Virno lists three communist demands and their abhorrent capitalist interpretations. The demand for the abolition of wage labour turned into precarity and a stark division between those having to work extremely long hours and those without any work at all. The demand for the dissolution of the state morphed into neoliberal governance of the markets and the power of the multinational enterprise over national governments. The critique of alienation and demands for the valuing of singularity converted into a celebration of the diversity of consumer identities, into ‘a fetishistic cult of *differences*’ (2004: 110, emphasis in original).

For Virno this communism of capital is paradoxical because, even though we can recognise some communist inspiration in it, it is merely the result of a ‘defeated revolution’ of the 1960s and 1970s (2004: 111). Such an interpretation of this sequence of history appears much bleaker than that associated with the ‘new spirit of capitalism’, which for Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2005) involves at

least the partial success of the critique of capital, that is, capital's incorporation of some of its critique. Does the communism of capital, then, merely describe a state of affairs wherein communist demands are twisted to become productive of capital?

The death of the capitalist utopia

The three examples of the communism of capital that we started with – the liberal communist, the use of communist imagery in marketing, and the free work that underlies much capitalist production today – seem initially to indicate that we witness nothing more than dynamics of appropriation. Yet, there is more to be said.

Communist demands are admittedly translated into capitalist terms in the figure of the 'liberal communist', identifiable in characters such as 'Bill Gates and George Soros, the CEOs of Google, IBM, Intel, eBay, as well as their court philosophers' (Žižek, 2008: 16). These are the 'smart' capitalists who support the nomadic, the creative and the cooperative, and who give from their profits to charity. For Slavoj Žižek, this liberal communism functions ideologically in that its charity constitutes 'the humanitarian mask hiding the face of economic exploitation' (2008: 22). This form of appropriation thus posits communism as the supplement that makes capitalism whole.

Likewise, communist elements are trivialised in the context of marketing, as discernible in the myriad appropriations of Che Guevara in various advertising campaigns. 'Cherry Guevara' ice cream, anyone? (See Kakutani, 2009) Yet, for example, the advertisement in which the face of Richard Branson is superimposed on Alberto Korda's famous image of Guevara accompanied by the text 'We live in *Financial Times*' seems in its inanity to simultaneously contain a grain of truth.

The question to be asked is: what need is there for capital today to flirt with communist ideas and symbols? Up until quite recently, the triumph of capital after the fall of the Berlin Wall seemed to indicate a post-ideological age. Already in 1989, Fredric Jameson famously noted that it was easier to imagine 'the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism' (1989: 50). Giorgio Agamben, likewise, surmises that in contemporary societies politics is eclipsed by the triumph of the economy, that is, 'a pure activity of government that aims at nothing other than its own replication' (2009: 22). Mark Fisher coined the phrase 'capitalist realism' to denote a similar state of affairs, wherein capitalism 'seamlessly occupies the horizons of the

thinkable' (2009: 8). The austerity that resulted from the financial crisis of 2008 confirms such an interpretation: the crisis has brought forth, at least at the level of the state and public policy, little that does not presuppose the continuation of capital.

Furthermore, historically, when capital was deemed to be in need of an ideology, it was usually understood to be explicitly *capitalist* in nature, not communist. Yet today, capital props itself up with communist elements. Even Fisher's capitalist realism, despite its attempts to 'precorporate' – to preemptively shape 'desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture' (2009: 9) – already also embraces anti-capitalism, as discernible in recent blockbuster products of Hollywood such as *Wall-E* and *Avatar*.

Does the incorporation of communist ideas imply a new phase or a renewed political potential? With Žižek, it is not clear what we gain from identifying the figure of the liberal communist, except another call for revolution. This 'liberal communism' eschews the 'communist horizon', the espousal of which would require 'a complete shift in perspective, or a radical ideological turnabout, as a result of which capitalism no longer appears as the only game in town' (Bosteels, 2011: 228). A mere description of the ideological function of the communism of capital surely cannot bring about such a reversal.

Jacques Rancière suggests that what marks the current crisis is 'the failure of the capitalist utopia' (2010: 174). After its dominance over the last 20 years, this utopia of 'the perfect self-regulation of the free market and of the possibility of organizing all forms of human life according to the logic of that market' (*ibid.*) is now crumbling. Similarly, Jodi Dean argues that 'Gestures to communism and socialism make sense because the markets failed' (2012: 42). After decades of neoliberal governance, the resulting inequalities and antagonisms are today so pronounced that they cannot be concealed anymore (Dean, 2012: 51). Thus the need of capital to explicitly confront communism in one form or other. Herein lies the kernel of hope.

Communist relations of production

Capital seems to not only toy with communist elements, but to some extent also actually depend on them. This becomes clear in the context of the socialisation of labour, that is, in the increasing importance in production of cooperation and collectively acquired knowledge and skills, such as that which Marx called the 'general intellect' (1973: 706). Marx's ideas about the socialisation of labour, especially as formulated in the 'Fragment on Machines', has influenced

contemporary thinkers of postindustrial production, most prominently Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2009).

With the development of machinery, Marx argued, the role of the worker changes. Instead of being hands-on involved in the production of commodities, the task becomes one of the application of socially existing powers: ‘the appropriation of his own general productive power, his understanding of nature and his mastery over it by virtue of his presence as a social body – it is, in a word, the development of the social individual which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth’ (Marx, 1973: 705).

Drawing on this insight, Hardt and Negri (2009) as well as others (e.g. De Angelis, 2007) have come to emphasise the role of ‘the common’ or ‘the commons’ in contemporary capitalist production (see also discussions in previous issues of *ephemera*, in particular Hoedemaekers *et al.*, 2012; Burston *et al.*, 2010; Dowling *et al.*, 2007). Hardt and Negri define ‘the common’ as ‘the common wealth of the material world’, such as that which constitutes nature, as well as ‘those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production’, such as language, knowledge and affect (2009: viii). These are resources and capacities that precede capital and that capital can only harness through processes of expropriation. Dealing in particular with the social aspects of the common, Hardt and Negri emphasise the fact that not only does contemporary ‘immaterial’ or ‘biopolitical’ production draw on pre-existing subjectivities and ‘forms of life’, but it also produces such subjectivities and forms of life. Put differently, ‘production today is production from the common, in common, of the common’ (Jones and Murtola, 2012: 641).

For Negri, then, it is not merely the socialisation of capital, in the form of the global unification of capital through financial governance, that matters (2008: 166). What matters is the use of finance to organise the expropriation of the social wealth produced in common. Thus Negri argues that we can speak of

a sort of ‘communism of capital’, where capitalism both gives rise to a total mystification of the valorisation that (as we have explained) is immediately common, and directly exploits the social participation to this valorisation (i.e. it exploits the *sociality* of the worker). (Negri, 2011, emphasis in original)

Hardt and Negri already pronounced in *Empire* that immaterial labour ‘seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism’ (2000: 294). It is in the role of the common in contemporary capitalism that Hardt identifies a kernel of hope, in the ‘proximity between the idea of communism and contemporary capitalist production’ (2010: 143). Although capital does not automatically create communism or liberation, capitalist

production reliant on the common brings forth the ‘conditions and weapons for a communist project’ (*ibid.*). In a similar vein, Nick Dyer-Witheford recognises in the commons the cell-form of communism or ‘commonism’, which contrasts with the commodity as the cell-form of capital (2007; see also De Angelis, this issue).

Hardt and Negri are certainly not the first to ascribe a communist hope if not necessity to the development of the capitalist relations of production. Yet critical voices remain to be heard. Félix Guattari and Negri already noted in 1985 that ‘capitalist work arrangements have succeeded in appropriating the discourse of communism’ (2010: 27). More affirmatively, Paul Adler sees the socialisation of labour, with new forms of collaboration and advances in technology, realising *within* capitalist relations of production a promise of work as as rewarding as it could be under communism (Adler, 2007; Heckscher and Adler, 2006). Appropriation, then, rather than radical change.

Dean, again, is sceptical of the ‘communist necessity’ that she identifies in Negri’s thought, where ‘communist desire is a given’ as that of the multitude (2012: 181). In her analysis of what she calls communicative capitalism, she is much more careful in exploring the potential for the exploitation of the common that networked communications provide capital (2012: 136ff.). It is in this complex and conflicted terrain that the contributions to this issue play out.

The contributions

In the first contribution to the issue, Rachel O’Dwyer explores the political economy of production in common in the context of the infrastructure that underlies today’s ‘digital communism’: the electromagnetic spectrum. This is ‘the communications channel for all mobile and wireless transmissions’. Positing this spectrum as a commons, O’Dwyer investigates recent controversies in its management in terms of its enclosure and how it enables capital accumulation based on digital sharing. O’Dwyer argues that the old proprietary logic that has governed the management of this commons is inappropriate and is also increasingly acknowledged to be so. Yet capitalist enclosure proceeds alongside sharing, with the communism of capital subject to management.

In his contribution, David Carlone draws on the work of J. K. Gibson-Graham and the diverse economies approach in order to argue that rather than merely conceiving of the communism of capital as an instance of capture, the common can, and in actuality also does, ‘infect’ capitalism. He draws on empirical material from ‘a job-training program for economically dislocated workers’ in

order to show how mutuality and participation exceed capitalist attempts to capture the common. In this way he also extends the discussion of the commons by Gibson-Graham (2006), which eschews the name 'communism' in favour of 'post-capitalism' and largely leaves the antagonistic dimension of the commons unmentioned.

Next, Mikkel Thorup takes on liberal communism and the capitalist twist on the communist dictum of contribution and sharing according to ability and need. In his article on philanthrocapitalism, Thorup investigates the contemporary relation between capitalism and charity. Scrutinising four forms of charitable giving – consumer philanthropy, corporate philanthropy, billionaire philanthropy and celebrity philanthropy – he argues that philanthropy has not only become an integral part of contemporary capitalism, but that it plays a crucial legitimating function. It helps to justify both individual participation in an otherwise 'amoral' capitalist system and, with that, the perpetuation of that system and the inequalities it produces and maintains.

In his contribution, Saroj Giri explores the Occupy movement as a site for the contestation of capital. He challenges those interpretations of Occupy that eschew questions of organisation and representation and that try to either reduce Occupy to specific sites of resistance and freedom, or read their more widespread significance only in terms of the resonance they effect on others. Instead, Giri argues that Occupy must be read as one of the organisational forms that is prefigurative of communism. Giri suggests that Occupy functions in the space outlined by Badiou's premise that having fidelity to the event requires the organisation of its consequences. By treating Occupy as more than simply interstitial, and rather as the practical bearer of revolutionary hope, Giri argues that it plays an active role in the future of communism.

Where O'Dwyer points to the ways in which digital capitalism relies on forms of the common, in his note Massimo De Angelis argues more directly for capital's extensive need of a 'commons fix'. According to De Angelis, capital needs this fix because its drive to accumulate meets with an ecological crisis and a crisis of social reproduction that it cannot master by itself. De Angelis suggests that if we understand commons and capital as two autopoietic systems, we can see how capital can use a power-over the commons for its own benefits, but also that the power-to that resides within the commons – which stands at the beginning and the end of processes of commoning – can be used to construct alternatives to capital.

The ideological function of the communism of capital is also explored in Colin Cremin's note 'Communiversity'. Communiversity here is the name of those practices

and discourses which provide a semblance of communism while masking a capitalist realism (Fisher, 2010). Cremin explores three figures associated with this image: Richard Branson as a left-liberal entrepreneur, Wal-Mart as a socially conscious company, and Colin Beavan the 'No Impact Man' as the caring consumer without power to change. Cremin suggests the figure of communicity provides an important tool for demythologising capital's use of the communist imaginary, which itself merely propels capital's excesses.

If infection might be one way to think a politics of the common, Peter Fleming in his note proposes silence as another. Picking up a political analysis of a number of events, chiefly the uprisings in London in 2011, he reflects on the so-called failure of these movements to put forth demands to power, and situates this state of affairs in a history of neoliberalism and a demand to speak to power. He suggests the emergence of a post-recognition politics which can be seen in a positive light not as silence yielding to power but exiting from it. Drawing on his analysis as capital drawing on the social wealth of the common, Fleming suggests that silence is one strategy of withdrawal from capital's apparatuses of capture. We may be witnessing the emergence of a 'nonfigurative common' which talks to itself but not to power.

In his note, Stevphen Shukaitis discusses two recent books on precarity, Guy Standing's *The precariat* (2011) and Franco Barchiesi's *Precarious liberation* (2011). Standing's book emerges out of a long history of institutionalised labour struggles, and he proposes to institutionalise a new labour politics around precarity. In contrast, drawing on the history of labour struggles and the way the ideology of work has been tied to ideas of citizenship in post-apartheid South Africa, Barchiesi suggests that an institutionalisation of precarity as the basis of a labour politics, for example via a basic income, is not what we need. Siding with Barchiesi, Shukaitis argues that precarity must be kept alive as a political concept rather than sociological category and that precarity must be contested rather than accepted or even idolized.

We finish the issue with four book reviews. In the first review, Miranda Joseph takes on David Graeber's theorisation of debt in his book *Debt* (2011). Although appreciative of Graeber's project overall, Joseph identifies a crucial shortcoming in Graeber's underlying framework in his treatment of processes of abstraction and particularisation as separate rather than intertwined. In the second review, Thomas Swann discusses David Eden's book *Autonomy* (2012), in which Eden engages with the ideas of Paolo Virno and Antonio Negri, the Midnight Notes Collective and John Holloway. Swann finds the book informative, but notes that more could be said about the connections between the different thinkers and also their contribution to broader political debates.

Next, Richard Weiskopf reviews Todd May's *Friendship in an age of economics* (2012), in which May explores the political potential of friendship in the context of today's neoliberal economy. Weiskopf notes that in his attempt to put friendship to work, May tends to downplay the 'darker' potential of friendship as a force of exclusion, but nevertheless appreciates May's contribution to ongoing debates. In the final contribution, Joyce Goggin takes on Ole Bjerg's *Poker* (2011). Drawing on Žižek's use of Lacan's categories of the symbolic, imaginary and real, Bjerg provides an analysis of the 'ontology of poker'. Although Goggin considers Bjerg's analysis of the game 'nothing short of brilliant', she also recognises that more work is needed in order to draw out its implications for understanding the operation of contemporary capitalism more broadly.

Conclusion

What are we to make, then, of the communism of capital? Both Thorup and Cremin seem to concur with our argument that little is to be gained politically from the ideological version of the communism of capital. It is merely a figure to be taken apart. In terms of production in common, however, the contributors to this issue offer diverse arguments. O'Dwyer clearly sets the challenge of studying how the communism of capital becomes an object of management, and how capitalist expropriation works alongside production in common. De Angelis notes the contradictory character of capital's commons fix, usefully distinguishing between the power-over of capital and the power-to of the commons that enable different social relations. Carlone suggests that the logic of infection might be a useful way to think about the spread of the common in capitalism. All of these contributions, then, provide very specific political analytics of the potentials of production in common, without falling back onto the necessary emergence of communism out of the current crisis of capital.

In contrast, Fleming and Giri set their eyes squarely on 'the communism of communists' (Rancière, 2010), shifting our focus onto struggles against capital. This to us seems a necessary and at least complementary effort to ideology critique and explorations of the potential of production in common. Fleming and Giri provide very different analyses and propositions for an organisation in common, with one premised on silence and the other on the reinvention of the form of the party and on new kinds of representation. In doing so they are witness to the political divergences apparent in movements such as Occupy, which simultaneously attest to the hope brought with them. Hope, to be worthy of its logical demarcations is, as Bloch (1995) argued, disappointing. Each organisational instance is, therefore, not merely a fanciful expression or lost

forever until a serious movement with a party at its helm emerges, but one which, through experience, sustains the advancement of hope.

It is perhaps not surprising that in the popular imagination Occupy has become part of the (new) global wave of movements advancing hope (Dinerstein and Deneulin, 2012). The question such explorations raise is of the state of communism today. If communism is the real movement rather than simply an idea (or ideal), then there must be practical conclusions to be drawn from Occupy and its aftermath for the state of communism. It is here that it connects with the communist hypothesis (Badiou, 2010), current debates about the state of the 'idea of communism' (Douzinas and Žižek, 2010; Žižek, 2013), and with Rancière's thought, for whom '[t]he only communist legacy that is worth examining is the multiplicity of forms of experimentation of the capacity of anybody, yesterday and today', with communist intelligence 'constructed in those experimentations' (2010: 176).

The recognition of the communist foundations of capitalist production today and its communist inflections bring us to two standpoints. One is marked by optimism: a hope that the increasingly shared nature of work and insights from the current failure of neoliberal capital might lead to a new and better mode of production. The other is marked by scepticism: a fear of the strength of capital's power of recuperation. The truth may well lie not in either side of this dialectic, but in the confrontation between the two.

references

- Adler, P. (2007) 'The future of critical management studies: A paleo-Marxist critique of labour process theory', *Organization Studies*, 28(9): 1313-1345.
- Agamben, G. (2009) *"What is an apparatus?" and other essays*, trans. D. Kishnik and S. Pedatella. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Badiou, A. (2010) *The communist hypothesis*, trans. D. Macey and S. Corcoran. London: Verso.
- Berle, A. and G. Means (1991) *The modern corporation and private property*. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Beverungen, A., B. Otto, S. Spoelstra and K. Kenny (2013) 'Free work', *ephemera: theory & politics in organization*, 13(1): 1-9.
- Bloch, E. (1995) *The principle of hope*, vols 1-3, trans. N. Plaice, S. Plaice and P. Knight. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Boltanski, L., and E. Chiapello (2005) *The new spirit of capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Bosteels, B. (2011) *The actuality of communism*. London: Verso.
- Burston, J., N. Dyer-Witford and A. Hearn (2010) 'Digital labour: Workers, authors, citizens', *ephemera: theory & politics in organization*, 19(3/4): 214-221.

- Cederström, C. and M. Marinetto (2013) 'Corporate social responsibility à la the liberal communist', *Organization*, 20(3): 416-432.
- De Angelis, M. (2007) *The beginning of history: Value struggles and global capital*. London: Pluto.
- Dean, J. (2012) *The communist horizon*. London: Verso.
- Dinerstein, A. C., and S. Deneulin (2012) 'Hope movements: Naming mobilization in a post-development world', *Development & Change*, 43(2): 585-602.
- Douzinas, C. and S. Žižek (eds) (2010) *The idea of communism*. London: Verso.
- Dowling, E., R. Nunes and B. Trott (2007) 'Immaterial and affective labour: Explored', *ephemera: theory & politics in organization*, 7(1): 1-7.
- Drucker, P. (1993) *Post-capitalist society*. New York: HarperBusiness.
- Dyer-Witheford, N. (2007) 'Commonism', *Turbulence* (June).
[<http://turbulence.org.uk/turbulence-1/commonism/>]
- Fisher, M. (2010) *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?* London: Zero Books.
- Fleming, P. (2009) *Authenticity and the cultural politics of work*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gibson-Graham, J.-K. (2006) *A postcapitalist politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Guattari, F. and A. Negri (2010) *New lines of alliance, new spaces of liberty*, trans. M. Ryan, J. Becker, A. Bove and N. Le Blanc. London: Minor Compositions / Autonomedia / MayFly.
- Hardt, M. (2010) 'The common in communism', in C. Douzinas and S. Žižek (eds.) *The idea of communism*. London: Verso.
- Hardt, M. and A. Negri (2000) *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hardt, M. and A. Negri (2009) *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Heckscher, C. and P. S. Adler (eds) (2006) *The firm as collaborative community: Reconstructing trust in the knowledge economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hoedemaekers, C., B. Loader and M. Pedersen (2012) 'The commons and their im/possibilities', *ephemera: theory & politics in organization*, 12(4): 378-385.
- Jameson, F. (1989) 'The antinomies of postmodernity', in (1998) *The cultural turn: Selected writings on the postmodern, 1983-1998*. London: Verso.
- Jones, C. and A.-M. Murtola (2012) 'Entrepreneurship and expropriation', *Organization*, 19(5): 635-655.
- Kakutani, M. (2009) 'Brand Che: Revolutionary as marketer's dream', *The New York Times*, 20 April.
[<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/21/books/21kaku.html?pagewanted=all>].
- Marazzi, C. (2010) *Il comunismo del capitale. Biocapitalismo, finanziarizzazione dell'economia e appropriazioni del comune*. Verona: Ombre Corte.
- Marx, K. (1991) *Capital: A critique of political economy*, vol. 3, trans. D. Fernbach. London: Penguin.
- Marx, K. (2010) 'Critique of the Gotha programme', trans. J. de Bres, in *The First International and after*, ed. D. Fernbach. London: Verso.
- Marx, K. (1973) *Grundrisse: Foundations of the critique of political economy*, M. Nicolaus. London: Penguin.

- Meacham, J. (2009) 'We are all socialists now', *Newsweek*, 6 February 2009. [<http://www.newsweek.com/2009/02/06/we-are-all-socialists-now.html>].
- Negri, A. (2008) *Goodbye Mr. Socialism*, with R. V. Scelsi, trans. P. Thomas. London: Seven Stories Press.
- Negri, A. (2011) 'In search of the Commonwealth', trans. A. Bove, *transversal*. [<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0811/negri/en>]
- Rancière, J. (2010) 'Communists without communism?', in C. Douzinas and S. Žižek (eds.) *The idea of communism*. London: Verso.
- Ross, A. (2004) *No collar: The humane workplace and its hidden costs*. New York: Temple University Press.
- Terranova, T. (2004) *Network culture: Politics for the information age*. London: Pluto.
- Virno, P. (2004) *A grammar of the multitude: For an analysis of contemporary forms of life*, trans. I. Bertolotti, J. Cascaito, A. Casson. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Žižek, S. (ed.) (2013) *The idea of communism 2: The New York conference*. London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2008) *Violence: Six sideways reflections*. London: Profile Books.

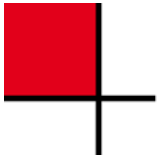
the editors

Armin Beverungen is a member of the editorial collective of ephemera.
E-mail: armin.beverungen@leuphana.de

Anna-Maria Murtola is a member of the editorial collective of ephemera.
E-mail: annamaria.murtola@aut.ac.nz

Gregory Schwartz teaches at the University of Bath. He is a political theorist who ended up in a school of management via a PhD in sociology. His research interests are in the area of work, organisation and society in the post-Soviet space. His research has looked at class recomposition and the re-articulation of control during capitalist transformation. Looking at the social and political processes that sustain the common and the collective in work, he has also recently been studying collaborative work in the green economy in the UK.

E-mail: g.schwartz@bath.ac.uk



Spectre of the commons: Spectrum regulation in the communism of capital*

Rachel O'Dwyer

abstract

The past decade has seen a growing emphasis on the social and juridical implications of peer production, commons-based property regimes and the nonrivalrous circulation of immaterial content in the online domain, leading some theorists to posit a digital communism. An acquisitive logic, however, continues to operate through intellectual property rights, in the underlying architecture that supports the circulation of content and in the logical apparatuses for the aggregation and extraction of metadata. The digital commons emerges, not as a virtual space unfettered by material exploitation, but as a highly conflictive terrain, situated at the centre of a mode of capitalism that seeks valorisation for the owners of network infrastructure, online platforms and digital content. Using a key example from core infrastructure, this paper will explore how controversies surrounding the management of the electromagnetic spectrum provide insight into the communism of capital in the digital domain. This paper proceeds in two parts: The first is historical, exploring how the history of spectrum management provides a lucid account of the expropriation of the digital commons through the dispossession and progressive deregulation of a communicative resource. The second considers current transformations to spectrum regulation, in particular the growing centrality of shared and commons spectrum to radio policy. Does a shift towards non-proprietary and unlicensed infrastructure represent an antagonistic or subversive element in the communism of capital? Or, if this communality of resources is not at odds with capitalist interests, how is it that an acquisitive logic continues to act?

* I would like to thank Professor Linda Doyle and Dr. Tim Forde from the Centre for Telecommunications Research, Trinity College Dublin and Dr. Patrick Bresnihan <http://provisionaluniversity.tumblr.com/> for their help and advice while writing this paper.

Introduction

If we speak of ‘the commons’ today as a general phenomenon, this has a lot to do with the modes of production, consumption and distribution that have emerged over the past decade around information and communication technologies. Though ‘the commons’ exists in both material and immaterial spheres, and has a legacy beyond the network, recent technological transformations are identified as a core actor in the hegemony of commons-based peer-production. The facility to leverage communicative capacities, support non-hierarchical cooperation and enable the circulation of non-proprietary content, has led a number of theorists to posit a ‘virtual communism’ (Lessig, 2004; Benkler, 2006; Kelly, 2009). This traces an immaterial space that trades in knowledge and culture, at once free from commercial subjugation and conversely capable of exerting influence on the material substrate of capital.

Such ‘virtual communism’ is, to echo Virno, ‘a communality of generalized intellect without material equality’ (Virno, 2004: 18). The underlying architectures that support the circulation of content are still proprietary. While user-generated content becomes increasingly central to the economy, the possibility of a ‘core commons infrastructure’, as Benkler (2001) calls it, is constrained by a variety of institutional, technical and juridical enclosures. The digital commons emerges, not as a virtual space unfettered by material exploitation, but as a highly conflictive terrain. The commons is situated at the centre of a mode of capitalism that seeks valorisation for the owners of network infrastructure, digital platforms and online content. This proprietary interest is diffuse, and increasingly so; it blends in a series of highly confluent mechanisms the essence of ‘the commons’ with new forms of enclosure.

Today we encounter conditions in which the core tenets of communism – the socialisation of production, the abolition of wage labour, and the centrality of commons-based peer-production – are remade in the interests of capital (Virno, 2004). These conditions imply new forms of sovereignty and political economy. This is not to say that the commons has not historically potentiated capitalist accumulation, but that we are witnessing a dramatic intensification of these conditions. In turn we are faced with a number of questions: through what proprietary mechanisms and juridical processes is the digital commons enclosed? How, in turn, is surplus value extracted from the digital commons – through what technological apparatuses, property regimes and composition of capital? Finally, what political and economic possibilities might emerge alongside the hegemony of the commons?

This paper will explore how recent controversies surrounding the management of electromagnetic spectrum provide insights into the composition of contemporary capitalism. As the communications channel for all mobile and wireless transmissions, electromagnetic spectrum is a core apparatus in the digital economy; its enclosure is part and parcel of the techniques that facilitate capitalist accumulation through production over wireless and mobile networks. This discussion proceeds in two parts: First, the history of spectrum regulation provides an account of the expropriation of communicative and cooperative capacities through the dispossession, deregulation and progressive rarefaction of a common resource. As mobile data grows exponentially, however, we are witnessing changes to the ways in which this resource is managed, with many calling for a greater communality of the radio spectrum in response to perceived scarcity in mobile bandwidth. The second part of the paper explores these emergent conditions. On one hand, it appears as though antagonisms between openness and enclosure in information capitalism prefigure a crisis in property relations that potentiate possible forms of anti-capitalist 'exploit' (Galloway and Thacker, 2007). On the other, it is also possible that capitalist accumulation is becoming ever more tightly organised through highly fluid and distributed mechanisms that route, not only around a direct intervention in production, but increasingly around the old property regimes.

The aims of such a study are reflexive. If the burgeoning political vocabulary of the 'communism of capital' offers a critical insight into the enclosure of the digital commons, spectrum management also provides an empirical case to reflect on the theoretical underpinnings of this vocabulary. For example, much of this theory not only acknowledges correspondence between forms of the commons with capitalist accumulation, it also identifies a number of contradictions in such an alliance, whether through the socialisation of production or through the imminent crisis of an underlying proprietary logic. This paper explores how the production of artificial scarcity around electromagnetic spectrum, when situated against the growing demand for a greater fluidity of network resources, provides a lens for what are perceived to be the irreconcilable elements of the communism of capital. Does a shift towards non-proprietary and unlicensed infrastructure represent an antagonistic or subversive element in the communism of capital? Or, if this communality of resources is not at odds with capitalist interests, how is it that an acquisitive logic continues to act?

The communism of capital

Today we are witnessing the reconfiguration of pre-capitalist forms of social coordination in the computational-informational space. This includes a range of nonmarket and non-proprietary activities such as open source software and open standards, peer-to-peer economies, and distributed forms of production over networks. As the informational network migrates from a traditional desktop model, becoming invested in everyday spaces through mobile and pervasive platforms, such activities are thought to be capable of inflecting not only social and juridical processes, but material economies (Rheingold, 2002; Kluitenberg, 2007). This ideology of the digital commons has many advocates in both the communities of digital activism and the core apparatuses of neoliberal power.

Traditional economic theories and the new schemes proposed by the advocates of the digital commons provide only a partial understanding of this burgeoning economy. Proceeding from a dialectical perspective, the range of cooperative activities taking place over digital networks appear to transcend the traditional enclosures of capital, operating over gift economies and forms of social capital. At the same time, recent conditions point to a conflictive terrain in which these very activities emerge at the centre of the valorisation process. Such conflicts include the growing centrality of open source to the corporate value chain and the new streams of revenue based around user-generated content. Specular to these activities are the new enclosures applied over communications ‘infrastructure’ such as bandwidth, consumer devices and network architectures. This is not to say that value is not communally held and produced, but that the apparatuses that leverage its extraction are not held in common. The combination of these two circumstances is significant, transforming the qualities of both. On one hand, the commons moves from a pre-capitalist legacy towards the centre of the market, and on the other, the value of property becomes less a question of a rent over infrastructure alone, and more one of leveraging a title to extract value from commons-based peer-production (O’Dwyer and Doyle, 2012). The traditional dichotomies of socialism vs. capitalism or property vs. the commons would not seem adequate to sketch such a system.

Recent critical activity is about learning a new political vocabulary to attend to these conditions. Post-Operaismo theorists have sketched an outline of the fundamental transformations underlying Post-Fordist capitalism (Virno, 2004; Marazzi, 2007; Hardt and Negri, 2009; Hardt, 2010; Vercellone, 2010). These include changes to the conditions and products of capitalist accumulation, structural alterations to the property relations under which labour produces and changes to the technical composition of labour (Hardt, 2010). A full rehearsal of

these is beyond the scope of this paper, but as they relate to the digital commons they include:

- A shift from the hegemony of material goods to immaterial goods such as knowledge, cultural capital and social/affective relations. Though material goods like cars and houses continue to play a significant role in the economy, these are supplemented by a range of commodities previously cast as external to the market, and typically held and produced in common.
- Transformations from productive capital and strict property regimes typical of the industrial era towards the parasitic extraction of rent over common outputs.
- Consequentially new models of labour have also come to the fore. In the context of the network economy, waged labour and capitalist intervention in production is replaced by 'precarity' and a variety of automated apparatuses for the extraction of surplus. (Virno, 2004)

It should be clear that the key to understanding economic production today lies with the commons. Capitalism needs the commons and consequently a range of systems to regulate and enclose its products. Where once these enclosures operated over land, today they operate over the entirety of human knowledge. We witness this where neoliberal enterprise converges on the natural resources and productive capacities of societies. The extraction of tertiary outputs, the rent extracted by real estate from local cultural injections and the enclosure of local knowledge under intellectual property regimes are key instances of this process.

Hardt and Negri (2009) outline two different types of commons: firstly, the natural, describing material and finite resources such as common land, agricultural and mineral resources and, secondly, the cultural or 'artificial' commons, describing intangible products such as common knowledge, language and shared culture. While this second commons still operates through very material channels, their outputs may not be subject to the same logics of scarcity as a natural resource. In turn the range of different forms of the commons are also subject to different forms of enclosure and systems of accumulation. In an information economy, it is readily accepted that a degree of freedom is essential to productivity, where access to common knowledge, codes and standards are essential for innovation and economic growth. Privatisation through intellectual property or other forms of enclosure destroys the productive potential of the commons. In the communism of capital, therefore, and particularly in the digital commons, we increasingly encounter a condition that inverts the standard narrative of economic freedom, where *openness* as opposed to private control is the locus of accumulation (Von Hippel, 2005). Examples of this include the commercial development of Android, an 'open' and 'free' mobile platform by the

Open Handset Alliance or the role of open source systems such as Linux to IT corporations like IBM.

All that said, an economy centred on the reproduction and distribution of digital commodities must still account for their translation into exchange value, which occurs outside of the commons (Pasquinelli, 2008). The digital commons stands against private control exerted by property, legal structures and market forces, and yet these economic barriers prevail in the substrate of the system, regulated by a temporary monopoly of exploitation conferred by licenses, patents, trademarks and copyright, capturing value before the true potential of the commons can be realised.

The digital commons is traditionally framed in a tiered structure that echoes the models commonly employed by network architecture¹. Different layers of contingent logical and physical strata form an assemblage concerned with the interoperation of terminal devices and the circulation of content through communication channels. This network comprises the content itself and the layers of software-defined protocols that proceed from the user down to the physical resources underpinning the network: storage and processing technologies, terminal devices, transmitters, routers, spectrum, real estate, man power and energy. Together these form the substrate architecture over which the digital commons is produced. New streams of value are increasingly identified within this space, from the transmissions channels that form part of the telecommunications value chain, through to the attention economy that underscores monopolies such as Google and Facebook. Rights governing access to communications are at the heart of this economy, as the core infrastructure that underscores digital labour. Any reforms, therefore, need to look to the architectures that flank the digital commons, to the policies, property regimes, protocols and technological standards that structure this conflictive space². This paper explores the property regimes surrounding the underlying architecture of mobile and wireless networks – electromagnetic spectrum.

1 For examples see the OSI model or TCP/IP.

2 Software studies, a burgeoning discipline that explores the sociopolitics of logical processes such as protocols, algorithms and automated management systems, has made a significant contribution to an understanding of how informational processes play a role in the valorisation process (Galloway, 2004; Lessig, 2006; Galloway and Thacker, 2007; Fuller, 2008). This is in turn complemented by broader discussions from medium theory, materialism and the political economy of communications (Kittler, 1995; Smythe, 2001; Fuchs, 2009, 2010, 2011). Finally a body of research, largely emerging from law, provides perspectives on the implementation of property rights through intellectual property (IP), digital rights management (DRM), communications policy and technological standards and legislation (Benkler, 1998, 2001, 2004, 2006; Werbach, 2004, 2011; Sandvig, 2006; de Vries, 2008).

Electromagnetic spectrum: An overview

The political economy of mobile media involves a network of devices and core, backhaul and radio access infrastructure. As the communications channel for all ‘radio’ transmissions, the electromagnetic spectrum is a core component in this system. The enclosure of spectrum within exclusive usage rights, property regimes and market dynamics, therefore, forms part of the technological composition of cognitive capitalism³ (Moulier-Boutang, 2012).

But what exactly is spectrum? Albert Einstein, when asked to explain radio, is reported to have replied:

You see, wire telegraph is a kind of very, very long cat. You pull his tail in New York and his head is meowing in Los Angeles. Do you understand this? And radio operates exactly the same way: you send signals here, they receive them there. The only difference is there is no cat. (Einstein, cited in Werbach, 2004: 14)

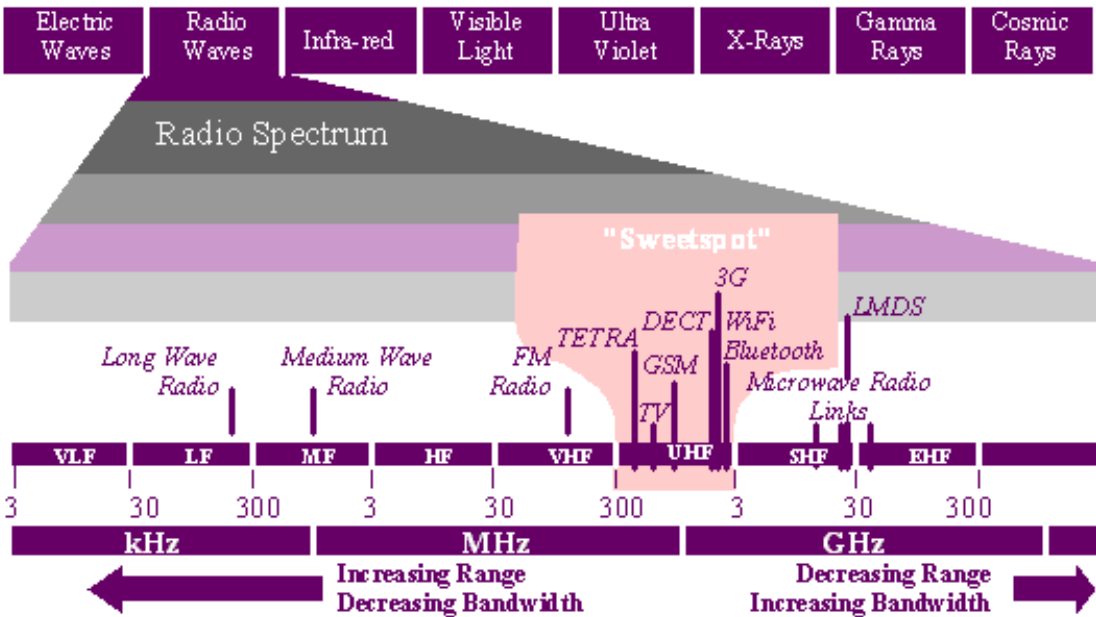


Figure 1: Spectrum usage.⁴

In any wireless communications system there are a variety of radio devices: transmitters and receivers, and the electromagnetic waves that pass between them. Radio technologies involve the transmission of signals encoded in these

³ A form of capitalism centred around the accumulation of immaterial assets.

⁴ Source: <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/market-data-research/market-data/communications-market-reports/cm05/overview05/spectrum/>.

electromagnetic waves in the same way a fixed network involves the transmission of messages through copper or fibre-optic cables. The term 'radio spectrum' references electromagnetic waves that traverse space with a frequency range between 3,000 and 400 billion cycles per second⁵. These waves provide the necessary channel through which messages propagate. All wireless communications, from radio and television transmissions, wireless networks, through to cellular technologies, personal networking devices and domestic radio appliances, rely on electromagnetic radiation within this frequency range for the circulation of data. The propagation characteristics of radio waves – specifically how they traverse space and interact with physical objects – make some frequencies more desirable conduits than others. The frequencies most suitable for commercial applications are typically those between 300 MHz and 3,000 GHz, in which television broadcasting, cellular services such as GSM and 3G, Wi-Fi and Bluetooth take place. These frequencies are attractive because antenna size is reasonable and the radio waves are of a dimension that is less susceptible to corruption by high rise infrastructure or mountainous terrain.

Spectrum is 'spectral'. Its incorporeal and invisible qualities relegate it to something resembling the fluid medium of the vistorian ether – an amorphous substance through which messages mysteriously propagate. However, the fact that radio waves have a physical dimension that interacts with surrounding matter and, furthermore, that these waves play a central role in the information econmy, makes spectrum *material*, both as network infrastructure and as a resource with an accelerating market value. In this way, spectrum echoes many of the properties of informational products in its seeming intangibility and lack of physical degradation, while at the same time belonging to the material world of radio devices that are rivalrous and subject to constraints regarding how they interact and negotiate interference.

This conceptual ambiguity, as we will come to see, has made governance of the electromagnetic spectrum a difficult issue, where regulatory debates surrounding the accurate modelling of use, occupancy, interference or scarcity often appeal to conceptual metaphors to perform political work. At the same time this material/immaterial ambiguity also makes electromagnetic spectrum and the legacy of its management an ideal lens for the digital commons. Rather than positing an immaterial realm of production that is fundamentally separate to the material economy, spectrum controversies go a long way to demonstrating the confluence of immaterial and material forces and relations of production in the

5 This range is outside human visibility, but these waves are comprised of the same elements as the visible spectrum of colours - the portion of the spectrum that is visible to the human eye.

digital domain. This is to say not only that communication proceeds along material and energetic channels, but that these networks involve highly confluent arrangements of contradictory strata, at one level freely reproducible and held in common and at another finite, rarefied and consolidated in property. Recent debates around spectrum management, therefore, problematise many of the normative assumptions about the digital commons and highlight many of the conflicts between the informational flows of a digital economy and its machinic underbelly, which is to say between cognitive and industrial forms of capitalism.

Spectrum's economic value is based on the right to build wireless communications infrastructure and the possibility to leverage networks, services and commodities upon that infrastructure (Forge et al., 2012). At the heart of this value is the communicative, cognitive and cooperative capacities of a network of users (Manzerolle, 2010). Exclusive control over and access to these capacities is central to the accumulation strategies of cognitive capitalism; it plays an integral role in the expropriation of surplus from the digital commons. As computation increasingly migrates to mobile and pervasive environments, reliant on spectrum-based technologies, this is increasingly so.

The role of spectrum has expanded over the past decade. In the twentieth century, non-federal spectrum was central to broadcast media such as public radio and television. Political economist of communications Dallas Smythe (2001) argued that control of these electromagnetic channels was a locus for value accrued through an attention economy over media audiences. Referred to as the 'audience commodity', it was the main commodity produced by any media form that earned its primary revenue from advertisers. Today this relation is intensified in keeping with Christian Fuch's extension of Smythe's theory towards the 'prosumer commodity' (2010), referring to surplus produced through the consumption, production and distribution of cultural capital over multicast networks such as the Internet. This does not signify a democratisation of media, but the total commodification of human creativity. In turn we can trace a correspondent intensification of the technical assemblages that facilitate this extraction. Contemporary spectrum-orientated networks pervade spaces and biologies, not just through the recent influx of smart phones and tablets, but through ambient sensor networks, meshes, smart grids and even microscopic sensing systems⁶, all of which rely on electromagnetic waves for transmission. As a result, control of the electromagnetic spectrum today facilitates the extraction of value across the whole range of human subjectivity, expanding and

6 'Smart dust' is an emerging system of many tiny microelectromechanical sensing systems. These can be wirelessly networked and distributed over an area to extract intelligence.

networking previously diverse forms of social production. Through mobile media we encounter not only the progressive fluidity of labour and social space, but the dynamic extraction of everyday demographic, psychographic, relational, locative and even biometric data from mobile consumers⁷. Such intense activities are reliant on a range of next generation high speed architectures for mobile broadband such as 3G, 4G, LTE and LTE Advanced. This currently represents an exponential demand for mobile bandwidth that is reflected both in the astronomical prices currently paid by incumbents for frequency assignments⁸ and in predictions of a global spectrum deficit as early as 2013 (Higginbotham, 2010).

The history of the radio spectrum is emblematic of a process through which common communicative capacities were progressively enclosed within various property regimes. Since the first radio acts, spectrum has been consolidated in a command and control framework under the guardianship of a national regulatory authority. Regulatory frameworks are broadly dictated by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), a UN organisation that intercedes with the national regulatory authorities of various territories to define a global standard of allocation. Where 'allocation' refers to the partitioning of bands of frequencies to specific applications such as radio, television or cellular networks, each regulator is responsible for further 'assignment', referring to the attribution of licenses to service providers within each allocated frequency band. These assignments are determined through comparative hearings or competitive auctions. Licenses confer exclusive usage of a band of frequencies in a given geographic territory to an incumbent. This provides the holder of the license with

7 Take, for example the hugely popular Nike+ app. Nike+ applications for iPhone and Android allow runners to monitor workouts. This includes mapping and tracking runs, monitoring personal fitness, and logging and sharing workout results with a social network of other Nike+ users. The mobile application utilises location-based information such as GPS and local weather, social networking capabilities, demographic information, and habits of consumption such as running shoes purchased and preferred music playlists. Nike attribute a significant increase in their market share in sports clothing to the global success of this social media application (Swallow, 2011). Not only is the application designed to build a strong consumer base for Nike products, identified revenue streams also include the possibility to tailor products to the consumer through location based and highly personalised offers on the go. 'Ultimately, we are about connecting with the consumer where they are', says Nike's Global Digital Brand and Innovation Director Jesse Stollak. 'We started with notion that this was about publishing to them with the right message and at the right time. We've quickly evolved to a focus on conversations and engaging them to participate as opposed to using new media in traditional ways' (*ibid.*).

8 Since July 1994, The FCC have conducted 87 spectrum auctions, which raised over \$60 billion for the US at the time of writing. The UK's spectrum auction for 4G services is projected to raise between 3 and 4 billion in 2013 (Thomas, 2012).

the right to build mobile and wireless infrastructure and/or to implement wireless transmissions for services such as television and radio, cellular communications and the mobile internet. Due to the technical and juridical consolidation of these licenses (which will be discussed in more detail shortly), rights to spectrum are consolidated with powerful incumbents such as mobile network operators, Internet service providers and public service broadcasters who can afford to invest in expensive, long term and large scale infrastructures.

While the majority of spectrum is consolidated in exclusive usage, a small range of frequencies, such as the 2.4 GHz band, have remained unlicensed for common use. This means that anybody can build and transmit in these frequencies, provided they adhere to certain regulations. This unlicensed spectrum has given rise to hugely successful protocols such as Wi-Fi, Bluetooth and Zigbee, but it is also subject to regulatory constraints that restrict the scale of nonmarket and non-proprietary networks. Not only does unlicensed spectrum comprise a very small frequency band, it is also governed by power-transmit rules that constrain wave propagation to within a very limited geographic radius. Any infrastructure that intends to scale and provide coverage over a wide area or to a large community requires access to spectrum that is licensed and auctioned on a scale that suits powerful commercial entities. Ownership and control of spectrum, therefore, confers economic power to incumbents, and in turn not having possession or rights to this resource is a major constraint to the development of a common communications infrastructure⁹.

Despite the prevailing belief that the radio waves constitute a 'public good' held in trust by National Regulatory Authorities such as the FCC or OFCOM, the

9 Take for example a number of well known community wireless initiatives such as OpenBTS and Village Telco. OpenBTS is a software based GSM access point that allows standard GSM compatible phones to place calls outside of an existing telecommunications network (Burgess, 2011). Using software and inexpensive Universal Software Radio Peripheral devices (USRPs) to replace the costly core infrastructure of the average mobile network, the developers have implemented a communications interface with a number of socially and politically beneficial applications. These include not only provision of universal service in rural and indigenous areas where the cost of infrastructure is prohibitive, but furthermore, the provision of a decentralised communications infrastructure, deployable in disaster relief, or in political situations where the existing network is under sovereign jurisdiction (Grammatis, 2011). However, because of current proprietary spectrum licensing, the operation of an OpenBTS system anywhere in the GSM band is strictly prohibited (Song, 2011). Other attempts at common core infrastructure such as Village Telco utilise the unlicensed 2.4 GHz band to create wireless mesh networks that support low cost internet access and telephony. Though these may not be subject to the same ownership constraints operating in licensed spectrum, they are constrained in other significant ways by the geographic and power-transmit regulations surrounding unlicensed spectrum.

reality is that this supposedly public resource is consolidated in ways that favour the media and communications industry. These powerful incumbents treat licences more or less like property, the market value of which is clearly reflected when such corporations are valued. Despite its status as a public good, licenses are arguably circulated without direct benefit to the public. Instead, this revenue is extracted through rent by powerful corporations and institutions that succeeded in privatising the commons.

The becoming-rent of profit

The communism of capital is characterised by a return and proliferation of forms of rent (Vercellone, 2010). Rent is the revenue that can be extracted from exclusive ownership of a resource, where value is contingent on its availability with respect to demand (Harvey, 2001). Industrial capitalism concerned direct intervention in the production process, and subsequently in the generation of profit. In industrial capitalism, therefore, rent is characterised as external to production and distinct from profit. Industrial capitalism constituted a shifting emphasis from immobile to movable property, corresponding to a shift from primitive accumulation towards profit. Rent was largely understood as a pre-capitalist legacy, traditionally associated with immobile forms of property such as land. Where 'rent' is the primary locus of value, the rentier is thought to be external to the production of value, merely extracting the economic rent produced by other means. The generation of profit, in contrast, requires the direct intervention of the capitalist in the production and circulation of material commodities. It is associated with the ability to generate and extract surplus (Vercellone, 2008, 2010). This transformation from rent to profit, many theorists argue, is emblematic of a passage from primitive accumulation to capitalist productive power in industrial capitalism (Hardt, 2010). In contrast, capitalist accumulation is today characterised by a shift from the productive forms of capitalism that characterised the industrial era towards new modalities in which rent is no longer cast in opposition to profit. Through the growing role of property in extracting value from a position external to production, and the manipulation of the social and political environment in which economic activities occur, such as the management of scarcity and the increasingly speculative nature of capital itself, the core tenets of 'rent' are confused with 'profit'. This is described in the Post-Operaismo theory of the 'becoming-rent of profit', an economic theory specular to the communism of capital.

Rent, as Pasquinelli (2008) maintains, is the flipside of the commons. Through the rent applied over proprietary frameworks that flank the digital commons, the material surplus of immaterial labour is opened to extraction. Spectrum, in this

case, like a monopoly over knowledge, decision engines, storage or processing capacities, provides the owner of that informational resource with the opportunity to leverage this property in order to extract value from a position external to its production. Where wireless transmissions are concerned, underpinning this process is the reification and subsequent rarefaction of radio signals – the commodification of electromagnetic transmissions followed by progressive arguments for the necessity of institutional regulation, first through state bodies, and later, increasingly through enterprise.

The becoming-rent of profit: Enclosure

Enclosure of the digital commons operates through the dual processes of dispossession and deregulation of these architectures (Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Hardt and Negri, 2009). To secure cooperation, capital must first appropriate the communicative capacities of the labour force. Common tools are appropriated and filtered through administrative channels, at which point they are once again distributed as part of the services capital must deliver to the labour force in order to ensure its ongoing development. But how does enclosure operate over something as intangible as electromagnetic spectrum? Throughout the history of radio communications, a variety of apparatuses that perform this enclosure can be identified, at turns semantic, technical and juridical.

In a wireless communications network there are radio devices and electromagnetic waves that pass signals between these. In information theory, this inter-device relationship is referred to as a 'channel'. It is contingent; it does not exist independently of these technological interactions. In other words, radio signals do not traverse an immaterial medium redolent of the Victorian ether or 'the spectrum'. They *are* the medium (Werbach, 2004). Nonetheless, spectrum is almost universally treated as a spatial rather than a relational artefact, where frequency is equivalent to geographic territory, signals are phenomena that traverse this space and radios are agents operating in this territory. The slightly more difficult to envisage reality, according to de Vries, is closer to a distribution of related entities that range over a set of values, such as, in its current management, radio energy indexed by frequency (de Vries, 2008).

Are we not simply dealing with space in a fourth dimension? Having reduced space to private ownership in three dimensions should we not also leave the wavelengths open to private exploitation, vesting title to the waves according to priority of discovery and occupation? (Childs, 1924)

Spectrum as 'land' is a conceptual metaphor that over time comes to operate as an empirical truth. We speak of spectrum as 'occupied' or 'fallow', of licensed spectrum as 'private property' and unlicensed as 'the commons'. Conceptual

metaphors are useful to make abstract concepts intellectually concrete (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003), but there is more at play than a necessary disambiguation; they normalise certain relations, crystallise habits of thought and discourage others. In this case, 'the spectrum' as a geographic trope performs an integral function in the enclosure of the commons. At the heart of this commodity is a social relation (Lukács, 1967). It draws the fluid relations between agents into a material domain where, to echo Lukács, 'they acquire a new objectivity, a new substantiality which they did not possess in an age of episodic exchange' (1971: 92)¹⁰.

Another metaphor that structures the radio space is that of 'interference'. If electromagnetic spectrum is a territory, the metaphor of interference is used to describe an 'inevitable' tragedy of the commons (Hardin, 1968) scenario, whereby the confluence of competing signals within that territory results in an intolerable signal-to-noise ratio. It is generally equated with the over-population of that space by transmitting devices and in turn is the primary rationale both in favour of the enclosure of frequencies within property rights and against proposals for a spectrum commons. It is more accurate to say that interference is the effect of unwanted energy on a radio receiver, degrading its performance or causing information loss from an intended signal. In other words, we are *not* speaking about a fundamental competition of the waves themselves but about the inability of a radio receiver to extract meaningful information. Interference, therefore, is highly contingent and cannot be defined outside the specifications of a technical system. It is far more accurate to say that different material or juridical arrangements, rather than simply the overpopulation of the airwaves, produces this condition¹¹.

10 As a counter example, 'open spectrum' advocates such as Robert Horvitz and David Reed have likened electromagnetic frequencies to colour (Weinberger, 2003). Where the visible spectrum of colour comprises those wavelengths that are small enough to be identifiable to the human eye, electromagnetic frequencies comprise those wavelengths that are too large to visually apprehend. In such a conceptual exercise, a title to a portion of the spectrum is similar to government privatisation of the colour red.

11 Arguably the metaphor of electromagnetic frequencies as land and interference as a form of overpopulation are also artefacts of the techniques available at the time of the first radio acts. Early transmission techniques were unsophisticated and required exclusive usage of a frequency band by a transmitter for fidelity. However, despite the development of dynamic spectrum access techniques as early as the 1940s, this metaphor continues to operate in regulatory decisions to the present day. These metaphors cannot be justified by appeal to the technological geography alone, therefore.

Over time conceptual and material arrangements solidify and reinforce each other in the regulation of spectrum. In the 1927 US radio act, for example, the airwaves were declared 'public property' and put under the guardianship of the Federal Radio Commission, later to become the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), which was given the subsequent authority to issue temporary licenses to those who were felt to broadcast 'in the service of public interest, convenience and necessity' (Marcus, 2004). To this day, licenses or channel assignments regulate the frequency at which a license holder can transmit, the signal strength of the transmissions as an index of wave propagation, the geographic territory, technical specifications and the designated service to be provided. Despite the availability of a variety of techniques for dynamic spectrum access¹² as early as the 1940s, regulation maintains exclusive forms of licensing on a frequency index. In effect, these technical and juridical specifications solidify a semantic enclosure; they produce spectrum as an excludable resource.

It is worth noting that while such licenses ceded exclusive control of a frequency block to a service provider within a given geographic region, this claim did not yet constitute an inalienable property right. However, the twentieth century chronicles not only the reification and subsequent rarefaction of spectrum, but the gradual justification of enterprise in favour of state control of this 'public good'. By the 1950s, key economists were making persuasive arguments for the use of market forces to distribute transmit rights (Herzel, 1951; Coase, 1959). The introduction of market forces proposes that instead of management through a state-defined regulatory body, spectrum should be bought or sold like any other commodity, with governments issuing not only licenses but property rights that corporations could trade, combine or otherwise modify (Coase, 1959; Hazlett and Leo, 2010). Auctions would be used to assign and efficiently distribute these rights. Economic, as opposed to regulatory decisions, these economists argued, would help to direct communications to where they delivered the highest social gains (Coase, 1959). The neoliberal argument at play claims that market-based solutions are inherently more socially valuable, internalising the digital commons within the context of privatisation in much the same way that public parks may be provisioned within the context of private real estate. Since their introduction in the nineties, auctions have played an increasing role in spectrum policy in both the US and Europe and achieved significant revenue through the sale of prime spectrum 'real estate' for next-generation mobile networks (Thomas, 2012).

12 The term used to denote signal processing techniques that dynamically and intelligently utilise available spectrum at a number of different frequencies.

The becoming-rent of profit: The production of scarcity

Beyond the enclosure of the commons, the survival of exchange value is increasingly contingent on the destruction of non-renewable scarce resources and/or the creation of an artificial scarcity where these goods are by nature non-rival and reproducible. Enclosure and scarcity go hand in hand; there is no chronology as such. The extraction of rent is dynamic and these elements, which are separated for clarity in this paper, are in reality entangled, imbricated and mutually enforcing.

According to Vercellone (2010), resources on which rentier appropriation is based today do not tend to increase with rent; indeed they do exactly the opposite. To quote Napoleoni's (1956) definition, rent is 'the revenue that the owner of certain goods receives as a consequence of the fact that these goods, are, or become, available in scarce quantities' (quoted in Vercellone, 2010: 95). Rent is thus linked to the artificial scarcity of a resource, and to a logic of rarefaction, as in the case of monopolies. Rent, therefore, leverages monopolistic or oligopolistic forms of property, and positions of political power that facilitate the manufacture of scarcity. Scarcity in the digital commons is induced by a variety of juridical artefacts such as intellectual property or digital rights management in the case of digital content, and through a combination of rhetorical devices and technological or juridical regulations in the case of electromagnetic spectrum.

There has been wide ranging controversy surrounding the scarcity of spectrum in recent years, where growing predictions of a severe deficit in available spectrum intersect with criticisms concerning the inefficient management of this resource. Spectrum, many argue, rather than being a naturally scarce resource, has been 'managed into scarcity' by rent-seeking activities that frame episodic restrictions as permanent barriers (Werbach, 2011; Forge et al., 2012). Theoretically, limitations to bandwidth do exist, but the previous use of an electromagnetic wave as a channel does not impact the fidelity of future transmissions. In this sense, spectrum can be defined as a perfectly renewable resource (Benkler, 2004) but just as easily framed or managed as a rival good. The current spectrum deficit can be largely attributed, not to any endemic scarcity of the radio waves themselves, but to an economic landscape that privileges exclusive usage rights over shared and unlicensed allocations¹³.

In this sense, the definition of a useful passage is always dependent on the threshold constraints of available knowledge, technology and legislation

13 Just as we can speak of spectrum as 'managed into scarcity, advocates of dynamic spectrum access discuss alternative techniques through which this resource might be "managed into abundance"' (Doyle, 2012).

(Sandvig, 2006). Due to constraints on the technologies and expertise when wireless communications were first implemented, for example, the possibility for multiple transmissions and managing competing signals was fairly limited, and early techniques favoured exclusive access. However, following Cooper's law¹⁴, wireless capacity is thought to have increased one trillion times since 1901 (Marcus, 2004). The development of a variety of non-exclusive techniques in subsequent years from spread spectrum¹⁵, to new forms of digital signal processing and modulation, directional antennas¹⁶, and various forms of cognitive and software defined radio¹⁷, reconfigures the geography of enablement and constraint. Though frequency specific receivers produce a rival, excludable and scarce resource, other radio techniques permit a variety of cooperative negotiations between devices transmitting in the same frequency band. These pose a significant challenge to an ideological construct that treats spectrum as a rivalrous good. While some of these techniques are already implemented in the small available unlicensed domains such as the 2.4 GHz band, political lobbying by powerful incumbents, and legacy regulations from state bodies, mean they are still prohibited in licensed spectrum. Current policy continues to give precedence to a signal processing technique that supports exclusive ownership, prohibiting the exercise of techniques that contest exclusive use.

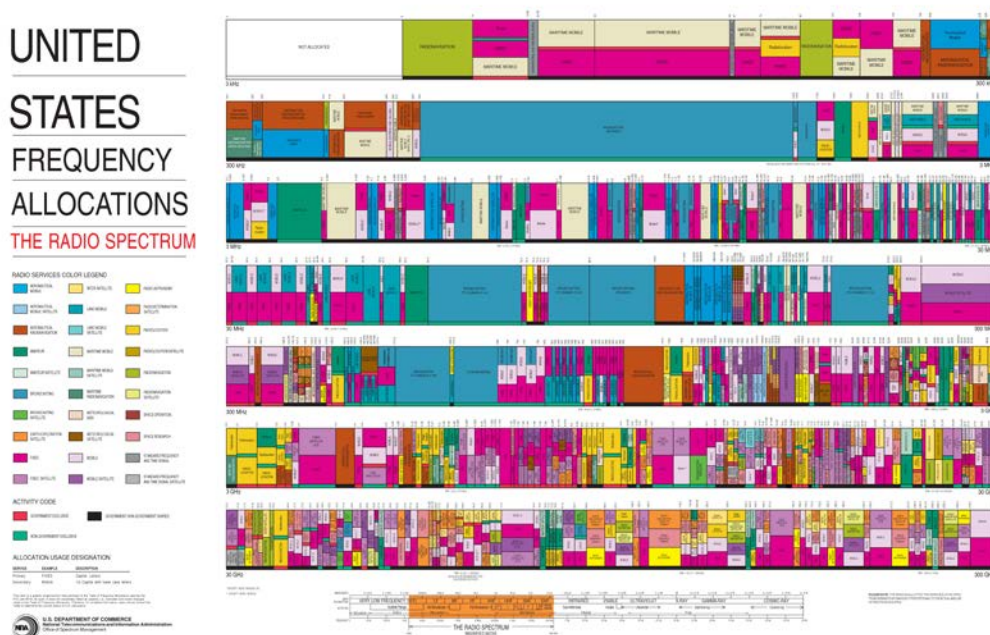
If scarcity is produced through frequency specific licensing, it is further consolidated through the scale of these assignments. Current allocation divides spectrum into large blocks which are assigned on a regional or nationwide basis. These frequency channels are in turn flanked by 'guard bands' – empty margins around active frequency domains designed to prevent possible interference between proximate operators. This practice not only cedes control to economically powerful actors who can afford to invest in this kind of scale, but the geographic extent of current allocation techniques, coupled with highly

14 According to Martin Cooper, the quantity of available spectrum has grown at the same pace since Marconi's first radio transmissions in 1895. The number of theoretically possible communications has doubled every 30 months. This fact has been dubbed 'Cooper's Law'.

15 Spread spectrum describes techniques in which a signal generated in a particular bandwidth is deliberately spread across the frequency domain, resulting in a wider bandwidth.

16 A directional antenna radiates greater power in one or more directions, allowing for greater performance and reduced interference from unwanted signals.

17 A cognitive radio is an intelligent device that can dynamically adapt a range of operating parameters such as frequency of operation, power, modulation scheme, antenna beam pattern, battery usage and so on. These adaptations may occur either in specific predefined ways or through pattern recognition and computer-based learning from real world situations.

Figure 2: FCC Frequency allocation chart.¹⁸

conservative margins of unutilised bandwidth, is apt to produce an excess capacity that is left to accrete as rent on the resource (Benkler, 2004)¹⁹.

Finally, scarcity is also performed through informational databases. An examination of the static frequency allocation charts of any first world country shows electromagnetic spectrum to be heavily occupied (FCC, 2012b; Ofcom, 2010). Such databases, however, do not take into account ongoing utilisation, only allocation and assignment. Secondly, in more dynamic tables such as geolocation databases, activity is often determined by highly conservative wave propagation models that return a result of occupation in favour of the incumbent, when in reality this often fails to be the case (Marcus, 2010)²⁰.

18 Source: <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/osmhome/allochrt.pdf>.

19 Benkler has described the relationship between granularity and shareable resources (2004). Granularity is a concept that is used to describe the scale and depth at which a resource is normally provisioned. Large grained goods are those typically provisioned in increments that constrain individual access. Small grained goods – such as a personal computer in the first world – are provisioned on a scale that enables individual access. For Benkler, the granularity of spectrum contributes to scarcity because the smallest increment size not only constrains bottom-up access, it also almost guarantees excess capacity in most contexts.

20 Recently certain national regulatory bodies are looking to make use of geolocation
databases to enable access to ‘TV white spaces’. These are frequency blocks of

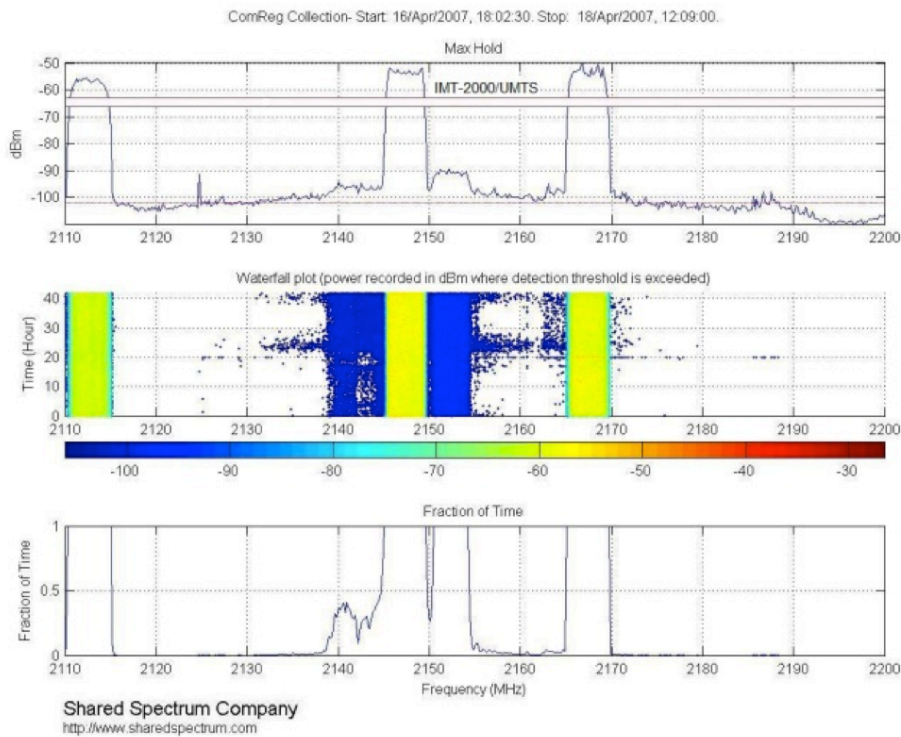


Figure 3: Shared Spectrum tests of spectrum utilisation in Dublin City Centre 16-18 April 2007.²¹

Scarcity in all of these instances results from the rarefaction of a resource and the rent-seeking architecture of a network economy that seeks returns for the owners of core infrastructure, and not, as is presumed, from the intangible constraints of the airwaves themselves. A significant number of studies comparing static tables

spectrum that have become available in the global switch from analogue to digital television. Where analogue television required more spectrum for transmission and produced greater interference, digital broadcasting is more spectrum efficient, freeing up spectrum in the highly desirable 700MHz range. Recent legislations include a number of protocols for access to this spectrum, such as listen-before-talk combined with a dynamic reference to geolocation with database lookup, where a transmitting device refers to a database to determine whether a frequency is currently in use at a particular geographic location. The current databases, however, make use of a wave propagation model, as opposed to a dynamic measurement approach, to determine whether spectrum is 'available'. This model calculates whether certain frequencies are available in a specific location by measuring their strength relative to the distance from the radio. The model currently employed, according to Marcus (2010), does not take adequate account of signal attenuation, returning a result of occupation when in reality this often fails to be the case. The data model, he argues, is engineered to be highly conservative, and prohibit access by unlicensed users in favour of the licensed incumbent.

of spectrum allocation with real-time activity return dramatically different results. Where reference to the FCC frequency allocation chart demonstrates high levels of scarcity and full utilisation, for example, current spectrum utilisation through dynamic sensing and measurement is estimated by myriad studies to be at best 17% in urban areas and 5% elsewhere (Ballon and Delaere, 2009; Forge et al., 2012).

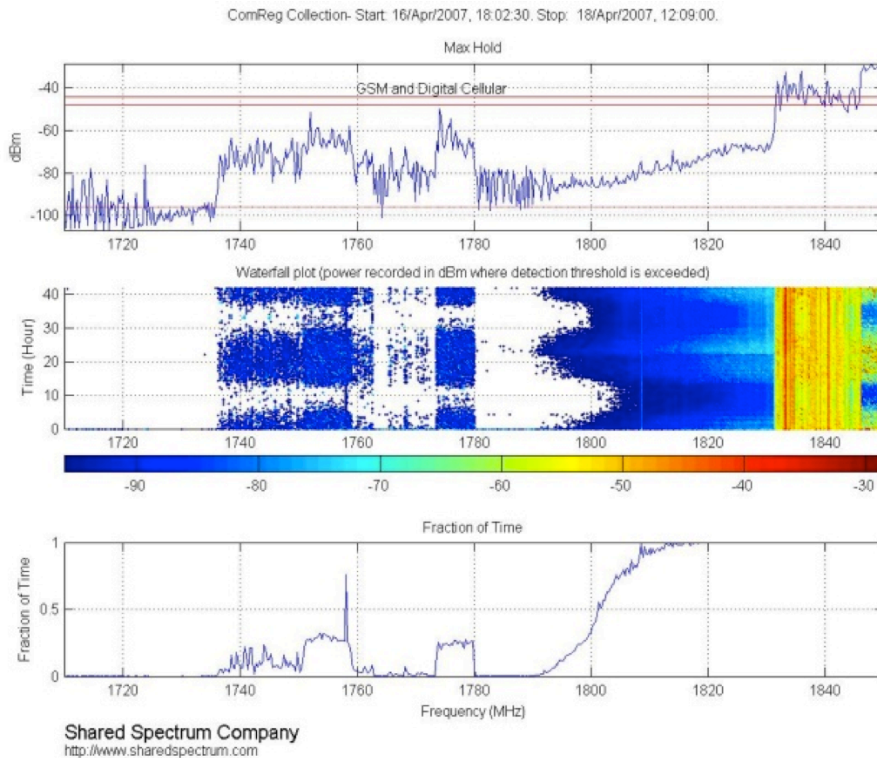


Figure 4: Shared Spectrum tests of spectrum utilisation in Dublin City Centre 16-18 April 2007.²¹

²¹ Source: <http://www.sharespectrum.com>. These images are measurements taken by a company called Shared Spectrum on behalf of the Centre for Telecommunications Research (CTVR), Trinity College Dublin in 2007. They show spectrum occupancy on the 16-18th April 2007. 40 hours of measurements are shown. Such measurements are site specific and similar plots exist for the USA and UK also performed by Shared Spectrum. This one shows measurements of spectrum use in Dublin City Centre but the measurements shown are indicative of the kind of pictures Shared Spectrum found in many different locations across the USA and other places in which they conducted measurements.

Contradictions in the communism of capital

There are irreconcilable elements inherent to the communism of capital. These are sometimes presented as a contradiction between the productive nature of the capitalist, as a generator of new forms of wealth, and the parasitic character of the rentier. By exploring the communism of capital through the lens of spectrum regulation, however, it would appear that this condition is more nuanced. Hardt and Negri frame the centrality of the commons to capital as a metastable condition that will eventually exceed its boundaries and give way to the productive multitude, arguing that 'the freedom required for biopolitical production also includes the power to construct social relationships and create autonomous social institutions' (2009: 310). Here, the hegemony of the digital commons constitutes the provision of social tools and critical faculties required to mobilise the labour force. This perspective is echoed by advocates of free culture such as Benkler (2006), who understands the economic importance of cultural production as an emancipatory force and Rheingold (2002), who views pervasive media as a vital tool for political mobilisation. However, without a common infrastructure including an open physical layer, an open logical layer and an open content layer, such social and intellectual activity is still open to extraction. It is therefore worth looking beyond the ways in which the centrality of the digital commons cultivates social and cooperative capacities to how the hegemony of the commons inflects the property relations that underpin the substrate of the network. It is here that we encounter various structural antagonisms at operation in the expropriation of the digital commons. This is where the circulation of immaterial products – those 'freely reproducible' outputs of the digital commons – show their material and energetic expenditure. This is reflected not only in the productive power of minds and bodies, but in the storage and processing power, electricity, cooling resources and bandwidth required to support an immaterial economy of goods and services.

We are witnessing attempts to integrate an 'immaterial' surplus not easily subjected to proprietary logic into a progressive growth dynamic established on the forms of enclosure that conditioned accumulation in industrial capitalism. This produces antagonisms where the necessary openness of the digital commons intersects with attempts to establish economic barriers over the infrastructure that facilitates its production. In other words, where openness and fluidity are a necessary condition of the communism of capital, the 'old' property rights represent a structural impasse.

The spectrum commons

In the case of spectrum, one such antagonism concerns techniques that produce scarcity and prohibit access at precisely the moment when excess capacity is needed to support a growing knowledge economy. The telecommunications industry and associated regulatory authorities for spectrum now identify an imminent 'spectrum crunch' where current demand exceeds the capacities of the resource in its current arrangement. Mobile data traffic is now doubling every six months (Forge et al., 2012). According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the number of devices connected to mobile networks worldwide is around 5 billion today and could rise to 50 billion by 2020 (PCAST, 2012). Such astonishing growth in mobile media requires the rapid expansion of networks. This presents as not only a desire for bandwidth, but also a greater fluidity of infrastructure in response to rapid fluctuations in the network architecture. The previous forms of spectrum management – the command and control model of exclusive and permanent licensing – are anathema to these requirements.

The result is arguably a growing logics of diffusion that occurs, not only around information and cultural goods that are held and produced in common, but increasingly around those that are historically consolidated in industrial property regimes. Where monopoly (or oligopoly) control is an essential component of the extraction of rent (Harvey, 2001), structural contradictions at the heart of capital threaten this monopoly, causing it to break down, ceding exclusive control towards transient, fluid and shared models of ownership. We can see this reflected in emergent trends in telecommunications that are antagonistic to the necessary economic barriers for the expropriation of commons resources: a growth in modalities of sharing in physical infrastructure and the circulation and redistribution of once fixed resources in response to market fluctuations (O'Dwyer and Doyle, 2012). With spectrum, this is arguably reflected not only in the emergence of market forces that trade, re-farm and otherwise reapportion licensed spectrum, but in growing arguments in favour of unlicensed spectrum coupled with dynamic spectrum access techniques (Werbach, 2003; Cochrane, 2006; Forge et al., 2012; PCAST, 2012).

A number of factors favour an unlicensed approach to spectrum regulation: the exponential demand for mobile bandwidth, the huge success of innovations in the 2.4 GHz band and the development of a variety of non-exclusive techniques that make cooperative negotiation of the electromagnetic spectrum feasible. Today, the idea of shared spectrum has a currency beyond a core group of long time advocates of 'open spectrum' and commons infrastructure, emerging at the heart of neoliberal enterprise, with several high-profile reports published in 2012

recommending a paradigm shift from exclusive access to forms of shared, license exempt and non-exclusive regulation. The final report for the European Commission, for example, entitled 'Perspectives on the Value of Shared Spectrum Access' provides an outline of the socioeconomic value of the spectrum commons and responds to the '[European] commission's recognition of the need to move away from exclusive and persistent channel assignments...reflected in a growing emphasis on shared spectrum access, which our findings support' (Forge et al., 2012: 12). Published in early 2012, this document was influential on a subsequent report published by President Obama's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST) in July, entitled 'Report to the President Realizing the Full Potential of Government-Held Spectrum to Spur Economic Growth'. The council includes Google chairman Eric Schmidt and Microsoft chief research and strategy officer Craig Mundie. The PCAST report, which proposes radical reform to the federal spectrum architecture, summarises that 'the norm for spectrum use should be sharing, not exclusivity' (2012: vi). Both reports represent significant policy reconfigurations and provide detailed recommendations for the implementation of a new spectrum architecture. This includes a greater fluidity in allocations; an increase in shared rather than exclusive channel assignments²²; a significant increase in unlicensed spectrum;²³ and the introduction of cognitive radios and dynamic spectrum access techniques to realise these reforms²⁴. These reports, while

22 Fluidity of licenses: Both reports recommend a shift from exclusive assignment and allocation of licenses in favour of various modalities of shared assignment in which channels are occupied by multiple users. This ranges from various forms of unlicensed access to licensed but underutilised spectrum in federal and non-federal bands, through to the removal of licensed bands altogether in favour of commons spectrum²². Licenses themselves also become more fluid, operating across different time-frames, permissions and territories and facilitating access to spectrum on both an episodic and a spatially modest scale. Finally, regulations would be lighter – built around the assumption that anything not explicitly forbidden is permitted, as opposed to the legacy principle that everything is forbidden beyond what is expressly permitted by the regulatory body.

23 An increase in unlicensed spectrum: This indicates forms of sharing without channel assignments and with neutral access to all users. Reports propose a significant increase in license exempt spectrum through the allocation of TV White Space and through the clearing of underutilised federal and non-federal bands. PCAST as an initial test bed call for 1000 MHz of federal spectrum. Similarly the EC report calls for the creation of two new swathes of license exempt spectrum in the UHF regions above and below 1GHz in the order of 40-50MHz each.

24 The use of cognitive radio and dynamic spectrum access techniques: The implementation of various forms of sharing and spectrum commons are reliant on intelligent devices as opposed to a central authority for their management. Reports recommend the use of available and emerging dynamic spectrum access techniques to manage cooperation between devices. These include the use of spread spectrum in which a signal is spread in the frequency domain; ultra wideband, where signals are

welcomed by many in the industry, have also lead to accusations of a creeping communism on behalf of the Obama administration (Brodkin, 2012)²⁵.

The new commons or the new enclosures?

The implications of these recommendations, which have yet to be implemented, are difficult to unpack. Here, a crisis of the old property relations places competing economic modalities in conflict. Their outcome is uncertain. It is as yet unclear if this represents a juncture in the communism of capital – the gradual dissolution of a logic of accumulation – or simply its reorganisation through ever more distributed channels.

On one hand, communality appears to inflect all layers of the network and undermine the necessary forms of enclosure that formed the conditions for the extraction of rent. PCAST, for example, proposes a transformation of the property rights governing licensed spectrum towards an ‘exclusive right to actual use, but not an exclusive right to preclude use by other...users’ (2012: 23). This removes some of the necessary conditions of enclosure and scarcity through which rent is extracted. Where rent is the central mode of extraction of the digital commons, dynamic spectrum access and/or an increase in unlicensed spectrum poses a direct sabotage to the rent applied over wireless infrastructure²⁶; it seems to destabilise the proprietary channels necessary for the expropriation of the digital commons. Long term advocates of open spectrum argue that such transformations condition the growth and scale of community-owned networks that were previously constrained by the limitations applied to unlicensed spectrum (Forge et al., 2012). Not only an increase in unlicensed spectrum, but a greater fluidity and transience in licensing, is conducive to smaller scale operations, nonmarket collectives and less economically powerful actors. These transformations might gesture towards a decomposition of information

underlaid across a band of frequencies at very low power close to the noise floor; opportunistic cognitive-sensing-based channel access where software defined radios sense activity in a band and respond accordingly and a variety of networked and context-aware radios with access to geolocation databases that provide information about available spectrum in a geographic location.

25 Reader comments in response to Jon Brodtkin’s article ‘Bold plan: opening 1,000 MHz of federal spectrum to Wi-Fi-style sharing’ (2012) [<http://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2012/07/bold-plan-opening-1000-mhz-of-federal-spectrum-to-wifi-style-sharing/?comments=1#comments-bar>].

26 Notably, the metaphor of ‘squatting’ is sometimes used in situations where licensed spectrum is made available to unlicensed users through dynamic spectrum access, directly referencing the economically disruptive aspects of this technique (Doyle, 2009, Doyle, 2011 the mobile phones of the future).

capitalism towards its inherent contradictions, as recent transformations to the technological composition of capital destabilise the economy of infrastructure.

On the other hand, we can also identify two possibilities for the failure of an anti-capitalist spectrum commons. One occurs where shared spectrum is tentatively introduced, but various forms of political or market-based lobbying produce unfavourable conditions for a spectrum commons. These include highly conservative restrictions that constrain market adoption of the cognitive radios required for commons spectrum such as stringent power-transmit regulations, highly politicised databases and/or the use of conservative models in spectrum sensing architectures that favour powerful incumbents.

The second possibility is more unsettling. Early innovations would suggest that these new forms of accumulation produce no necessary contradistinction between 'the commons' and 'the market'. As previously discussed, this alliance is already well observed at a content level, where open standards and open innovation²⁷ are the locus of production for software development and social media. From the PCAST and EC reports, it appears that this communality is beginning to inflect the physical layer also. This is confusing, because, in many ways, it appears as if accumulation in the communism of capital has largely been based on fragile alliances between the old enclosures of industrial capitalism and the new modes of extraction in cognitive capitalism. If these alliances break down – ceding to forms of the commons not only in digital content but in the proprietary infrastructures that previously facilitated its extraction – how is that an acquisitive logic might continue to act in the digital commons?

Caffentzis has written in detail about what he terms the Neoliberal 'Plan B' – the use of the tools of the commons by the Obama administration to 'save' Neoliberalism from itself (2010: 25). This casts the PCAST report in a different light. For Caffentzis, the appearance of seemingly collectivist, socialist and communist actions does not intend to proliferate a permanent commons, but instead to return the economy back to its pre-crisis state of minimal state intervention. The danger for the network information economy is that a public associates phrases such as 'unlicensed' or 'commons' with a liberalisation and/or decommodification of the radio spectrum where, very possibly, we are encountering a much more draconian form of enclosure dressed in the socialist garb of 'the commons'.

27 See Living Labs <http://www.openlivinglabs.eu/> or the Open Handset Alliance <http://www.openhandsetalliance.com/>.

Along with the more optimistic reports detailing shared access to spectrum are those outlining the new forms of regulation that would be appropriate to this commons (FCC, 2012a; CSMAC, 2012). These largely focus on the exercise of distributed forms of self-regulation through a networked system. Proposals brought by the US Commerce Department's Spectrum Management Advisory Committee (CSMAC), for example, published recommendations for unlicensed spectrum in July 2012. These included the introduction of 'tethered' radio devices in all federal bands that might be opened for shared access and in all newly created unlicensed bands. The radio in question has a form of networked connectivity that allows it to negotiate spectrum access in a dynamic fashion, accessing locative information pertaining to frequencies that are occupied or off-limits in particular geographic territories. However, this connectivity also allows a device to be controlled and accessed remotely. This facilitates a shift from autonomous radios, to one in which some central authority has the power to remotely monitor or even switch off a consumer device. The CSMAC report discusses the possibility to de-activate devices that are deemed to be 'noncompliant' through 'connected equipment that can be required to call home periodically, and take mitigation steps when interference occurs, including the possibility of automatic shut off or losing access to particular frequencies' (2012: 3). While this noncompliance primarily relates to 'interference', the report also proposes further discussion of a motion concerning intentional interruption of a wireless service by government actors for the purpose of ensuring public safety and law enforcement (2012: 7). Secondly, CSMAC outlines the possibility to leverage the power of the network to report or inform on noncompliant devices, discussing the possibility to deputise these tethered consumer devices to report back violations by neighbouring devices. This is maintained through 'The establishment of a voluntary clearing house website to leverage the power of crowd sourcing by creating a tool for consumers or government operators to file reports of interference to create a snapshot of where such incidents may be occurring and when' (2012: 9). Finally, the report proposes the hegemony of this connected approach through the gradual phasing out of all unconnected devices, or restricting these to legacy bands of spectrum (2012: 8). Though not expressly outlined, this tethered system also produces the possibility for new forms not only of surveillance, but monetisation and billing of users.

Here, we encounter a commons with a new kind of networked enclosure. The frequency band becomes open, but various draconian interventions in the network architecture constrain access. It might seem, therefore, as though we are not witnessing a 'disaccumulation' of network infrastructure, but its reconfiguration along a new metrics of speed and diffusion. This is to say that capital might become ever more tightly woven through forms of decentralisation. This is particularly the case in an information economy where forms of

networked media facilitate the automated monitoring, aggregation and control of distributed agents (Galloway, 2004). 'Command and control' no longer permanently resides in a regulatory authority, but moves about as desired.

Contrary to much of the theory on the communism of capital, which supposes an imminent crisis, it appears it is still possible to not only produce temporary alliances between industrial and cognitive capitalism, but to leverage new forms of enclosure over the top of an emerging accumulation regime particular to the network economy.

This re-drawing of the boundaries of both the commons and the systems of enclosure is part of the unfolding management of the communism of capital.

references

- Ballon, P. and S. Delaere (2009) 'Flexible spectrum and future business models for the mobile industry', *Telematics and Informatics*, (26): 249-258.
- Benkler, Y. (1998) 'Overcoming agoraphobia: Building the commons of the digitally networked environment', *Harvard Journal of Law and Technology*, (287): 1-113.
- Benkler, Y. (2001) 'Property, commons and the first amendment: Towards a core commons infrastructure', white paper for the first amendment program Brennan Centre for Justice at NYU School of Law, New York, United States of America, March.
- Benkler, Y. (2004) 'Sharing nicely: On shareable goods and the emergence of sharing as a modality of economic production', *The Yale Law Journal*, 114(273): 275-359.
- Benkler, Y. (2006) *The wealth of networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom*. London: Yale University Press.
- Brodkin, J. (2012) 'Bold plan: Opening 1,000 MHz of federal spectrum to Wi-Fi-style sharing' article posted 20-07-2012 at 9:33pm to *arstechnica*. [<http://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2012/07/bold-plan-opening-1000-mhz-of-federal-spectrum-to-wifi-style-sharing/>].
- Burgess, D. (2011) 'David Burgess on OpenBTS – A DIY Air-Interface!' Skype interview with L. Dryburgh at Emerging Communications Conference, San Francisco, United States of America, June 27-29.
- Caffentzis, G. (2010) 'The future of "the commons": Neoliberalism's "plan B" or the original disaccumulation of capital?', *New Formations*, 69: 23-41.
- Childs, W.W. (1924) 'Problems in the radio industry', *The American Economic Review*, 14(3): 520-523.
- Coase, R. (1959) 'The Federal Communications Commission', *Journal of Law and Economics*, 2(1): 1-40.
- Cochrane, P. (2006) 'The future of regulation – not', in E. Richards, R. Foster and T. Kiedrowski (eds.) *Communications: The next decade*. London: Ofcom.
- Commerce Spectrum Management Advisory Committee (CSMAC) (2012) 'CSMAC unlicensed subcommittee final report, 24 July 2012. [http://www.ntia.doc.gov/files/ntia/publications/unlicensed_subcommittee_finalreport072420122.pdf].

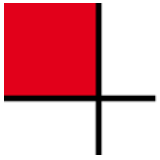
- Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions (2012), 'Promoting the shared use of radio spectrum resources in the internal market', European Commission Report, 3 September 2012. [http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/policy/ecomm/radio_spectrum/_document_storage/com/com-ssa.pdf].
- De Vries, P.J. (2008) 'De-situating spectrum: Rethinking radio policy using non-spatial metaphors', *New Frontiers in Dynamic Spectrum Access*, IEEE: 1-5.
- Doyle, L.E. (2009) *Essentials of cognitive radio*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Doyle, L.E. (2011) 'The mobile phones of the future'. [http://ledoyle.files.wordpress.com/2011/04/future_of_the_phone_april_2011.pdf].
- Doyle, L.E. (2012) 'PCAST: Re-casting the future' blog post on 27-07-2012 to Linda Doyle: Research, ideas and random thoughts. [<http://ledoyle.wordpress.com/2012/07/27/pcast-re-casting-the-future/>].
- Dyer-Witheford, N. (1999) *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and struggles of high-technology capitalism*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Federal Communications Commission (FCC) (2012a) 'Proposed certification test procedures for TV band (white space) devices authorized under subpart H of the part 15 rules'. [<http://apps.fcc.gov/eas/comments/GetPublishedDocument.html?id=223&tn=19463>].
- Federal Communications Commission (FCC) (2012b) Allocation chart 2012. [<http://transition.fcc.gov/oet/spectrum/table/fcctable.pdf>].
- Forde, T., I. Marcluso and L. Doyle (2011) 'Exclusive sharing and virtualisation of the cellular network', *New Frontiers in Dynamic Spectrum Access*, IEEE: 337-348.
- Forge, S., R. Horowitz and C. Blackman (2012) 'Perspectives on the value of shared spectrum access', *Final report for the EU Commission*. [http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/policy/ecomm/radio_spectrum/_document_storage/studies/shared_use_2012/scf_study_shared_spectrum_access_20120210.pdf].
- Fuchs, C. (2009) 'Information and communication technologies and society: A contribution to the critique of the political economy of the internet', *European Journal of Communication*, 24(69): 69-87.
- Fuchs, C. (2010) 'Labor in informational capitalism and on the internet', *The Information Society*, 26: 179-196.
- Fuchs, C. (2011) 'Article web 2.0: Prosumption and surveillance', *Surveillance & Society*, 8(3): 288-309.
- Fuller, M. (ed.) (2008) *Software studies: A lexicon*. London: MIT Press.
- Galloway, A. (2004) *Protocol: How control exists after decentralization*. London: MIT Press.
- Galloway A. and E. Thacker (2007) *The exploit: A theory of networks*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.
- Grammatis, K. (2011) 'No Internet in Egypt? We can fix that', *Huffington Post* 9. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kosta-grammatis/no-internet-in-egypt-we-c_b_815765.html].
- Hardin, G. (1968) 'The tragedy of the commons', *Science*, 162: 1243-1248.
- Hardt, M. (2010) 'The common in communism', *Rethinking Marxism*, 22(3): 346-356.
- Hardt, M. and A. Negri (2009) *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap.
- Harvey, D. (2001) 'The art of rent: Globalization, monopoly and the commodification of culture', *Socialist Register*, 38: 93-110.

- Hazlett, T. and E. Leo (2010) 'The case for liberal spectrum licences: a technical and economic perspective', *George Mason Law & Economics Research Paper*, 10(19).
- Herzel, L. (1951) 'Public interest and the market in color television regulation', *University of Chicago Law Review*.
- Higginbotham, S. (2010) 'Spectrum shortage will strike in 2013', *gigaom*. [<http://gigaom.com/2010/02/17/analyst-spectrum-shortage-will-strike-in-2013/>].
- Kelly, K. (2009) 'The new socialism: Global collectivist society is coming online', *Wired*. [http://www.wired.com/culture/culturereviews/magazine/17-06/nep_newsocialism?currentPage=all].
- Kittler, F. (1995) 'There is no software', *ctheory*. [<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=74>].
- Kluitenberg, E., S. Jorinde, and L. Melis (eds.) (2007) *Open 11: Hybrid space*. Amsterdam: NAI Publishers.
- Lakoff, G. and M. Johnson (2003) *Metaphors we live by*. New York: University of Chicago Press.
- Lessig, L. (2004) *Free culture: How big media uses technology and the law to lock down culture and control*. London: Penguin Press.
- Lessig, L. (2006) *Code: Version 2.0*. London: Basic Books.
- Lukács, G. (1971) 'Reification and the consciousness of the proletariat', in *History and class consciousness*. London: Merlin Press.
- Manzerolle, V. (2010) 'Mobilizing the audience commodity: Digital labour in a wireless world', *ephemera: theory and politics in organization*, 10(3/4): 455-469.
- Marazzi, C. (2007) 'Measure and finance', presented at 'Measure for measure: A workshop on value from below', Goodenough College, London, United Kingdom, 21 September.
- Marcus, B.K. (2004) 'The spectrum should be private property: The economics, history, and future of wireless technology', in *Essays in political economy*. Alabama: Ludwig Von Mises Institute.
- Marcus, M.J. (2010) 'Cognitive radio under conservative regulatory environments: Lessons learned and near term options', in *New Frontiers in Dynamic Spectrum Access*, IEEE: 1-5.
- Moulier-Boutang, Y. (2012) *Cognitive capitalism*. London: Basic Books.
- Napoleoni, C. (1956) *Dizionario di economia politica*. Milan: Edizioni di Comunità.
- O'Dwyer, R. and L. Doyle (2012) 'This is not a bit-pipe: A political economy of the substrate network', *Fibreculture* (20): 10-35.
- OFCOM (2010) 'United Kingdom frequency allocation table 2010' [<http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/spectrum/spectrum-policy-area/spectrum-management/ukfat2010.pdf>].
- Pasquinelli, M. (2008) *Animal spirits: A bestiary of the commons*. Rotterdam: NAI Publishers.
- PCAST (2012) 'Report to the president realizing the full potential of government-held spectrum to spur economic growth'. [http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/pcast_spectrum_report_final_july_20_2012.pdf].
- Rheingold, H. (2002) *Smart mobs: The next social revolution*. Cambridge MA: Basic Books.
- Sandvig, C. (2006) 'Access to the electromagnetic spectrum is a foundation for development', in M. Harvey (ed.) *Media matters: Perspectives on advancing governance and development*. Paris: Internews.

- Smythe, D. (2001) 'The audience commodity and its work', in M.G. Durhman and D.M. Kellner (eds.) *Media and cultural studies keywords*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Song, S. (2011) 'Village Telco and OpenBTS networks: Technology overview and challenges' article posted 14-12-2011 at 14:00 to *ictworks*. [<http://www.ictworks.org/tags/openbts>].
- Swallow, E. (2011) 'How Nike outruns the social media competition', *Mashable*. [<http://mashable.com/2011/09/22/nike-social-media/>].
- Thomas, D. (2012) '4G mobile auction to go ahead after years of delay', *Financial Times*, 12 February.
- Vercellone, C. (2008) 'The new articulation of wages, rent and profit in cognitive capitalism', lecture as part of *The art of rent*, Lecture Series, Queen Mary University School of Business and Management, London, UK.
- Vercellone, C. (2010) 'The crisis of the law of value and the becoming-rent of profit', in F. Fumagalli, and S. Mazzadra (eds.) *Crisis in the global economy: Financial markets, social struggles and the new political scenarios*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Virno, P. (2004) *A grammar of the multitude*. London: Semiotext(e).
- Webb, W. (2012) 'White space databases: A guidance note for regulators and others'. [<http://www.weightless.org/media/resources>].
- Von Hippel, E. (2005) 'Open source software projects as user innovation networks: No manufacturer required', in J. Feller, B. Fitzgerald, S. Hissam, and K. Lakhani (eds.) *Perspectives on free and open source software*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Weinberger, D. (2003) 'The myth of interference', *Salon*. [<http://www.salon.com/2003/03/12/spectrum/>].
- Werbach, K. (2003) 'Radio revolution: The coming age of unlicensed wireless'. [<http://werbach.com/docs/RadioRevolution.pdf>].
- Werbach, K. (2004) 'Supercommons: Toward a unified theory of wireless communication', *Texas Law Review*, (82): 864-973.
- Werbach, K. (2011) 'The wasteland: Anticommons, white spaces and the fallacy of spectrum', *Arizona Law Review*, 53(1).

the author

Rachel O'Dwyer lectures on the M.Sc for Interactive Digital Media in the Computer Science Department of Trinity College Dublin and is currently undertaking a PhD in the Department of Engineering on the political economy of mobile networks, funded by the Irish Research Council for Science, Engineering and Technology (IRCSET). She is founder and Editor in Chief of the journal *Interference* (www.interferencejournal.com) and co-facilitator of the Dublin Art and Technology association DATA 2.0. (www.data.ie). Email: rachel.odwyer@gmail.com



Infecting capitalism with the common: The class process, communication, and surplus*

David Carlone

abstract

This paper makes two moves in considering the question of the communism of capital. First, it draws upon diverse economies scholarship to conceptualize class as the process of creating, appropriating, and distributing surplus labor. Second, the paper relies upon autonomist Marxism to conceptualize communication as an instance of the common informing immaterial labor. These two moves situate communication as an intervention into the class process, offering new avenues for the production of capitalist surplus value. In so doing, however, capital does not capture the common. Rather, communication infects capitalism with non-capitalist practices and values. To support this argument, this paper analyzes field data from a job-training program for economically dislocated workers. The analysis highlights unexpected outcomes, including varying routes to the creation of surplus value, differing notions of value, and possibilities to rethink and restructure capitalism.

The call for this special issue poses the communism of capital as a question, a matter open to investigation as well as the possibilities of the imagination. At the same time, there seems to be a belief that we have witnessed the capture of the common by capitalism (Casarino, 2008). I am sympathetic to this claim even as I believe it overstates the case. A close examination of specific instances of communism within capital, I argue, reveals moments of the common undermining capital.

* I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and editor Murtola for their insightful contributions to the development of this paper.

The close examination I offer focuses on the use of communication to create surplus value. This focus on communication and surplus allows me to bring together two bodies of scholarship relevant to the communism of capital yet rarely linked in conversation. Scholarship on diverse economies (e.g., Resnick and Wolff, 1987; Gibson-Graham, 2006a, 2006b) offers a decentered capitalism and a conceptualization of class as the process of creating surplus labor. Scholarship on autonomist Marxism (e.g., Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2004, 2009) provides an understanding of the common as a resource for the creation of surplus value. Communication, central to both bodies of scholarship, provides a conceptual and practical bridge between the two.

Communication may be conceptualized in many ways (e.g., Shepherd, St. John and Striphas, 2006). The broad frame for this paper is communication as representation. Thought of as representation, communication matters not for reasons of expression or information flow, but for its ability to create, to constitute. Communication about economics, then, opens up and closes off opportunities for invention and intervention (Gibson-Graham, 2006a; Ruccio, 2008). Too often, though, social observers represent capitalism as *the* economic order of the day (Walters, 1999; Spencer, 2000; Hardt and Negri, 2000). This dominant capital-centric discourse (Gibson-Graham, 2006a) hinders change. Those who wish to intervene in or offer alternatives to capitalism face a daunting task; they confront capitalism as an omniscient, omnipotent system. Such a discursive arrangement too readily consigns resistance and intervention to the margins, always already likely to fail (Gibson-Graham, 2006a). To break out of this enfeebling narrative, we must 'critique... existing conceptions of economy and capitalism... to make room for new economic representations, ones... more friendly and fostering to an innovative and transformative economic politics' (Gibson-Graham, 2006a: ix).

I take up the question of the communism of capital with Gibson-Graham's call for new economic representations squarely in mind. I draw together two bodies of scholarship that, each in its own way, offers a representation of contemporary capitalism that makes visible opportunities to critique and reconfigure economic relations. Within autonomist Marxist thought I focus, particularly, on the idea that capitalism seeks to exploit the general intellect and the common through immaterial labor. From the work of diverse economies scholars, I take a definition of class as a social process of creating surplus labor.

Using these ideas, I argue that communication exemplifies the common and intervenes in the process of creating surplus value. However, capital cannot capture the common without also sowing the seeds of problems. To state otherwise is to miss theoretical, empirical, and practical lessons that may help

provoke possibilities for future political movements and affiliations. Aspects of communism do exist within capitalism. Rather than only representing the capture of the common by capital, though, communism may also undermine capital from within.

I support this argument by drawing upon data collected through a field study of a job-training program for economically dislocated workers. I compare two job-training courses, one for manufacturing work and one for customer service work, focusing on the use of communication to create surplus. In the remainder of the paper I, first, conceptualize class as the process of creating, appropriating, and distributing surplus labor. I then place communication within the class process, as a resource for the creation of surplus labor. Following this conceptual discussion, I use these particular concerns to analyze data collected in a job-training program, foregrounding non-managerial and non-capitalist avenues for the creation, appropriation, and distribution of surplus.

Class, surplus and communication

Class as a process of surplus labor creation

The diverse economies project of non-capitalist representation and invention has generated several insights important to the analysis presented in this paper. One of the most basic insights is that diverse economies already exist, even as we believe that capitalism is the sole economic system (Gibson-Graham, 2006a). Gibson-Graham (2006a) offers another insight. Assessing capitalist-centric discourse from a post-structuralist, feminist perspective, she turns attention to the metaphor of infection. Infection suggests an entity incubating and spreading within a host body. In dominant discourse, capitalism is always seen as the invading, consuming, or infecting body. Intriguingly, even as it consumes, capitalism is itself never infected. Decentering the power of capitalism, then, offers the advantage of considering how non-capitalist practices may infect capitalism. For my purposes, capitalism may (attempt to) consume the common. Yet, as it does, the common may incubate alternative economic practices from within capitalism. I will develop this claim in later sections, but wish to provide a concrete illustration here. Capitalism seeks to incorporate robust forms of cooperation into the creation of surplus value. Cooperation carries with it a set of ethical values and relations, such as responsibility to another, which may provide a resource for questioning and critiquing existing economic relations.

Diverse economy scholars' insights often revolve around a particular perspective on 'class' (Resnick and Wolff, 1987). Rather than representing class as groups, diverse economies scholars define class as the overdetermined 'social process of

producing and appropriating surplus labor... and the associated process of surplus labor distribution' (Gibson-Graham, 2006a: 52). This conceptualization of class possesses several advantages for engaging the question of the communism of capital. First, the definition highlights economy as political economy by distinguishing the moments of surplus labor production, appropriation, and distribution and understanding these moments as ethical decisions (Gibson-Graham, 2006b). For example, who should receive distributions of surplus labor? What counts as surplus, versus necessary, labor?

Second, emphasizing class as a social process necessitates examining class in specific contexts and in relation to other processes, such as communication. Class is but one 'process among the many that constitute social life' (Resnick and Wolff, 1987: 115) and varies across time, space, and economies. With respect specifically to capitalism, the class process is one 'in which surplus labor is appropriated from wage laborers in value form' (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 54). But, a contextualized, processualized class concept illuminates surplus labor production in many sites, such as households (Fraad, Resnick and Wolff, 1994; Cameron, 2000), the family (Fraad, 2000), self-employment (Hotch, 2000), and universities (Curtis, 2001). Subsequently, the possibility of someone occupying multiple class positions becomes visible:

a worker in a capitalist enterprise may participate in an exploitative capitalist class process at work, a communal class process at home in a collectively organized household, and work on the weekend and evenings in an independent class process as a self-employed dressmaker. (Arvidson, 2000: 170)

Diverse economies scholars' examination of choices and processes at more concrete meso and micro levels responds to autonomists' tendency to emphasize an abstract and macro level of investigation, particularly Hardt and Negri (Gilbert, 2008). Wolff (2010), for instance, has argued for a micro socialism, a firm-specific intervention in which the members who produce surplus labor also control its appropriation and distribution. His example is of a start-up in which members intentionally incorporate time and energy into their weekly work to decide what to do with their surplus. The Mondragón cooperatives represent a much larger instance of micro socialism, one in which the cooperators intentionally produce, appropriate, and distribute surplus labor for the benefit of a community economy (Gibson-Graham, 2006b). Meso- and micro- analyses and interventions such as these reveal the class differences and contradictions missing from analyses of empire, particularly, the relations of place-bound surplus value creation to place-less surplus value appropriation (Resnick and Wolff, 2001).

Theorizing these approaches, Gibson-Graham (2004: 27) identifies two avenues for 'transformative action', 'the politics of empire' and 'the politics of place'. The politics of empire call for revolution to replace the totality of capitalism. In the politics of place, 'places always fail to be fully capitalist, and herein lies their potential to become something other' (Gibson-Graham, 2004: 33). Though these avenues overlap and inform one another, it is the latter avenue, the politics of place, which offers unique insight into the question of the relations between communism and capitalism.

The politics of place and conceptualizing class as a process enlarge the possibilities before us.

Projects of class transformation are therefore always possible and do not necessarily involve social upheaval and hegemonic transition. Class struggles do not necessarily take place between groups of people whose identities are constituted by the objective reality and subjective consciousness of a particular location in a social structure. Rather, they take place whenever there is an attempt to change the way in which surplus labor is produced, appropriated, or distributed. (Gibson-Graham, 2006a: 59)

Thinking of class struggle as occurring whenever and wherever surplus labor production, creation, or distribution shifts informs my understanding of what transpires when capital attempts to capture the common. Ultimately, separating class from 'structural or hegemonic conceptions of capitalist society' (Gibson-Graham, 2006a: 58) makes room for engaging already existing, and imagining future, struggle and change (Cameron and Gibson-Graham, 2003). A stakeholder model of organization (Deetz, 1995), a Benefit Corporation, collaborative software development (Adler, 2006), and even entrepreneurship (Jones and Murtola, 2012), become sites of struggle, not only sites of capital ever improving itself.

Of course, there are limitations to the diverse economies approach. One risk is that in decentering capitalism, capitalism becomes just another option among others for organizing the creation, appropriation, and distribution of surplus labor. Second, and related, perhaps as we see capitalism as one option among others, we risk a belief that since it is just one option, capitalism will wither away. A third risk is that in opening up the range of economic possibilities, capitalist and otherwise, we lose site of the material, cultural, libidinal, and so on, enablements and constraints that make some possibilities more or less likely than others (Grossberg, 2010).

Still, being alert to already existing alternative representations and practices of organizational and economic processes suggests we should be more hopeful than many critics of capitalism allow. With this hopefulness in mind I turn to

autonomist Marxist thought for an additional account of contemporary capitalism that enlarges our organizational and economic imagination. As I have suggested, I am sympathetic to autonomist Marxists' claims that capital has captured the common even as I believe they overstate the situation.

Communication and the creation of surplus value

Conceptualizing class as an overdetermined social process makes room for considering its relation to other social processes, such as communication. This possibility is particularly timely; the process of communication has assumed a more central role in the capitalist class process of producing surplus value (Lazzarato, 1996; Hardt and Negri, 2000). The development of brands (Arvidsson, 2006; Thrift, 2006), creation and maintenance of social networks (Currid, 2007), provision of relational mutuality in customer service (Carlone, 2008), creativity (Bilton and Leary, 2002), and collaborative community (Heckscher and Adler, 2006) all illustrate the participation of the socio-cultural terrain of communication in the production of surplus value.

Autonomists have been at the forefront in theorizing the use of communication to produce intangible effects or commodities, such as subjectivity, affect, or image. Lazzarato captures this development with the concept of immaterial labor, 'labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity' (Lazzarato, 1996: 133). Immaterial labor draws upon 'the general intellect', the storehouse of knowledge of a culture and society, as 'a direct force of production' (Marx, 1973: 706). In other words, immaterial labor relies upon the knowledge, attitudes, and skills acquired by workers outside of work, through their participation in society (Virno, 1996a, 1996b, 2001). Knowing something about cooperation or image management, for instance, may be useful, and valuable, when one goes to work.

The general intellect is part of the common, the broader 'shared resources and capacities' (Jones and Murtola, 2012: 640) that provides sources of value. Hardt identifies two forms of the common. Air, land, and water form the natural commons. The artificial commons 'results [from] human labor and creativity such as ideas, language, affects, and so forth' (Hardt, 2010: 350). In both natural and artificial forms, the common exists apart from capitalism, autonomous on its own terms.

Furthermore, as capitalism relies on the common (and particularly the artificial common), forms of working together, such as collaboration, become more important. Basically, if good ideas exist between people, and must be puzzled over and fit together by groups of people, capitalism must incorporate

collaboration to produce surplus value. These practices provide ‘the tools for overthrowing the capitalist mode of production’ and constitute ‘the bases for an alternative society and mode of production, a communism of the common’ (Hardt, 2010: 352).

To come to this hopeful conclusion Hardt carefully contrasts qualitative changes to capitalism in terms of forms of property, arguing for a banishment of private and collective property in favor of the common. Currently, the autonomy of the common shifts the nature of property to one that capitalists have, at best, difficulty controlling. As a result, there is movement from revenue as profit to revenue as rent, illustrated by quests for and controversies surrounding patents and copyrights. Patents and similar objectifications raise the possibility that capitalism may expropriate the common without controlling its production. This raises a question. Might forms of communication be similarly transformed, weakening their non-capitalist potential¹?

As Hardt himself acknowledges, his analysis highlights qualitative changes not yet dominant in quantitative terms. I find the cautionary note here important. First, forms of immaterial property likely need to be delineated in our analyses. Seeking a patent for how a plant may possess medicinal properties seems different from claiming possession of a form of talk for its social support and stress reduction (Goldsmith, 2004). Because the latter is ubiquitous, its novelty, a necessary quality for a patent, for instance, seems limited. In other words, it seems very difficult to extract rent from forms of talk that are not scarce. Second, we must be careful not to cover over the contradictions or ‘class differences’ that stem from class processes (Resnick and Wolff, 2001: 69). A focus on rent may occlude the class process, as defined by Resnick and Wolff (1987), since a class process requires the creation of surplus labor.

Recalling the metaphor of infection (Gibson-Graham, 2006a) we would do well to consider how the common, brought within capitalism, infects or modifies capitalism. The common suggests knowledge shared with others because we have come to experience and make sense of experience together. ‘The production of the common always involves a surplus that cannot be expropriated by capital’ (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 212). Casarino (2008) goes further in arguing that there is only one surplus, only part of which capital is ever able to subsume.

The qualitative difference between capital and the common consists in positing surplus in different ways, in engaging surplus to different ends. Surplus value is living surplus as separation. Surplus common is living surplus as incorporation. (Casarino, 2008: 23)

1 I am thankful to the anonymous reviewers for pointing me toward this possibility.

Or, as Gibson-Graham (2006b) prefers, the common provides an intentionally shared basis for community. The common may refer to a description of knowledge and skill that arise spontaneously out of human interaction, and may refer to a prescription for that knowledge and skill to guide human interaction. Perhaps, living surplus as incorporation will transform our understanding and practice of the incorporation.

Communication knowledge, attitude and skill, part of the common, inform immaterial labor. Indeed, Greene extends the power of immaterial labor with his concept of ‘communicative labor’. Echoing the sense of change and process central to the study of diverse economies and autonomist Marxism, communicative labor brings into relief ‘changes in the sphere of production and the role that [communication] plays as a practice, process, and product of economic, political, ideological, and cultural value’ (Greene, 2004: 202). Communication, considered as a multiply valued practice, process, and product, points toward how communication commonplaces may produce surplus value as well as surplus common.

At least within the US context, culture provides a rich resource for thinking and talking about communication (Carey, 1989; Craig, 1999). Underwriting everyday discussions of how people do and should communicate, whether in civil society or romantic relationships, are appeals to ‘honesty’, ‘clarity’, ‘understanding’, and so on. Such appeals rely upon commonplace beliefs (Taylor, 1992; Craig, 1999) about what communication is, does, and requires. In the language of the autonomists, these commonplaces are part of the spontaneous, human-created common.

In addition to animating everyday discourse, communication commonplaces authorize many industries, organizations, and jobs. For example, interactive service work, as in sales or customer service, relies upon communication commonplaces, such as authenticity or empathy, often translating them into practice in innovative, even contradictory, ways (Korczynski, 2005; Korczynski and Ott, 2004). Here, commonplaces become prescriptions for performing certain kinds of work.

Mutuality and participation represent two communication commonplaces important to this paper. Each commonplace, in its own way, aids the creation of surplus value. Yet, each also remains autonomous, as does the common more generally (Hardt, 2010). I add, through a return to diverse economies, that as they create surplus value, each commonplace also infects capitalism (Gibson-Graham, 2006a). Communication implicates interactants in an ethical relationship. In other words, communication, performed, enacts the common as

relational doing (Pearce, 2007). The communication features of the work analyzed below infect capitalism because they call into being ethical relationships that we perform with others and to which we hold them and ourselves accountable.

Ongoing faith in mutuality indexes the power of communication to allow people to share experience, come together, and craft an interdependent future (Williams, 1985; Morley, 2005). As with any commonplace, mutuality not only describes human interaction, it also prescribes interaction; mutuality provides a standard for good communication. Communication, figured as mutuality, requires symmetrical, non-manipulative, and tight relationships (Depew and Peters, 2001) and 'that good and just relations among people require a knowledge of and care for souls' (Peters, 1999: 47). Even when people experience disagreement or conflict in their relations, they expect that their conversational partner(s) will afford them respect, honesty, and some sense that 'we are in this together'.

Related to mutuality is the commonplace of participation. At its most basic, participation draws attention to communication as an interactive process of joint decision-making and our desire to make our world together (Deetz, 1992; Pearce, 2007). Participation requires that we freely and openly form ideas and interests during conversation and decision making processes. Participative communication, then, should be a dialogic and collaborative construction of self, other, and world (Deetz, 1995; Gadamer, 2004).

Importantly for the analysis presented below, mutuality and participation illustrate a socialization of production that exists uneasily with the pursuit of surplus value (Adler, 2006). Participation as a basis for collaborative community in knowledge intensive firms (Heckscher and Adler, 2006) retains its power as a foundation for democratic society. Thus, changes in the nature of economic competition may help drive organizing toward more democratic and community-oriented practices. To the extent that economic practices capitalize on communication commonplaces, particular standards of goodness are introduced to the class process. As will be seen in the analysis, as capitalism captures mutuality and participation in the effort to produce surplus value, it introduces a set of practices and outcomes that may undermine the exploitative dimension of the class process. In other words, it is precisely because communication

represented as mutuality and participation focuses on a particular normative base for engaging in society that communication may infect capitalism².

Bringing the insights of diverse economies scholars to the work of autonomist Marxists pays off in at least two ways. First, to reiterate, too often the relation of communication to the production of surplus value is represented in terms of colonization (e.g., Deetz, 1992; Habermas, 1987; Sayer, 1999; Sproule, 1990; Tompkins, 2005) or consumption (Casarino, 2008; Hardt and Negri, 2000; Virno, 1996a). Alternatively, this paper asks how communication might 'infect' (Gibson-Graham, 2006a: 141) capitalism. Second, the insights move us from abstract concerns with 'empire' (Hardt and Negri, 2000) and 'the multitude' (Hardt and Negri, 2004) to a level where we may observe 'production today [as] production from the common, in common, of the common' (Jones and Murtola, 2012: 641). Finally, combining the concepts of class as process and the common hold significant potential for timely intervention into contemporary economic practices³. Perhaps we might aid the communicative infection of capitalism.

Studying class, surplus and communication

This analysis stems from an ongoing study of the cultural foundations for and implications of the replacement of US manufacturing jobs with service and knowledge-intensive work. The site for this ongoing study, New Skill, is a locally designed and implemented job-training program in a Southeastern US metropolitan area experiencing a deep and rapid economic transformation. Since 2000 tens of thousands of people have lost manufacturing and related jobs.⁴ Median household incomes and wages in the metropolitan area have remained stagnant and declined, respectively. Between 1999 and 2005 poverty rates increased in the metropolitan statistical area, center city and suburbs (Berube and Kneebone, 2006). In late 2003, sparked by persistent layoffs in the region's

2 Certainly, other communication commonplaces exist, many also with great historical and cultural purchase (see, for example, Carey, 1989). I do not claim that mutuality or participation are or should be the standards for judging communication. To be sure, there are good reasons not to treat these as the norm (Peters, 2006). Still, mutuality and participation possess great resonance in US culture and often appear in new economy work.

3 This is not to deny the need for interventions at other levels. Still, a focus on more micro scales affords us some room to maneuver within existing conditions, and begin to see what meso and macro level changes we might need and pursue.

4 Between 2000 and 2010, the region lost approximately 85,000 manufacturing and related jobs. Average unemployment rose to more than 8.0 percent at the end of 2004 (Bureau of Labor Statistics U-3 data). As of March 2010, the rate stood at 11.6 percent, at 10.0 percent as of December 2011, and at 9.1 percent as of October 2012.

manufacturing sector, a coalition of public and non-profit agency leaders announced their intention to help the community and individuals respond to the changing economy. Assistance took the form of New Skill, a community college-based job-training program⁵.

Four features distinguish New Skill. First, it is designed specifically for those who have lost manufacturing jobs and who must quickly re-enter the workforce, presumably in a new industry. Second, the program retrains participants in no more than 90 days. Third, the training is for jobs in growing industries in the local economy. Finally, New Skill staff members develop courses by monitoring local economic and industry trends to identify employment opportunities and working with industry representatives to create curriculum. In their curriculum development, New Skill staff members ask industry representatives two questions: 1) What must your employees know to be successful? and 2) What skills, attitudes, and experiences will give a job candidate an advantage in your hiring process? Course content and instruction, then, should prepare learners to meet employer expectations in occupations with stability and opportunity.

New Skill has come to be seen as a model for re-training dislocated workers in the contemporary economy. Numerous other community and community college leaders from around the country have turned to New Skill staff for guidance with their own programs. Also, the regional commitment to job training programs often is cited as a model for other US communities.

As a site for various transitions New Skill thus offers an important opportunity to: 1) examine economic representations and imaginaries surrounding economic transitions (Ruccio, 2008; Jessop, 2004), 2) respond to the need to situate analyses of contemporary economic relations in more or less localized contexts (Gleadle, Cornelius and Pezet, 2008), and 3) inquire into the situated, contingent meanings, practices and implications of the class process (Carlone and Larson, 2006). A goal of this analysis is to show the possibilities that exist within, against, and alongside political, cultural, and economic restructuring (May and Morrison, 2003; McGee, 2005).

In addition, this analysis attends to the New Skill curricula for how it seizes upon common notions of what counts as good communication so that these may be cultivated, enhanced and directed toward the creation of surplus value. New Skill is a technology for the creation/enhancement of communicative laborers. Examining New Skill, then,

5 To maintain confidentiality, I use pseudonyms throughout.

reveals how power works productively by augmenting the human capacity for speech/communication. [T]he productive power of cultural governance resides in the generation of subjects who come to understand themselves as speaking subjects willing to regulate and transform their political, economic, cultural and affective relationships. (Greene and Hicks, 2005: 101)

In the cases analyzed below, I focus on how the communication component of the courses provided 'specific techniques that beings use to understand themselves' (Greene and Hicks, 2005: 101) and how these techniques simultaneously enhanced and undermined the production of surplus value.

Mutuality and participation highlight certain features of communication. Lay and academic theorists and practitioners of communication may develop specific practices or technologies (Foucault, 1988; Greene and Hicks, 2005) of communication that embody mutuality and participation. For instance, active listening may help comprise technologies of dialogue or collaboration. Such communication technologies, many hope, will result in certain outcomes, such as cooperation, understanding or community. For example, to perform customer service work the mutuality commonplace must be foregrounded, cultivated through practice and directed toward the customer. Hence, job-training programs intervene in the class process by channeling the common toward the production of economic value.

New Skill offers a customer service representative course (CSR) and a certified manufacturing technician (CMT) course, among others. Data collected for this paper came from these two courses through a total of 140 hours of observation and 28 interviews. Approximately 60 hours over 12 weeks were spent observing the naturally occurring practices of two offerings of the CSR course. Seven people enrolled in the first course, ten in the second. CSR instruction included lectures, discussions of actual, tape recorded customer service phone calls, mock phone calls, visits by potential employers and various in-class exercises. Though the course covered general customer service, the specific focus became the financial services/credit card industry due to local hiring patterns and course instructor qualifications. Observations in the CMT course took place over approximately 80 hours. Nineteen people completed this course, which included lectures, video lessons, exams, discussions and exercises.

CSR interviews included the course instructor and 14 of the 17 learners. CMT interviews included the course instructor and 13 of the 19 learners. When possible, formal respondent interviews provided depth. Typically, though, I relied upon ethnographic interviews that responded to the naturally occurring flow of conversations, activities and breaks of the classroom setting (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). This strategy better responded to course participants' lives, severely

impacted due to their un- and under-employment⁶. I analyzed data from observations, ethnographic interviews and course documents.

Using especially the concepts of class, mutuality and participation, I worked through data via open, or exploratory, categorizing (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). As I read through field notes, interview transcripts and notes, and course materials I looked for those places where communication, as participation or mutuality, and surplus value creation arose. This reading brought forth, in each course, how communication aids firm success by creating surplus value. These early categories informed subsequent periods of data collection and analysis.

I then worked through the data with the concept of infection in mind, reading for signs of critique, disagreement or confusion on the part of course members. On this reading I noted how participation and mutuality provided resources to push back against surplus value creation and appropriation. For example, I noted robust discussion of who should control labor, work and surplus value.

As I developed these categories around the common within the class process I recognized similarities between and differences across the CMT and CSR courses. For example, I noted in both courses the displacement of traditional managers, offering greater authority to labor. I also noted an ongoing focus on capitalist surplus value in the CMT course, in contrast to surplus social value in the CSR course. For this paper, I selected the categories and data excerpts that best represented the use of communication commonplaces to create surplus value and that also depicted the use of these commonplaces to push back against or infect the quest for surplus.

Communist infections of capitalism

Viewed through a capitalism-as-dominant lens, the following data could be seen as more of the same, as capital finding new ways of conditioning labor for and incorporating it into the production of surplus value. To restate the argument for this paper, however, diverse representations of economy de-center capitalism and its presumed dominance. Beginning with the premise that diverse economies exist, I argue that as a capitalist class process draws the common into the creation of surplus value, capitalism is infected with aspects of communism.

⁶ Contrary to popular depictions of the unemployed as possessing much free time, this population had little actual control over their use of time due to a constant scramble to find/retain work, obtain financial resources to pay bills, retrain, secure transportation and so on. It quickly became obvious that formal, out of class interviews posed significant challenges to the participants.

Specifically, the autonomous communication commonplaces of participation and mutuality infect capitalism with socio-cultural demands that capitalism cannot meet. The following analysis has two sections, one assessing the use of participation in the Certified Manufacturing Technician (CMT) course and one assessing the use of mutuality in the Customer Service Representative (CSR) course.

Participation within the manufacturing class process

The Certified Manufacturing Technician course certifies learners in the skills and techniques required of knowledge-based manufacturing. This purpose resulted in a course that engaged the class process by depicting individual and collective labor as responsible, creative and knowledgeable. Capitalizing on these attributes required labor to participate extensively in the manufacturing process. Participation, as discussed earlier, invokes specific ideals and practices that situate labor as autonomous, co-creators of manufacturing futures.

CMT taught advanced manufacturing techniques through eight units: manufacturing concepts, math for measurement, communication and teamwork, problem solving, statistical process control, blueprint reading, the business of manufacturing, and computer use in manufacturing. A theme connected course units: US manufacturers' success lies in producing high-quality products for their customers; attaining customer-driven quality requires the creativity, intelligence and cooperation of those who actually produce products—manufacturing technicians. Cultivating intelligent, creative and collaborative technicians enhanced the production of surplus value.

As CMT instructor, Mike drew upon a long career in manufacturing operations management to stress that manufacturing success lay in 'quality people', not machinery, organizational structures, or even management. On the first morning of class he linked the personal to manufacturing, 'Too often, in our personal and professional lives, we put Band Aids on symptoms. What we really need is quality in whatever we do. Our job, in whatever we do, is to provide quality and add value'. 'Our current and future employers', he continued, 'need our ideas, experiences and abilities to be successful'.

'Quality people' works to describe and prescribe the need to put 'to work human faculties, competencies, knowledges, and affects' (Hardt, 2010: 353) developed inside and outside of work. Invoking quality people suggests the putting to work of the best of the common. Diverse economies scholars (e.g., Gibson-Graham, 2006b) and autonomists (e.g., Hardt and Negri, 2009) agree on the ongoing (re-)creation of subjects through economic activity. This CMT job-training course

seeks to recreate labor as autonomous, intelligent and collaborative. For example, in one class session learners engaged in a lengthy problem solving exercise to diagnose a decline in quality. In the more successful groups, participants learned through role-playing that customer and technician cooperation led to the discovery of vital information. Supervisors had little knowledge pertinent to the problem at hand.

Lessons about the need for and consequences of quality people, those who practiced creativity and responsibility, resonated with learners and had unexpected consequences for the creation of surplus value. For instance, personal responsibility explicitly required technicians to labor for and identify with others. Through cooperation learners often came to identify with other subjects, such as the customer, broadening those with a stake in manufacturing and shifting manufacturing from a private, enclosed endeavor to one more public and open. Learners saw themselves, for instance, as technicians *and* customers, with overlapping needs and concerns, some of which contradicted narrow interests of capitalists. Boundaries of the class process expanded to include a range of subjects, interests and values. Learners discovered that they had much in common with various other subjects.

Serving and identifying with customers raised questions of authority over the manufacturing process. Other aspects of the course raised additional authority questions. Mike's stories had a recurring moral: Management too often gets in the way of quality people finding good solutions to problems. One tale recounted the history of Lincoln Electric, an Ohio-based welding products company. Lincoln Electric, according to Mike, was one of the first US companies to provide employee health plans, vacation benefits and stock ownership; has relied upon an employee advisory board since the early 1900s; and has never laid off employees. Especially given their own work experiences, this story awed learners. One shouted, 'Are they coming here?'. Mike foregrounded the lesson he wished to impart:

Talk about progressive. You know, it's the people that do this. Your attitude is more important than the culture of the company. This is not management. This is the people. This is about attitudes, and how we take care of our time and talents. That is how we will be judged.

Understood from the perspective of participation as aiding the creation, appropriation and distribution of surplus value, the Lincoln Electric story presents several lessons. First, the story emphasizes, again, the role of personal responsibility, creativity and autonomy to firm success. Management recedes in importance. Second, attitudes, time and talents remain distinct from firm culture and management. This may be seen as illustrating claims that immaterial and

communicative labor draw upon knowledge and capacities learned outside of work. Advice that 'we' must care for our 'time and talents' is suggestive of the commons and commonwealth. Third, I find Mike's use of 'the people' intriguing. On the one hand, Hardt and Negri (2000) have been quite critical of the concept of 'the people' for its close connection to nationalism, among other problems. At the same time, the story here is at the firm level, not the nation-state, perhaps sidestepping problems of national pride, racial purity and so on. (Other parts of the course pointed toward an embrace of diversity within participation.) What I find interesting in this case is that the phrase 'the people' began to suggest 'self-rule' and the invention of 'lasting democratic forms of social organization' (Hardt and Negri, 2009: viii). 'The people' placed a possible cooperative subjectivity before learners. Indeed, throughout the course I noted numerous examples of spontaneous cooperation: study groups, learners tutoring other learners and learner presentations promoting the course and co-learners rather than the presenter.

Finally, the Lincoln Electric story places surplus value in relation to ethical decision making and to labor occupying multiple class positions. As related in the story, portions of the surplus appropriated from Lincoln Electric laborers are distributed back to them in the form of health and vacation benefits. As owners of Lincoln Electric stock, laborers also occupy a position whereby they have some voice in the distribution of the surplus that is appropriated from them, some of which may return to them in the form of dividend payments. Finally, portions of appropriated surplus value may be directed toward the maintenance of employment levels, rather than toward profit. Though these lessons remained inchoate, Lincoln Electric drew attention to ethical questions and decisions that arise when participation contributes to the class process.

As Mike's sketch of Lincoln Electric suggests, creating surplus value through participation invoked the ideal of a common future created with others and provided a counterpoint to traditional meanings of management. For example, the Communication and Teamwork unit considered McGregor's (1960) Theories X and Y. Unit materials clearly preferred Theory Y, emphasizing labor as self-directed, responsible, creative and imaginative, and filled with inherent potential. Mike leveraged this material with numerous stories of US manufacturers placed in jeopardy because managers 'got in the way of their people'. Employee, firm and societal wellbeing hinged upon labor performing their 'natural' abilities, without managerial oversight; success lay in labor autonomy.

The confluence of lessons about 'in the way'-managers, stories of firms offering long-term employment and mechanisms for employee voice, learners' own (under-) employment experiences, and the call for responsible action on the part

of manufacturing technicians foregrounded labor authority as central to the class process of creating, appropriating and distributing surplus value. Subsequently, labor authority and values of cooperation, self-direction and responsibility replaced traditional management. As Gibson-Graham (2006a) argued, changes in the class process equate to class struggle. In this instance of New Skill, class struggle was made quite apparent, in part because participation was chosen as the best avenue for surplus value creation. Mike could have easily taught creative labor as subservient to management. Instead, he stressed creative labor in place of management. We should see this not as a personal preference, but as a preference arising from the common, inserting communism into capitalism.

Labor emerged as the central, creative figure in manufacturing. In fact, course activities asked learners to assume various class process subject positions; learners created and ran their own businesses, calculated cash flow, managed growth, planned future projects, considered open book management and allocated resources. Lessons on how to calculate costs and profits proved particularly interesting. With the abatement of managers and management, calculating and assessing costs and profit fell within the purview of manufacturing technicians. Moreover, learner questions about the definition and calculation of costs and profits suggested that producers might directly appropriate the surplus value they create, as in Wolff's (2010) micro socialism.

In one accounting exercise participants calculated labor variance, comparing actual results of labor to 'standard amounts'. Standard labor efficiency should have led to a profit of \$60.90. However, a negative variance in labor efficiency led to a profit of \$48.30. In a second version of the exercise, a variance in price, rather than labor, raised profit to \$72.90. Not surprisingly, each variance exercise emphasized the need to account for costs and revenues. Simultaneously, however, costs, revenues and profits were represented as outcomes of human, ethical decisions, not naturally given features (Gibson-Graham, 2006b) of (capitalist) economic practice. Multiple representations of variance illuminated various definitions of and paths toward 'profit'. As Marx wrote, 'In all states of society, the labour-time that it costs to produce the means of subsistence, must necessarily be an object of interest to mankind' (Marx, 1967: 71). Profit and cost definitions and calculations became general economic practices, not strictly managerial or capitalist ones. More important, profit and cost came to be the ethical decisions of labor. Inserting participation into the capitalist class process reconfigured that process so that the appropriation of surplus value by non-producers became less tenable.

Learners invoked several existing and imagined pathways to profit. For instance, course materials defined manufacturing technicians as 'direct labor' and indirect

labor as ‘manufacturing labor costs that are difficult to trace to specific products’. One learner astutely asked Mike if variance analysis could be applied to ‘indirect costs’, such as indirect labor. Mike’s reply of ‘absolutely’, prompted smiles, laughter, and conversation among learners about the meaning of supervisors and managers. Within the capitalist class process, managers represent unproductive labor since they do not produce surplus value. Rather, they receive a distribution of the surplus value produced by labor. This distribution covers the ‘managerial supervision of productive laborers... [which] provides a political condition’ for the production of surplus value (Resnick and Wolff, 1987: 129). But, as labor participation enhanced surplus value creation, it also diminished the political necessity of, and surplus distribution to, managers.

Ultimately, the CMT course reliance upon participation directed learners toward cooperative management of manufacturing and collective creation, appropriation, and distribution of surplus value.

Mutuality within the customer service class process

In contrast to manufacturing, the result of customer service is not a tangible product, but an intangible relationship between the customer service representative and the customer. To be of value to the firm employing the customer service representative, this relationship should rest upon a foundation of mutuality, a communication commonplace that enacts the common as a site for obligation and ethical reciprocity. For several reasons, though, this foundation presents problems for the capture of the common by capitalism. Mutuality precedes the customer-customer service representative relationship, establishing at least part of the context for this relationship. Second, once invoked, mutuality becomes the primary resource for practicing customer service and creating surplus value. Finally, mutuality also exists as an outcome of good customer service. At each ‘stage’ of customer service, mutuality conditions the capitalist production of surplus value and infects this production with the social value of the common good⁷. For these reasons I disagree with claims that capital has captured the common (Casarino, 2008). With respect to customer service work, the common does appear at the beginning, middle, and end of capitalist production (Hardt and Negri, 2004). CSR learners remain keen to the distinction between ‘living and producing’ (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 148), however, using the values of living to assess the values of producing.

7 As a contrast, we might imagine customer service premised on a belief in communication as information. In such a scenario, a good customer service representative would only provide factual responses to customer inquiries, perhaps reducing the ethical obligation to another. Such customer service does exist, though it was not present in this job-training course.

The CSR course stressed the centrality of the customer service representative to firm success. The principal lesson was this: surplus value often derives less from a product and more from the service attached to that product. Hence, customer service representatives have direct, economically value-able contact with customers. Good customer service representatives, participants learned, draw the customer into a personal relationship. In turn, this personal relationship creates a relation with the firm and retains the customer.

As the central lesson illustrates, the CSR course mixed the common with capitalism. Mutuality helped to produce surplus value. For example, one course text characterized the CSR as the ‘primary contact’ and ‘voice of the organization’ for customers. Customer service representatives ‘project the company’s image’ and cultivate relationships with customers. Providing customers with ‘a wonderful experience’ maintains the relationships. Another text, *The Customer*, taught that being a good customer service representative rests on ‘the deep conviction [that we should recognize] the Customer [sic] as a human being and a Valued Asset [sic] to our business’. To be successful, customer service representatives must ‘quickly tune into people and [be] sensitive to their needs’. Finally, for Ann, the course instructor and a financial services call center trainer, the customer ‘needs to feel important and appreciated, needs the approval of others to support his/her self-approval, and fundamentally welcomes contact’.

To fulfill this mission, CSR communicative performances required authenticity and commitment in their communication, a ‘genuine smile in the voice’. As one text put it, ‘treat every problem with respect, keep calm, cool and pleasant while avoiding all arguments, agree as often as possible, avoid placing blame, use reflective responses, exchange mutual feedback, agree on a solution that will build trust and loyalty, and recognize different communication styles’. Achieving all of this ‘provides a moment of truth’ for each customer.

Creating authentic relations and providing moments of truth recruit and retain customers and create surplus value. Ann underscored the value of CSRs with examples drawn from her experiences in the financial services industry. One story assessed the loss of a customer who annually charged \$100,000 on her credit card. ‘At [Ann’s employer,] we need to get 68 new customers to replace that one lost customer’. To avoid that situation, ‘Your job is to make the customer feel that your company is the best’.

As these examples show, the course drew attention to the role of the customer as well as the customer service representative in quality customer service. Customers have a role to play, even if that role is somewhat guided by the customer service representative; customers should express themselves, and,

ideally, come to have certain feelings and responses with and toward the CSR. Creating authentic relations and moments of truth require the work of customer service representatives *and* customers. Mutuality calls forth reciprocity, whether the context is one of the common or a capitalist class process. People may jointly create authentic relations in both contexts. More to the point, authentic relations require joint creation.

Customer service work resembles the creative labor of artists and authors, those for whom the value of a work depends heavily on audience judgment. CSR labor must be performed for and with others and with certain effects to create surplus value. Indeed, the centrality of customers in assessing performances may be witnessed 'in the emergence of calculations of economic value' for things such as 'customer loyalty and customer satisfaction' (Adkins, 2005: 123). However, authentic relations may aid firm profitability, but there is an additional creation that exceeds calculations of profit. Customers and customer service representatives *together* create surplus as surplus value and surplus common.

Joint production of surplus value and surplus common helps explain why mixing the common and capitalism does not lead to the capture of the former by the latter. Rather, recalling that many processes constitute social life (Resnick and Wolff, 1987), the communication process of mutuality retains its autonomy. Jointly performed labor of mutual communication does not only lead to surplus economic value, but a surplus social value, as well. Authentic communicative connections with others are often seen as goods in and of themselves, exceeding the boundaries of capitalist valuation (Hardt and Negri, 2000). In the CSR class process, the social practice and cultural value of authentic, mutual communication helped create surplus economic value, even as authentic, mutual communication infected this creation with surplus common. As a sign of infection, customer service interactions may breed solidarity against corporate power and mistreatment. As customers and customer service representatives identify with one another they may align themselves against other interests and parties, such as managers who place time restrictions on interactions in the name of efficiency and profit.

As discussed, customer service provision rested upon a strongly ethical understanding of the customer as a fellow human and customer service interactions as mutual. However, course instruction also advocated selling oneself, which, for learners, represented a contradictory resource for creating surplus economic value. Learners drew upon the resources of mutuality to obstruct surplus economic value creation and the commodification of themselves and their relationships.

All New Skill courses included career services instruction in ‘selling oneself’: conducting a job search, writing cover letters and résumés, and presenting oneself in an interview. Though participants were, on the whole, familiar with job search devices and strategies, collating them under the label of ‘selling oneself’ confounded and offended many CSR participants, in part because the dictum violated other principles, especially authenticity.

Ann arranged class visits by local customer service center representatives to extend classroom learning and provide opportunities to practice job-seeking skills. During one visit by a human resources professional from a regional bank, learners’ concerns focused heavily on the nature of the work, benefits packages and the hiring process. When Ann playfully prodded participants to tell the HR rep about their course, ‘Come on guys, sell yourselves a little!’ they remained silent. It fell to Ann to tell the recruiter about the course. Ann expressed her frustration after the visit. ‘You all had an opportunity here to sell yourselves! Why didn’t you tell them what you can do? What you can offer? What you’ve learned?’ Fieldnotes indicate similar wonder. Learners had ample time with an appreciative audience, one interested in hiring personnel for a call center. Yet, they remained surprisingly silent. Participants looked blankly at Ann until one broke the silence: ‘What do you mean?’

A second visitor worked for a marketing company specializing in identity branding. The company sold an electronic communications package to help sales people maintain close, though largely automated, contact with their (prospective) customers. His presentation blended product information with instruction in how to sell oneself: ‘Our product sets you apart so that you stand out from the crowd. You’ve got to answer the question for your customer, “Why should I choose you?”’

After the recruiter left a learner turned to his peers and wondered, ‘What’s identity branding?’ ‘It’s a computer tool to customize what you want to say’, came one reply. Another added, ‘You stay in touch with your customers’. These answers failed to curb the learner’s bewilderment. ‘OK. But what is it? What’s the actual product? What are they selling? What’s identity branding?’

Finally, one learner voiced his concerns about selling himself in customer service work in an interview:

I don’t see [customer service] so much as being honest work, because what you are representing to your customer is just not necessarily your personality. It’s a front. You are putting on a mask to present to the customers. And I believe when you’re working honestly, you’re working as yourself. Is it me that’s making the money or just this person I’m pretending to be?

Learners' reactions to selling oneself relied upon mutuality and authenticity as a source of critique. This use of the common to create surplus allowed learners to assert the primacy of human relationships and undermine the ability of capitalist commodities to hide their constitutive social relations to 'appear as independent beings endowed with life' (Marx, 1967: 72). Rather than representing the capture of the common, communicative labor made visible a social relation as process and product. Customer service interactions informed by messages of responsibility, authenticity and commitment function as commodities only with great difficulty (Carlone, 2008; Korczynski, 2005; Korczynski and Ott, 2004). Authentic and mutual communication requires direct contact between humans, a contact that exceeds narrow roles of 'customer' and 'customer service representative'. The communicative labor required of the conversational partners infects customer service work with the social norm of responsibility to another. Though a capitalist dream may be to subsume mutuality, the common expresses itself where and when 'conversation takes place' (Casarino, 2008: 1).

Ultimately, customer service interactions represent social and moral investments that overrun the calculations of capitalist valuation. Ann poignantly illustrated these investments with stories of 'elderly callers' who call simply to talk to someone, regardless of whether they carry the credit card serviced by the call center. Such calls illustrate the conflict between social and capitalist value in customer service. On the one hand, CSRs should move such callers off the phone due to the slim, if any, surplus value created. On the other hand, talking with such callers fulfills the social need for and moral obligation in communication. In sum, CSR learners recognized that mutual communication met ethical obligations to self and other, and placed these obligations ahead of capitalist surplus value creation.

Conclusion

In this paper I examined how communication commonplaces inform job training for economically dislocated workers. Rather than relying upon a framework emphasizing capitalist reproduction or control of workplace subjects – a framework in which capitalism acquires discursive, if not practical, dominance – I situated capitalism as but one currently existing version of economy, one that exists alongside alternative and non-capitalist relations and processes. I conceptualized job training in terms of the capitalist class process of creating, appropriating and distributing surplus value. Communication commonplaces, exemplifying the common, infect capitalism even as they aid the pursuit of surplus value.

I intentionally focused on how the commonplaces of mutuality and participation infect capitalism, rather than on how capitalism consumes such socio-cultural values and practices. I do not want to claim that analyses showing the capitalist capture of the common are wrong. Nor do I want to overstate the emancipatory potential demonstrated here of communism within capitalism. I do want, however, to decenter capitalism, create space for alternative representations and draw attention to already existing non-capitalist possibilities. Seen through this lens, emphasis on the vitality of job-training participants' communication knowledge and ability to the creation of capitalist surplus value revealed unexpected work meanings, practices and subjectivities. Such unexpected variation aids recognition of multiple forms of surplus creation, appropriation and distribution, and raises questions about how surplus should be created, appropriated and distributed (Walters, 1999).

The analysis illuminates paths toward the autonomy of labor over surplus value, and of social value, or surplus common, over capitalist surplus value. In the CMT course, the participation of quality people placed labor autonomy and creativity front and center in the class process and diminished the role of managers/management. Cost accounting, for instance, denaturalized 'costs', transforming the economics of firm operation into the political economics of firm operation. In the context of customer service, reliance upon mutuality to produce surplus value led to the privileging of the social value of authentic, mutual relationships over and against capitalist surplus production and valuation. Mutuality and obligation lent themselves to a social, or non-economic, form of surplus labor, a life-affirming labor (Greene, 2004) as surplus common (Casarino, 2008).

Examining the subjectivities, practices, and meanings informing, embedded within, and stemming from the class process enhances understandings of the communism of capital. Emphasis on communicative labor in terms of participation and mutuality within the class process displaced managers and capitalist surplus value. This displacement signals the ability of the common to resist capture by capital, and even to infect capital during attempted capture.

Rather than representing the capture of the common by capital, communication commonplaces became a resource for questioning naturalized capitalist relations. Drawing upon the common to promote mutuality, for instance, inserted capacities and values into the capitalist class process that proved difficult to control. Norms of social obligation present in the common possess authority and autonomy on their own; these norms came to prescribe cooperation and proscribe exploitation. As evidenced in the CSR course, the social value of a good relationship may be a source of capitalist value. But, identifications forged

between CSRs and customers may work against capitalist desires to convert customer service communicative labor into surplus value. The socio-cultural value of the communicative labor of mutuality counters any straightforward capture of economic surplus and creates, as well, surplus common. Extracting rent, too, in the face of such socio-cultural value would likely encounter similar difficulties.

I believe it important to return, briefly, to the matter of representation. A representation of diverse economies decenters capitalism, revealing a variety of possibilities, many already in existence. This insight seems useful for (re-) considering some of the popular representations of the contemporary economy. For example, management guru Charles Handy celebrates the discontinuity between the 'old' and the 'new' economy. "The 'age of personal sovereignty' [Handy] argues is marked by 'the switch from a life that is largely organized for us, once we have opted into it, to a world in which we are all forced to be in charge of our own destiny'" (cited in Hancock and Tyler, 2004: 630). From one view, Handy's embrace of 'our own destiny' may signal dissolution of societal structures and supports and a transfer of those functions, and risk, to the individual. However, from another view, being in charge of one's destiny might also focus attention on current and possible future configurations of the creation, appropriation and distribution of surplus value and surplus common. Handy's assessment might be understood as signaling an infection of capitalism by self-rule (Hardt and Negri, 2009). What is important, then, is the ability to re-read, against the grain, existing texts, practices and debates.

With these insights in mind, several questions come to mind. How might we distinguish between opportunities and problems of the common in the production of capitalist surplus value? How might the common within capitalism provide pathways to alternative or non-capitalist relations, perhaps around the cooperative creation, appropriation and distribution of surplus value or labor? Such questions alert us to the mutual overdetermination of class, political, natural, and cultural processes.

Clearly, much work remains to achieve the possibilities posed by the relations among this job-training context, the common in communication and the class process. Still, inchoate though they may be, socializing production, as evidenced here with the use of communicative labor, provides new meanings of and practices for the moment and position of exploited labor. Crucially, these new meanings and practices are important to the ongoing and imagined ordering of society. Stories of cooperation might be built upon to demonstrate the possibility for communal production, appropriation and distribution of surplus labor or value. Importantly, these possibilities already exist, at times more fully formed,

within, against, and alongside capitalism. Indeed, calls for a 'new' (capitalist) economy in response to a changing context insert difference and possible transformation within capitalism itself. New Skill illuminates new economy work not as the outcome of structural imperatives, but as a space of ethical discussion and decision (Gibson-Graham, 2006b). Ultimately, alternative representations of the common within capitalism make visible the practice of and need for imagination and invention.

references

- Adkins, L. (2005) 'The new economy, property, and personhood', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 22(1): 111-130.
- Adler, P. S. (2006) 'Beyond hacker idiocy: a new community in software development', in C. Heckscher and P. S. Adler (eds.) *The firm as a collaborative community: Reconstructing trust in the knowledge economy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Arvidson, E. (2000) 'Los Angeles: A postmodern class mapping', in J. K. Gibson-Graham, S. A. Resnick and R. D. Wolff (eds.) *Class and its others*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Arvidsson, A. (2006) *Brands: Meaning and value in media culture*. London: Routledge.
- Berube, A. and E. Kneebone (2006) 'Two steps back: city and suburban poverty trends 1999-2005', *Living Cities Census Series*. Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution.
- Bilton, C. and R. Leary (2002) 'What can managers do for creativity? Brokering creativity in the creative industries', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 8(1): 49-64.
- Cameron, J. (2000) 'Domesticating class: Femininity, heterosexuality, and household politics', in J. K. Gibson-Graham, S. A. Resnick and R. D. Wolff (eds.) *Class and its others*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Cameron, J. and J. K. Gibson-Graham (2003) 'Feminising the economy: Metaphors, strategies, politics', *Gender, Place, and Culture*, 10(2): 145-157.
- Carey, J. W. (1989) 'A cultural approach to communication', in *Communication as culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Carlone, D. (2008) 'The contradictions of communicative labor in service work', *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 5(2): 158-179.
- Carlone, D. and G. S. Larson (2006) 'Locating possibilities for control and resistance in a self-help program', *Western Journal of Communication*, 70(4): 270-291.
- Casarino, C. (2008) 'Surplus common: A preface', in C. Casarino and A. Negri (eds.) *In praise of the common: A conversation on philosophy and politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Craig, R. T. (1999) 'Communication theory as a field', *Communication Theory*, 9(2): 119-161.
- Currid, E. (2007) *The Warhol economy: How fashion, art, and music drive New York City*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Curtis, F. (2001) 'Ivy-covered exploitation: Class, education, and the liberal arts college', in J. K. Gibson-Graham, S. A. Resnick and R. D. Wolff (eds.) *Re/Presenting class: Essays in postmodern Marxism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Deetz, S. (1992) *Democracy in an age of corporate colonization: Developments in communication and the politics of everyday life*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Deetz, S. (1995) *Transforming communication, transforming business: Building responsive and responsible workplaces*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.
- Depew, D. and J. D. Peters (2001) 'Community and communication: The conceptual background', in G. J. Shepherd and E. W. Rothenbuhler (eds.) *Communication and community*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers.
- Fraad, H. (2000) 'Exploitation in the labor of love', in J. K. Gibson-Graham, S. A. Resnick and R. D. Wolff (eds.) *Class and its others*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fraad, H., S. A. Resnick and R. Wolff (1994) *Bringing it all back home: Class, gender, and power in the modern household*. London: Pluto Press.
- Foucault, M. (1988) 'Technologies of the self', in L. H. Martin, H. Gutman and P. H. Hutton (eds.) *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Gadamer, H. G. (2004) *Truth and method* (2nd rev. ed.), trans. J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall. New York: Continuum.
- Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2004) 'The violence of development: Two political imaginaries', *Development*, 47(1): 27-34.
- Gibson-Graham, J. K. (2006a) *The end of capitalism (as we knew it): A feminist critique of political economy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gibson-Graham, J. K. (2006b) *A postcapitalist politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gilbert, J. (2008) *Anticapitalism and culture: Radical theory and popular politics*. Oxford: Berg.
- Gleadle, P., N. Cornelius and E. Pezet (2008) 'Enterprising selves: How governmentality meets agency', *Organization*, 15(3): 307-313.
- Goldsmith, D. J. (2004) *Communicating social support*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Greene, R. W. (2004) 'Rhetoric and capitalism: Rhetorical agency as communicative labor', *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 37(3): 188-206.
- Greene, R. W. and D. Hicks (2005) 'Lost convictions: Debating both sides and the ethical self-fashioning of liberal citizens', *Cultural Studies*, 19(1): 100-126.
- Grossberg, L. (2010) *Cultural studies in the future tense*. Duke University Press.
- Habermas, J. (1987) *The theory of communicative action, volume 2: Lifeworld and system*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hancock, P. and M. Tyler (2004) '"MOT your life": Critical management studies and the management of everyday life', *Human Relations*, 57(5): 619-645.
- Hardt, M. (2010) 'The common in communism', *Rethinking Marxism*, 22(3): 346-356.
- Hardt, M. and A. Negri (2000) *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hardt, M. and A. Negri (2004) *Multitude: War and democracy in the age of empire*. New York: Penguin.
- Hardt, M. and A. Negri (2009) *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap.
- Heckscher, C. and P. S. Adler (eds.) (2006) *The firm as a collaborative community: Reconstructing trust in the knowledge economy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

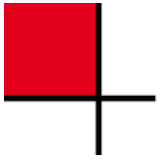
- Hotch, J. (2000) 'Classing the self-employed: New possibilities of power and collectivity', in J. K. Gibson-Graham, S. A. Resnick and R. D. Wolff (eds.) *Class and its others*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Jessop, B. (2004) 'Critical semiotic analysis and cultural political economy', *Critical Discourse Studies*, 1(2): 159-174.
- Jones, C. and A. Murtola (2012) 'Entrepreneurship and expropriation', *Organization*, 19(5): 635-655.
- Korczynski, M. (2005) 'The point of selling: Capitalism, consumption, and contradictions', *Organization*, 12(1): 69-88.
- Korczynski, M. and U. Ott (2004) 'When production and consumption meet: Cultural contradictions and the enchanting myth of customer sovereignty', *Journal of Management Studies*, 41(4): 575-599.
- Lazzarato, M. (1996) 'Immaterial labor', in P. Virno and M. Hardt (eds.) *Radical thought in Italy: A potential politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lindlof, T. R. and B. C. Taylor (2002) *Qualitative communication research methods* (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Marx, K. (1967) *Capital: A critique of political economy; volume 1: The process of capitalist production* (F. Engels, ed). New York: International Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1973) *Grundrisse: Foundations of the critique of political economy* (M. Nicolaus, trans). New York: Random House.
- May, S. and L. Morrison (2003) 'Making sense of restructuring: Narratives of accommodation among downsized workers', in J. Cowie and J. Heathcott (eds.), *Beyond the ruins: The meanings of deindustrialization*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- McGee, M. (2005) *Self-help, Inc.: Makeover culture in American life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McGregor, D. (1960) *The human side of enterprise*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Morley, D. (2005) 'Communication', in T. Bennett, L. Grossberg and M. Morris (eds.) *New keywords: A revised vocabulary of culture and society*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Pearce, W. B. (2007) *Making social worlds: A communication perspective*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Peters, J. D. (1999) *Speaking into the air: A history of the idea of communication*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Peters, J. D. (2006) 'Communication as dissemination', in G. J. Shepherd, J. St. John and T. Striphas (eds.) *Communication as... perspectives on theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Resnick, S. A. and R. D. Wolff (1987) *Knowledge and class: A Marxian critique of political economy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Resnick, S. A. and R. D. Wolff (2001) 'Empire and class analysis', *Rethinking Marxism*, 13(3/4): 61-69.
- Ruccio, D. F. (2008) 'Economic representations: What's at stake?', *Cultural Studies*, 22(6): 892-912.
- Sayer, A. (1999) 'Valuing culture and economy', in L. Ray and A. Sayer (eds.) *Culture and economy after the cultural turn*. London: Sage.
- Shepherd, G. J., J. St. John and T. Striphas (eds.) (2006) *Communication as... perspectives on theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Spencer, D. A. (2000) 'Braverman and the contribution of labour process analysis to the critique of capitalist production – twenty-five years on', *Work, Employment, & Society*, 14(2): 223-243.
- Sproule, J. M. (1990) 'Organizational rhetoric and the rational-democratic society', *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 1(2): 129-140.
- Taylor, T. J. (1992) *Mutual misunderstanding: Scepticism and the theorizing of language and interpretation*. Durham, NC: Duke University.
- Thrift, N. (2006) 'Re-inventing invention: New tendencies in capitalist commodification', *Economy and Society*, 35(2): 279-306.
- Tompkins, P. K. (2005) *Apollo, Challenger, Columbia: The decline of the space program*. Los Angeles: Roxbury.
- Virno, P. (1996a) 'The ambivalence of disenchantment', in P. Virno and M. Hardt (eds.) *Radical thought in Italy: A potential politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Virno, P. (1996b) 'Virtuosity and revolution: The political theory of exodus', in P. Virno and M. Hardt (eds.) *Radical thought in Italy: A potential politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Virno, P. (2001) 'General intellect', trans. A. Bove. [<http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpvirno10.html>].
- Walters, W. (1999) 'Decentering the economy', *Economy and Society*, 28(2): 312-323.
- Williams, R. (1985) *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*, revised edition. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wolff, R. D. (2010) *Capitalism hits the fan: The global economic meltdown and what to do about it*. Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press.

the author

David Carlone is Associate Professor of Communication Studies at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. His research interests cluster around the culture of the new economy, especially the production of meanings and values that might enable alternative economic arrangements focused around labor autonomy and non-economic values.

E-mail: david_carlone@uncg.edu



Pro Bono? On philanthrocapitalism as ideological answer to inequality

Mikkel Thorup

abstract

This article will discuss philanthropy not as a social or humanitarian practice but as an integrated part of present day creative capitalism, having a direct relation to the growing inequality associated with it. The article will investigate four expressions of philanthropy as ideology: consumer philanthropy, in which we are asked to consume with good conscience; corporate philanthropy, in which businesses engage in social work and philanthropic associations reengineer themselves to mimic corporations; billionaire philanthropy, in which conspicuous consumption is now being supplemented with conspicuous philanthropy; and celebrity philanthropy, in which one of the hallmarks of being a celebrity today consists in the commitment to turn that fame towards a good purpose. The aim of the article is to explore how philanthropy may serve to justify extreme inequality.

Introduction

In the spring of 2010 four Danish youths started an enterprise called 'Initiative for Life', which sells graduation caps. The project is supported by the non-governmental organisation Save the Children and the proceeds go towards educating Ethiopian children. On their website www.initiativforliv.dk they write: 'When you buy Initiative for Life's cap you not only get a good price but also a good conscience'. What interests us here is the blend of purchase and charity, the good price and the good conscience. This is but one small example of a contemporary trend to de-differentiate capitalism and charity, increasingly summarized under the label philanthrocapitalism.

The term ‘philanthrocapitalism’ expresses the idea that *capitalism is or can be charitable in and of itself*. The claim is that capitalist mechanisms are superior to all others (especially the state) when it comes to not only creating economic but also human progress; that the market and market actors are or should be made the prime creators of the good society; that capitalism is not the cause but the solution to all the major problems in the world; that the best thing to do is to extend the market to hitherto personal or state processes; and, finally, that there is no conflict between the rich and the poor but rather that the rich are the poor’s best and possibly only friend. This is why Slavoj Žižek quite provocatively talks of the ‘liberal communists of Porto Davos’, that is, a fusion of capitalists and left-wing radicals, a fusion of the summits in Davos and Porto Alegre. These involve different, but not that different, expressions and celebrations of a new post-national, post-bureaucratic, post-state constellation, which both sides think usher in a new ‘smart’ era where smart ‘means dynamic and nomadic against centralized bureaucracy; dialogue and cooperation against central authority; flexibility against routine; culture and knowledge against old industrial production; and spontaneous interaction against fixed hierarchy’ (Žižek, 2006).

One can interpret philanthrocapitalism as the latest expression of the modern era anti-revolutionary, pro-capitalist claims that a rebellion against capitalism will only end in misery and that there is actually no opposition between the market and the common good. In the 1990s the dominant versions of this anti-revolutionary stance were encapsulated in Francis Fukuyama’s thesis of liberal-democratic capitalism as the last good idea and the hype of a high-tech, net-based ‘crisis free’ economy. Both claims quickly lost persuasive force. The IT-bubble crashed in early 2000 and the movements critical of globalization seriously questioned whether the ‘G8 World Order’ was the only world possible. It seems therefore fair to interpret the enormous attention to and hope in philanthrocapitalism as an attempt to close the legitimization deficit of contemporary ‘creative capitalism’ where some get more and more but many more get so much less; a development not halted but accelerated by the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath of austerity.

I will pursue this theme in seven sections. The first section outlines the theoretical framework for the investigation. The next four sections will take up different philanthrocapitalist actors: consumers (II), corporations and charities (III), the super rich (IV) and celebrities (V). Section six will zoom in on one explicit description and defense of this development, a book titled *Philanthrocapitalism*. The seventh and final section will summarize the findings on the ideological function of philanthrocapitalism and what it says about present developments, most notably in the interface between the market and politics as well as emotions and the public.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the interrelations between present day philanthropy and a new form of 'creative capitalism'. My claim is basically that philanthrocapitalism is a sub-form of a new creative capitalism in practical terms and even more forcefully in legitimizing intent. We should then not understand it as a mere appendix to capitalism, or as an insignificant advertising trick, but as a fully integrated part of the way in which capitalism is operating and legitimizing itself at present (Žižek, 2009; Nielsen, 2009).

From absurd to ethical

The main theoretical inspiration for this article comes from Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello and their *The new spirit of capitalism* (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). I will interpret philanthrocapitalism as an answer to a critique, or rather as a way to integrate the critique into the self-portrayal of capitalism. We have for instance seen capitalist firms turn the critique of inauthenticity into a 'self-critical' maneuver using a vocabulary of a new playfulness, irony and creativity, levelling corporate culture to distance themselves from their own inauthentic past (Frank, 1997). An ideology or spirit is basically a self-representation developed and conceptualized through an active engagement with the structural features of the economy and with societal pressures and critiques.

Capitalism needs such a spirit in order to appear legitimate. Repeating an idea from Max Weber, Boltanski and Chiapello state that 'capitalism is an absurd system' (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 7) meaning that it does not provide its own legitimization but needs to find it in the outside world and that it needs such a legitimacy spirit in order to justify engagement in capitalist practices. This means that a capitalist spirit serves legitimacy purposes for everyone. It provides justifications for the entrepreneur working day and night to start a new company, for the worker clocking in and out, for the manager supervising or firing a workforce, for the day-trader frantically buying and selling, for politicians legislating (or not) on economic practices, etc. Boltanski and Chiapello say:

The spirit of capitalism is precisely the set of beliefs associated with the capitalist order that helps justify this order and, by legitimating them, to sustain the forms of action and predispositions compatible with it. These justifications, whether general or practical, local or global, expressed in terms of virtue or justice, support the performance of more or less unpleasant tasks and, more generally, adhesion to a lifestyle conducive to the capitalist order. In this instance, we may indeed speak of a *dominant ideology*, so long as we stop regarding it as a mere subterfuge by the dominant to ensure the consent of the dominated, and acknowledge that a majority of those involved – the strong as well as the weak – rely on these schemas in order to represent to themselves the operation, benefits and constraints of the order in which they find themselves immersed. (*ibid.*: 10-11)

Boltanski and Chiapello investigate 'the way in which the ideologies associated with economic activity are altered' (*ibid.*: 3) and identify historically grounded ideologies or spirits, which basically consist in the ways in which capitalism presents itself, the ways in which it asks to be evaluated, the ways in which it enables but also constrains practices. I will argue that philanthropy is one of the ideological elements in the new spirit of capitalism, a capitalism integrating ethical, emotional, relational, cognitive and now also ecological resources into the heart of all capitalist processes. Philanthrocapitalism is the element in the new spirit of capitalism most aggressively integrating the ethical critique of capitalism and turning it into an asset.

Of interest here is the ideological function that philanthrocapitalism shares with other recent phenomena like 'green accounts', 'corporate social responsibility' and the like, seeking to repeat using new concepts and arguments what the president of General Motors allegedly said in 1953: 'What is good for General Motors is good for America and vice versa'. Philanthrocapitalism is the claim that what is good for the rich is good for the poor (but presumably not vice versa). The article will not address the question of philanthropy's effects but only philanthrocapitalism as a symptom and sign of contemporary capitalism and its alleged legitimacy deficit.

Philanthropy has always been dependent upon inequality and hierarchy. Inequality is the reason why philanthropy is needed and the riches of the more fortunate are what provide the material for the philanthropy. So inequality provides both the reason and the resources of philanthropy. But inequality takes on many forms. It is dependent upon the economy in which it exists, just as the legitimacy narratives of inequality are (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). At present we seem to be witnessing, despite the financial crisis, the deepening of an 'entrepreneurial' or 'creative' capitalism offering huge opportunities for some and condemning many more to increasingly precarious forms of existence (OECD, 2011). One of the main claims in this article is that present philanthropic practices, and more importantly the conceptualization of philanthropy, has much to do with a new form of global capitalism systematically dividing up the risks and the rewards (Harvey, 2005, 2010; Crouch, 2011).

In his remarkable book, *Debt: The first 5,000 years*, anthropologist David Graeber discusses hierarchy as a counterpart to exchange, the latter implying formal equality.

In contrast, relations of explicit hierarchy – that is, relations between at least two parties in which one is considered superior to the other – do not tend to operate by reciprocity at all. It's hard to see because the relation is often justified in reciprocal

terms ('the peasants provide food, the lords provide protection'), but the principle by which they operate is exactly the opposite. (Graeber, 2011: 109)

Charity is dependent upon non-reciprocity. Just imagine what would happen if a recipient of aid gave back the same or a larger amount to the initial giver. Then Graeber presents a 'continuum of one-sided social relations, ranging from the most exploitative to the most benevolent. At one extreme is theft, or plunder; at the other selfless charity' (*ibid.*).

What this tells us is that just as with inequality, charity may be generous and selfless but it is dependent upon and is reproducing hierarchy. It is, Graeber says, only at the two extremes that one can have interactions with complete strangers. There is a long tradition for anonymous giving, where both the giver and the receiver remain unidentified to each other. But, as all charity organizations know, from a pragmatic point of view there needs to be a face (preferably a child or a woman) of the recipient and also a naming or self-branding opportunity for the giver. This apparent discrepancy between anonymity and identification and its moral implications are not my concern here. It is rather the hierarchy inherent in philanthropy and why 'it's hard to see', as Graeber put it above. That is, what is of interest here is how inequality tends to 'hide' behind a new charity discourse of intense emotional and monetary investment by the givers in the recipients of the charity.

What may be an indication of something new in contemporary philanthropy is exactly this emotionalization on the part of the giver, this refusal to keep the recipient a stranger, the need to familiarize oneself with the one in need. Personal commitment (real or simulated) is the new entry point of the giver just as empowerment is the new supposed exit point of the recipient. In the following I will explore what this change in philanthropy tells us about our present social and economic condition. Finally, the aim here is purely diagnostic, a giving of a sort of a situation report portraying the interlocked changes of both philanthropy and capitalism. There will be no prognostic or prescriptive conclusions at the end.

Charity button: Consumer philanthropy

In Danish supermarkets there are machines that collect empty bottles in order to recycle them. Consumers can feed their bottles into the machines and by returning them get a partial refund on their original purchase. Alternatively, consumers can choose to press the 'charity button' on the machine in order to donate the bottle refund money to sick children instead of keeping it to themselves. Increasingly we see philanthropy being embedded in everyday

consumption. There are some products that are charitable as such, such as ecological or fair trade products. But we also see other products given an extra-moral dimension not related to the actual product but derived from its purchase. Here the company selling the product promises to give a share of the price to some charitable cause, thereby linking consumption and charity.

The purchase of products labelled ecological, fair trade and consumer philanthropy are all expressions of political consumption but should also be understood within the framework of what 'the new spirit of capitalism' promises to produce, namely an emotional and moral dimension to purely economic activity. By buying these 'philanthrocapitalist products' you get in a sense more than you pay for. You get the product and its utility value but you also get to do some good. There is an added dimension to the purchase, which mirrors a larger trend in contemporary capitalism. The immediate output is no longer enough. Pay is no longer enough reward for one's work. There has to be personal growth as well. The product is no longer enough. There has to be an added dimension of experience, meaning or morality to go along with it. The logic of 'Get two, pay for one' is no longer reserved for the quantitative part of shopping but is now also applicable in its qualitative part, in what we can call the moral surplus value of shopping.

This moral surplus value is embedded in the shopping situation itself, at the heart of the basic market relation of buying and selling. Charity is here directly and positively correlated with private consumption. The more you purchase the more good you do. To choose this product rather than that, to click the charity button rather than get the money yourself, are doubly charitable. They are charitable for the ones getting the money but also for the one doing the shopping or clicking. Consumer philanthropy is therefore the individual-psychological component in the ideological complex which claims that there is today no opposition between consumption (enjoyment) and charity (morality), just as the work-organizational logic says that there is no opposition between work for pay and work for individual growth. Both are indicative of a shift in capitalism, moving from the society of scarcity's promise of welfare through the state, to the post-scarcity society's promise of liberation and morality in and through capitalism itself.

At my local supermarket small plastic barriers are paced between the groceries of different customers on the cash register belt. These are mostly covered in commercials but some of them bear the imprint: 'You too can give to charity. Donate your refund to sick children'. The problem is that once you're standing in line, placing your groceries on the cash register belt, it is too late to press the charity button for the refund money. Instead, what the text does is only to

stimulate bad consciousness when you are standing there with your refund ticket. Taking a cue from Campbell Jones' (2010) wonderful notion of 'the subject supposed to recycle', this is the articulation of the subject supposed to donate. The ostensible free choice on whether to donate the money or not really turns out to be a moral imperative: 'We are *supposed to* in the strong sense that we should, moreover we must, and to not do so would make us guilty of a breach' (Jones, 2010: 30). 'So', Oprah Winfrey said in a TV charity show, 'by just buying a t-shirt, a pair of jeans, even a cell phone, you can actually begin to save lives' (quoted in Richey and Ponte, 2011: 2-3). To choose not to recycle, or donate, or consume (!) 'is an act of bad faith, a careless failure of duty, responsibility and care' (Jones, 2010: 30). That breach, and the guilt associated with it, is also what is invoked when you are standing there at the cashier's with your groceries and your refund slip in hand.

The button at the refund machine is not really there for your choice. The option of getting the money is only there to simulate an option. But it is an all-important simulation because the creation of a 'situation of choice' is what gives the donation its moral character and provides emotional enjoyment. It is in this case not consumption but the abstention from consumption – 'I could have taken the money for myself but I didn't' – which provides the moral dimension and the enjoyment. But it comes out of a very special form of subjectivation in which duty passes as choice. It obligates us to ask 'where the image of the subject supposed to recycle [and donate] comes from' (Jones, 2010: 37) and to notice that this subjectivation is part of a larger trend to shift agency onto individual subjects (as we shall see below) and away from questions of economic and political power as well as from all of us, not as individuals (consumers, donors) but as citizens.

Consumer philanthropy, like the others forms detailed below, is dependent upon a particular focus on the individual. Collective or institutional effort is consistently downgraded in favor of individual engagement and personal motivation. This is also evident in former US president Bill Clinton's book *Giving: How each of us can change the world*, which is basically a catalogue of outstanding individuals making a difference. Even when the topic is government the focus is on individuals giving. Running through the book is a special way of addressing the reader: 'Most of us aren't public figures like Mia Farrow, Don Cheadle, or George Clooney who can use their fame to do good, but each of us has the ability to do something' (Clinton, 2007: 203). And, Clinton reminds us, 'if everyone did it, we would change the world' (*ibid.*: 55). This is change coming out of individual choices of consumption or donation rather than common action. So, although Clinton is a fair defender of public responsibilities, his narrative fits in with a depoliticized, ethical subjectivation turning the commitment inwards rather than the effort outwards.

The bottled water company Thirsty Planet uses the slogan 'Buy a bottle. Change a life!'. Vinicius Brei and Steffen Böhm, who have analyzed the CSR-strategies for 'ethical' bottled water of companies such as this, emphasize that these consumer philanthropic

campaigns are always emotional and persuasive, trying to closely connect the bottled water consumer to the African problem of lack of water. The campaigns urge consumers to 'get involved' and 'participate' in solving this problem by buying a bottle of branded water. (Brei and Böhm, 2011: 244)

Involvement, participation and compassion are translated into consumption. The difference one can make, so these campaigns tell us, is through buying stuff. The ethical dilemma of our abundance (here of water) and others' lack thereof is paradoxically solved through us consuming more of it. Inequality becomes the solution rather than the problem.

Here we may briefly invoke Hannah Arendt's critique of the politicization of private emotions in *On revolution*. Political compassion is solidarity, which establishes 'a community of interest with the oppressed and exploited'. It 'partakes of reason and hence generality' (Arendt, 1965: 88) whereas pity is the emotional or perverse side of compassion where the emotional attachment of the private sphere is superimposed upon strangers suffering. What Arendt seems to be saying is that one can either acknowledge the human in the one suffering or one can through pity enact a familiarity which imitates the suffering stranger as one's friend, hence emotionalizing, depoliticizing but also intensifying the relation. Is that not what contemporary expression of philanthropy does when it insistently mimics a relation, a 'partnership' between blatant unequals? The suffering other and the consuming self is what gets celebrated in contemporary consumer philanthropy. What pity enables is emotional investment in the suffering other, imitating the help one gives a friend while keeping that other at a comfortable distance from oneself.

This is emotionality without cost, caring at a distance, resulting in an acute depoliticization of the reasons for the suffering. What philanthrocapitalism is aiming at are ideal victims (Christie, 1986) or, rather, ideal sufferers, whose story (and purpose) is one of suffering rather than repression or injustice. In their critique of the RED campaign, where a certain percentage of money earned from products with the RED label are given to charity, Richey and Ponte draw our attention to the glittery and person-fixated representation of the Western celebrities promoting the campaign as well as the enjoyment of the Western consumer purchasing the RED products. 'You can feel great about spending, whether you are buying cappuccinos or cashmere', as the RED American Express campaign says, giving their take on the African AIDS pandemic: 'Has there ever

been a better reason to shop?’ (Richey and Ponte, 2011: xi). These personal stories and enjoyments are contrasted to the images of the African, often nameless, bare life – the subject supposed to suffer –

counted in the calculation of ‘lives saved’ as easily as pill counts or merchandise inventory. Africans with AIDS are presented in smooth, virtual representations in which ‘global politics’ is reduced to style. (*ibid.*: xii)

‘Doing good while doing great’: Corporate philanthropy and philanthro-business

In an article entitled ‘What’s wrong with profit?’, Alan Abramson, director of the nonprofit sector and philanthropy program at the Aspen Institute is quoted as saying: ‘More and more people are asking who else is going to finance doing good if government isn’t’. Speaking of corporate leaders he continues: ‘These guys have firsthand knowledge of the market’s power, and they’re asking themselves why they can’t make money and tackle some of the problems once addressed primarily by government at the same time’ (Strom, 2006).

Traditionally businesses have thought of philanthropy as something to be done after office hours and with the profits earned and then most often as basically a PR-thing. The trend right now is to think philanthropy as part of competitiveness planning (Porter and Kramer, 2002; Johansen, 2010) but also of the capitalist enterprise as philanthropic in and of itself (Smith, 1994; Byrne, 2002). The thinking is summarized in the title of Curt Weeden’s (2011) book on philanthropy, *Smart giving is good business* with the telling subtitle *How corporate philanthropy can benefit your company and society*, and in various consulting initiatives like <http://measuringphilanthropy.com/> helping corporations to give profitably. Manifesting itself here is the claim of an indistinction between company interest and societal interest and even more fundamentally between profit-making and doing good. Or, as the founder of Oracle, Larry Ellison has said: ‘The profit motive may be the best tool for solving the world’s problems, more effective than any government or private philanthropy’ (quoted in Edwards, 2008: 12).

Corporate philanthropy involves the idea that capitalism and the private business model provide the solution to a whole range of societal and global problems; that these solutions are superior to all alternatives, especially state and individual philanthropy; and that the solutions come about not as a result of using the surplus from capitalist profit-making but rather from using capitalism, and especially the profit-model, as the means itself. This connects to a new form of value creation, which ‘derives not only from the production of goods and services

that extract surplus value from the labor process, but the manipulation of images that convince consumers of the firm's integrity' (Fleming, 2009: 3). Corporate philanthropy is part of the turn to authenticity in seemingly all spheres of life, including corporate life, stating that business and profit – just like work for the laborer – is not really the goal but just the means to something else and better.

Bill Gates, who is one of the most generous and prominent philanthropists, has summarized the rationale behind corporate philanthropy in a 2008-article on creative capitalism. He acknowledges the efforts from governments and non-profit groups:

[...] but it will take too long if they try to do it alone. It is mainly corporations that have the skills to make technological innovations work for the poor. To make most of those skills we need a more creative capitalism: an attempt to stretch the reach of market forces so that more companies can benefit from doing work that makes people better off. We need new ways to bring far more people into the system – capitalism – that has done so much good in the world. (Gates, 2008)

The ruling idea – or rather ideology – behind this is that businesses, through the profit motive, are organized rationally and pragmatically, unlike the political and private charity organizations ruled by ideological prejudice and vested interests. Corporate philanthropy is heavily dependent upon an impatient technical fix-approach to the world and a near-total dismissal of 'traditional politics' as a way to solve problems. Kasper Kofod, partner in the design company Social Action which couples businesses and charities, expresses it thus:

The politicians do their bit but it just takes such a long time. The political machine is a giant fleet to get going. That is why I would never go into politics to make a difference. The corporate world is more dynamic than political life. Politicians are simply not good enough at giving their own citizens the tools they need in order to get direct assistance. Corporations can do that. (quoted in Lavrsen, 2008)

Businesses, the argument goes, are tuned into getting a 'return on their investment'. Only businesses are able to respond quickly, efficiently and responsively to philanthropic needs because that is what they do to all their customers. Here it is not only the profit and business model being universalized, but also the customer as the general human being. People in need are just like customers: Identify the need and satisfy it. This connects very precisely to the market value of appropriating social life and ethical demands, namely a way to get into the welfare market from which the state is currently retreating and for which it is actively seeking both market and civil society replacements. Shedding its pure market profile for a caring one is one way to approach the 'market' of welfare. It is what Gerard Hanlon and Peter Fleming very precisely call a 'soft power form of extending corporate influence' and it emerged to 'fill the legitimization breach left in wake of a reconfigured state' (Hanlon and Fleming,

2009: 939, 942; see also Hanlon, 2008). A simultaneous upsurge in ethical demands and abandonment of the state (receiving its first ideological name as Tony Blair's Third Way) is both verbalized and responded to by corporations today.

Corporate philanthropy is then to be understood as a sub-category of Corporate Social Responsibility, meaning an active embrace of social responsibilities by companies. Ronen Shamir identifies an all-important element in this when he says that 'corporations have assertively embarked on the Social Responsibility bandwagon, gradually shaping the very notion of Social Responsibility in ways amenable to corporate concerns' (Shamir, 2004: 675-6). Like all the other examples given in this article, CSR is among other things also a way to answer the ethical demand in a way that doesn't hinder but promotes capitalist processes. 'The new formula', Giorgio Armani said when launching his RED Emporio Armani product line at the summit at Davos, 'is that this is charity to the world of course, but particularly it is the fact that commerce will no longer have a negative connotation' (quoted in Richey and Ponte, 2011: 5).

It may often be a question of a PR-exercise intended to deflect criticism, that is, a matter of 'self-regulation' of responsibilities, as Shamir puts it, meant to avoid legislatively imposed responsibilities. It is certainly a way to maintain control in a corporate environment of 'ethical consumers', 'creative employees', 'critical publics', 'investigative media' and 'activist mobilization'. Embedding CSR into corporate culture (real or fake) is a way of responding to critique by self-promotion of the standards one wants to be measured by, knowing that other and possibly stricter standards of good behavior are out there gaining momentum. CSR is, ideologically speaking, a way to answer criticism while appearing 'to be governed by good will alone' (Shamir, 2004: 677), that is, by one's own altruistic motives.

Another prominent element in corporate philanthropy is a sort of reversed CSR, which we could call philanthro-business. Here the issue is not the humanization of the corporation but rather a marketization of philanthropy (Weisberg, 2006; Foster, 2007), neatly summarized by Bill Clinton: 'The same strategies businesses use to organize and expand markets that enhance the public good and empower their customers to do the same [!] can be adopted by nongovernmental organizations involved in philanthropic work' (Clinton, 2007: 178; see also Hoffman, 2008 and Prahalad, 2005). The main impetus behind this transformation seems to be a response similar to that of companies, namely, a response to critiques of wastefulness, ineffectiveness and excessive bureaucracy. This critique is part of the stated rationale behind philanthrocapitalist initiatives but is also the driving force behind the marketization of aid organizations, with

‘the market’ and ‘the business’ providing the reigning models for organizational design today.

The market approach to philanthropy tells you to look at philanthropic needs as you would any other need on a market and at donors as you would any other customer. As a member of Google’s charity fund Sheryl Sandberg said: ‘We look at the most efficient ways to solve the world’s problems’ (quoted in Lee, 2006). And that is increasingly presented as the way of the market. This is why philanthropy has to copy the methods and organizational designs of capitalism and private business in order to develop what an American center calls ‘effective philanthropy’. The center ‘provides foundations and other philanthropic funders with comparative data to enable higher performance’ (www.effectivephilanthropy.org). Another such center, the British Impetus Trust defines ‘venture philanthropy’ thus:

Venture philanthropy is an active approach to philanthropy, which involves giving skills as well as money. It uses the principles of venture capital, with the investee organisation receiving management support, specialist expertise and financial resources. The aim is for a social, rather than financial, return. (<http://www.impetus.org.uk/about-venture-philanthropy/>)

One should of course notice here the little word ‘active’, which discreetly shames other philanthropic approaches. ‘Venture philanthropists’, ‘upstart-charity’, ‘social investments’, ‘strategic philanthropy’ and not least ‘social entrepreneurs’ are some of the terms in this growing indistinction between corporations and charities, both using a capitalist mindset, vocabulary and organization and both seeing their job to provide some good to ‘philanthropic clients’ (*The Economist*, 2006; Deutsch, 2006).

Fuelling philanthro-business is the conviction being retold again and again at present that the ‘old methods’ are obsolete and outdated. This is also what pushes corporate philanthropy center stage. The obsolete and outdated consists in state development aid and private, ‘unprofessional’ charities. This is where they both tap into and deepen the ruling anti-bureaucratic consensus (du Gay, 2000), showing how it is a critique with an in-built solution: private capitalism and the business model, as also evident in the contemporary development of welfare. This anti-bureaucratic consensus is mirrored by an equally prominent hope in management solutions, solutions always coming down to ‘opening the flows’, ‘knock down the bureaucracy’, ‘floating units’, ‘unleashing creativity’, all ‘about replacing bureaucratic systems with entrepreneurial systems’ as two of its prominent celebrators state (Osborne and Plastrik, 1992: 14); and all of this is basically taking finance rather than production as the underlying organizational principle. This then gets coupled with an extreme confidence in the leader –

parallel to the near-awe in which everyone seems to hold the verdicts of ‘the finance market’ at present.

Corporate philanthropy and philanthro-business are therefore symptoms of what many perceive or describe as a ‘state crisis’. The suggested solutions are a symptom or expression of the general marketization that most non-profit enterprises and activities experience at present where the devaluing of non-markets go hand in hand with a near-total confidence in the market, the innovative entrepreneur and the efficient leader as the new ‘social fixer’.

The not-so-secret millionaire: Plutocharity

One of the most high-profile and mediatized expressions of philanthrocapitalism is billionaire philanthropy where extremely wealthy individuals donate extravagant sums of money to charity. The best known figures here are Bill Gates, Warren Buffet and George Soros. The wealthy seem always to have given to some form of charity, often as an integrated part of being rich, along with throwing grand dinners and stock-piling the mansion with art (Jackson, 2008). But something qualitatively new seems to have occurred in the world of plutocharity (Lloyd, 1993; Shershow, 2005: 133-5; Handy, 2007). This can be illustrated by the TV-series *The secret millionaire*, in which a rich person goes undercover as an average Joe to meet some of society’s poor and end up giving a large sum of money to the people he has met. In a Danish episode of the series the trailer reads:

In *The secret millionaire* Carsten Mikkelsen says goodbye to the jet-set life in Ibiza to go undercover for ten days in one of Denmark’s most criminal cities – Høje Kolstrup in the municipality of Aabenraa. He has to live as unemployed newcomer in a concrete ghetto but is really on the search for projects to give money to. It becomes a journey where Carsten gets closer to reality’s problems of poverty and violence. But it also becomes a meeting between people struggling to make a difference for others. A meeting which creates the foundation for new friendships and which Carsten in the end rewards with money from his own pockets. (<http://omtv2.tv2.dk>, 31 August 2008)

This series exposes nicely a significant problem in all charity: the difference between the giver and the receiver, not only during the charitable act – which gives us the ethical dilemmas of charity – but also afterwards, giving us its structural issues. More important, though, is the mention of emotional effect, which is a constant particularly in billionaire and celebrity philanthropy. It is no longer enough to just give lavishly (often after one’s death) and get something named after you, like in the good old days of classical billionaire charity. Now you have to go out, feel a moral obligation and an emotional attachment to the ones

getting the charity. The dominant trend now is to get personally involved in the charitable acts, to use not only one's money but also time and competencies. One has to feel, engage, participate.

This is evident in the pledges listed on The Giving Pledge website where the personal motivation is at the center. The Giving Pledge started by Bill Gates and Warren Buffet 'is an effort to invite the wealthiest individuals and families in America to commit to giving the majority of their wealth to philanthropy' (<http://givingpledge.org>). At present it has just under 100 members.

As seen in corporate philanthropy, a significant reason for getting into charity is the alleged inefficiency of the classical approaches to helping others. The discrepancy between one's moral and emotional engagement in other people's suffering, and the perception of the inabilities of classical approaches to do the job, creates an obligation to invest one's time and money. Again, what triggers this expression of philanthrocapitalism is an anti-political conception of problem-solving. An employee at the Gates Foundation says:

We are sort of creating a post-UN world. People want to see quicker results' and he even mentions its democratic nature as one of the reasons for its incompetencies. (quoted in Beckett, 2010)

Plutocharity is the most extreme version of the present confidence in the 'over-competent individual', the leader or manager. This individual has proven his or her worth on the market – the measure of all things – and this market competence is now considered a universal competence applicable across the full spectrum of the social, including philanthropy.

Plutocharity has received a lot of media attention, not least because it is often about flamboyant individuals giving very huge amounts of money and promising grand and quick results. But plutocharity is not first and foremost an expression of extreme charity but of absurd inequality. The significant fact to observe is the relation between new forms of charity and a massive and growing inequality. On a personal level it may be motivated by moral concerns but at a structural level it is a way to manage the legitimacy and possibly also social challenges of extreme inequality. Keeping the money exclusively for oneself is no longer an option. One cannot possibly explain to oneself and the rest of the world why one has so much when so many other people have so little. It needs a justification other than merit and that is philanthropy. It is not that one thinks one has not earned the money. But what Thorstein Veblen a hundred years ago called 'conspicuous consumption' must now be supplemented by conspicuous non-consumption in the form of charity in order for the consumption to be both legitimate and enjoyable.

‘The world is watching’: Celebrity philanthropy

The American actor George Clooney has used his private funds to sponsor a satellite to monitor troop movements in the south of Sudan in order to help avoid another genocide in the region. Everyone can watch the movements on the website www.satsentinel.org, the motto of which is ‘The world is watching because you are watching’. This motto nicely summarizes the logic behind a fast growing trend of using celebrity status to generate attention on other issues than celebrity marriage/divorce-cycles and to force action on pressing global issues. Clooney himself has been instrumental in securing the referendum that in January 2011 gave an overwhelming majority supporting the secession of South-Sudan from the rest of the country (Avlon, 2011). The world is watching because they are watching.

A strong connection exists between the new immaterial capitalism and its valuation of brands, reputation, and story-telling in the so-called ‘experience economy’ (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), and contemporary celebrity-culture. In both it seems the performative outweighs the qualitative, attention value outweighs use value. Whereas the economy was earlier connected to material production of ever more and ever cheaper products and the valuation of a commodity was somehow attached to its primary or immediate utility, now it seems both economy and valuation are defined by immaterial processes of attention. Likewise, celebrity-culture is symptomatic of a shift from criteria of qualification to ones of attention in and of itself as the gateway to celebrity status (as evident in the reality-TV food chain of creating and forgetting ‘celebrities’). It is increasingly celebrity status itself which generates celebrity status, rather than any admirable or praiseworthy acts. Celebrity culture is one of the new life forms in the immaterial economy, being played out on the red carpet and in reality TV-shows. What it does not offer is any justification for itself. It is there because we watch it, but it cannot answer why we should watch it and why celebrities deserve our attention. Celebrities cannot answer why they should enjoy so extravagantly and why the rest of us should have part in that luxury only as spectators. Again, we find philanthropy offering itself as a way to deal with the problem of legitimate inequality.

Philanthropy and celebrities were decisively united at the LiveAid-concert in 1985 when musician Bob Geldof brought together a string of artists for the biggest TV-event of its time. Charity was hereafter an ever more integrated part of celebrity status (Poniewozik, 2005). It often takes on a slightly comic or embarrassing form when celebrities wander about in places and problems they do not understand (but, honestly, do we know more? And does it not equally condemn us for watching not the catastrophe but the celebrity watching the catastrophe?).

Or it can take on a more ominous form, as when the pop star Madonna brought home a child after a trip to Malawi in 2006. This is not the place to discuss or criticize celebrity contribution to the alleviation of the world's problems. But what is of interest here is celebrity philanthropy as yet another symptom of how also the global attention-economy needs an explicated moral dimension in order to appear legitimate. It is becoming increasingly difficult to be just a celebrity enjoying the spotlight. The attention has to be redirected to something beyond oneself.

The Irish rock star Bono is probably the most famous of the celebrity philanthropists. He has cleverly used his rock star status to gain access to the halls of power from presidents to the pope and he is a living advertisement of the initiative *Product Red* whose slogan is: 'Buying (Red) Saves lives' (www.joinred.com/red). The Red brand is added to already existing products (showing in perfect form the immaterial economy) and part of the profits from buying Red products go to a global fund combating HIV, AIDS, malaria and other diseases. This expression of consumer philanthropy is sustained by the coolness factor of a rock star like Bono. A spiral of attention is created where celebrity status is exchanged for 'philanthropic attention' which is then fed back into greater celebrity status.

Just as with plutocharity it is the massive inequality, this time of attention rather than money, the differential access to media and popular attention, which enables the charity. The celebrity of the celebrities not only marks their difference from the rest of us. Their position gets redescribed as an opportunity – possibly an obligation – to do good. The charmed life of the celebrities and our watching them gets bestowed a moral dimension otherwise lacking from a mediatized existence. The inequality in media attention is what makes this charity possible, and charity is part of what makes celebrity status legitimate.

The gospel of wealth

Philanthrocapitalism, I would argue, is one of the most dynamic answers to a situation perceived as problem- and crisis-ridden. Dynamic because it not only criticizes state efforts, bureaucratic administration and ordinary politics – as a standard liberal-conservative position would – but also because it offers an apparently coercion-free, individual-based engagement type solution. It claims to organize the solutions not merely on the market in terms of profit – which, again, would be a classical right-wing response – but rather locates its effort in the interstices between the market logic and private morality. In that sense it links up with the ongoing restructuring of the welfare state in the joint

mobilization of ‘civil society’ individuals to solve community or global issues. Both developments are parasitic on a notion of politics as ineffective and promote a notion of the individual, albeit the professionalized individual (often through the market or profit logic) as the better and warmer approach to problem-solving.

Philanthrocapitalism is part of the present rediscovery of civil society, not as the place of public yet non-state and non-market interactions and deliberations, but rather as the site of efficient problem-solving. Civil society is functionalized and in that process also de-democratized. It is therefore inherently anti-political because politics is identified as part of the problem and because solutions are deliberatively phrased in un- or antipolitical terms. Even as billionaires like Warren Buffett lobby for higher taxes on the rich to fund state initiatives in education, health and other public services, the philanthrocapitalist idea is basically about marketization-through-moralization and depoliticization-through-counter-bureaucracy. ‘Politics have failed’ gets repeated endlessly. Markets and morality is all that is left. Luckily they are basically just two versions of the same effort to do good to people.

This is most evidently the case in a so-called ‘philanthrocapitalist manifesto’ written by the authors of the book *Philanthrocapitalism* with the subtitle *How the rich can save the world and why we should let them* (Bishop and Green, 2008a, 2008b, 2010). In the manifesto the authors Matthew Bishop and Michael Green put forward a number of suggestions on how to integrate philanthropy with the workings of capitalism. More importantly, they identify the present as a ‘post-crisis fiscal wasteland’ with need of

radical surgery on our public services. The last decade has been a gilded era for the government sector as a raft of public spending commitments from health and education to international development have been hailed as the solution to social problems. But those times are over. (Bishop and Green, 2010)

The state cannot be trusted to ‘tackle the social challenges of the 21st century’ and neither can ‘the charity sector’ or ‘populist bashing of the rich’. Instead we need to ‘rewrite the social contract between the rich and the rest’. The rich have ‘a responsibility to the rest of society’ which goes beyond paying taxes, namely to ‘give back with their money and their skills’. With that they can be ‘a dynamic, entrepreneurial source of innovation’ – notice the ever-great hope in the entrepreneurial – and help to ‘build a more sustainable environment for wealth creation’ (Bishop and Green, 2010). One can hardly overestimate the significance in their final description of what a healthy society would look like, a ‘sustainable environment for wealth creation’. This is using the market model as societal description and it is basically a message to the rich that they can only stay rich – and richer than ‘the rest of us’ – by giving time and money to charity.

Philanthrocapitalism, they write, is ‘not a party-political issue. It is an opportunity to create a new partnership of philanthropists, businesses and social entrepreneurs with government’ (*ibid.*). Never mind the ideological claim of being a non-party issue. They are right in the sense that this hope in philanthrocapitalism is widely shared across the political spectrum (Bill Clinton has been touring with Matthew Bishop on precisely this issue). More interesting is the legitimacy resources found in this claim of capitalism’s profits and approaches as the way to address global and local issues. In their 2008-book there is a final chapter called ‘The gospel of wealth 2.0’. In it they quote the Indian software giant Nandan Nilekani for saying:

In a country with as much *stark poverty and income disparity* as India and which has just tentatively embraced free market ideology, it becomes all the more critical that the rich embrace philanthropy. It is not only the moral and ethical thing to do. It is also vital to *making entrepreneurial capitalism acceptable to the people as the best form for the economy*. The rapid rise of philanthropy amongst India’s business leaders is the fork in the road between India becoming a modern equitable free market democracy or going back to a stultifying socialistic state. (quoted in Bishop and Green, 2008a: 257, my italics)

This linkage between inequality and entrepreneurial capitalism as well as the opposition between politics on the one side and philanthropy and free market ideology on the other is exactly at the core of my argument above and is the dominant idea behind philanthrocapitalism, both as to why it is supposedly badly needed at present and how it will answer that need. The morally just and the capitalist benefit seem to converge in the call for more philanthropy.

Conclusion

Every society has dealt with the question of the morality of inequality (Wisman and Smith, 2011). My argument here is that philanthrocapitalism is the way the problem of inequality is being dealt with morally, politically and organizationally in a specific historical constellation of growing material inequality and economic transformation. *Pro bono* is Latin and means ‘for the common good’ and it usually refers to professionals, like lawyers, using their expertise for free to help others. In the title of this article it refers to a small pun on the rock star singer Bono and the purpose is simply to raise the question of what philanthrocapitalism represents. If it is more than the desire to help others, then what is this more about? The purpose has not been to expose, ridicule or criticize philanthrocapitalist actors, to devalue philanthropy as paternalistic or ineffective, nor to discuss the moral philosophical implications in helping others, or to evaluate the actual effects of this activity. Others have already done that (Reich, 2006; Singer, 2006; Ruiz, 2006; and not least Edwards, 2008). The purpose has

been to explore what all this pro bono-activity signifies when viewed within a grander societal framework, where capitalism steps in as the active instrument of philanthropy, where the development in capitalism enables new practices, where inequalities are rampant and growing, and where new oppositions to the global system seem to be mounting.

The economy is becoming dependent upon external qualities of the self threatening its capitalist form. This is what is sometimes referred to as the 'communism of capital' where 'the capitalistic initiative orchestrates for its own benefit precisely those material and cultural conditions which would guarantee a calm version of realism for the potential communist' (Virno, 2004: 110). I'm reluctant to place the analysis squarely within this 'communism of capital' approach as I fear it obscures how capitalism not only appropriates but also changes the appropriated. I would rather speak in continuation of Adam Arvidsson who investigates how 'the most important source of value becomes the ability to appropriate an externality' (Arvidsson, 2006: 9), in this case the moral and relational resources inherent in individuals. Similarly to Arvidsson's work on brands, I have looked at philanthropy 'as a capitalist institution, and not just as a cultural phenomenon' (*ibid.*: 14). Capitalism is trying to restructure its operational and legitimacy set-up to address this general tendency to appropriate externalities and I have argued that philanthrocapitalism should be seen as just such an attempt, trying to address the problem of inequality on the basis of a manageable but also expanding version of a 'moral capitalism'.

The main conclusion is that the various philanthrocapitalist practices investigated above are different expressions of the same adaptation to the demands of a capitalism where emotional, relational, cognitive and imaginative resources are not only mobilized but also valorized as the main productive force of economic practice. This new constellation we can call 'cognitive capitalism' (Boutang, 2011) or 'immaterial capitalism' (Gorz, 2010), the main point being that 'personality and subjectivity' (Lazzarato, 1996: 133), qualities of the self, are not only being capitalized. It is not only, and possibly not primarily, a move from inside the companies out, but it is rather the companies having to go beyond the internal profit logic, that is, to the realm of everybody's daily life. The personal has not only become the political, as the 1970's slogan put it. The personal has become everything. The emotional, relational and creative qualities of the self have become the guiding principles of private and collective organization.

references

- Arendt, H. (1965) *On revolution*. London: Penguin.
- Arvidsson, A. (2006) *Brands: Meaning and value in media culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Avlon, J. (2011) 'George Clooney: A 21st century statesman', *Daily Beast*, 21 February.
- Beckett, A. (2010) 'Inside the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation', *The Guardian*, 12 July.
- Bishop, M. and M. Green (2008a) Philanthrocapitalism. How the rich can save the world and why we should let them. London: A and C Black.
- Bishop, M. and M. Green (2008b) 'Can the rich save the world? Interview with Matthew Bishop and Michael Green', *Alliance Magazine*, October [www.alliancemagazine.org/node/1584].
- Bishop, M. and M. Green (2010) 'The philanthrocapitalist manifesto'. [www.philanthrocapitalism.net/2010/01/the-philanthrocapitalist-manifesto].
- Boltanski, L. and È. Chiapello (2005) *The new spirit of capitalism*. London and New York: Verso.
- Boutang, Y. M. (2011) *Cognitive capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Brei, V. and S. Böhm (2011) 'Corporate social responsibility as cultural meaning of management: A critique of the marketing of "ethical" bottled water', *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 20(3): 233-252.
- Byrne, J.A. (2002) 'The new face of philanthropy', *Business Week*, 2 December.
- Christie, N. (1986) 'The ideal victim', in E. Fattah (ed.) *From crime policy to victim policy*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Clinton, B. (2007) *Giving: How each of us can change the world*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Crouch, C. (2011) *The strange non-death of neoliberalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- du Gay, P. (2000) *In praise of bureaucracy: Weber, organization, ethics*. London: Sage.
- Deutsch, C.H. (2006) 'Lessons in management from the for-profit world', *The New York Times*, 13 November.
- Edwards, M. (2008) *Just another emperor? The myths and realities of philanthrocapitalism*. London: Demos.
- Fleming, P. (2009) *Authenticity and the cultural politics of work: New forms of informal control*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foster, L. (2007) 'A businesslike approach to charity', *Financial Times*, 10 December.
- Frank, T. (1997) *The conquest of cool. Business culture, counterculture, and the rise of hip consumerism*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Gates, B. (2008) 'Making capitalism more creative', *Time Magazine*, 31 July.
- Gorz, A. (2010) *The immaterial. Knowledge, value and capital*. London: Seagull.
- Graeber, D. (2011) *Debt. The first 5,000 years*. New York: Melville House.
- Handy, C. (2007) *The new philanthropists*. London: William Heinemann.
- Hanlon, G. (2008) 'Rethinking corporate social responsibility and the role of the firm: On the denial of politics', in A. Crane, A. MacWilliams, D. Matten, J. Moon and D.S. Siegel (eds.) *The Oxford handbook of corporate social responsibility*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

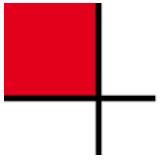
- Hanlon, G. and P. Fleming (2009) 'Updating the critical perspective on corporate social responsibility', *Sociology Compass*, 3(6): 937-948.
- Harvey, D. (2005) *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harvey, D. (2010) *The enigma of capital and the crises of capitalism*. London: Profile Books.
- Hoffman, K. (2008) 'Placing enterprise and business thinking at the heart of the war on poverty', in W. Easterly (ed.) *Reinventing foreign aid*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Jackson, W. J. (ed.) (2008) *The wisdom of generosity*. Waco: Baylor University Press.
- Johansen, L.J. (2010) 'Velgørenhed goes to market', *Mandag Morgen*, 26 April.
- Jones, C. (2010) 'The subject supposed to recycle', *Philosophy Today*, 54(1): 30-39.
- Lavrsen, L. (2008) 'Verden reddes ikke af ånd eller politik – men af kapitalisme', *Information*, 8 February.
- Lazzarato, M. (1996) 'Immaterial labor', in P. Virno and M. Hardt (eds.) *Political thought in Italy*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lee, J. (2006) 'A charity with an unusual interest in the bottom line', *The New York Times*, 13 November.
- Lloyd, T. (1993) *The charity business*. London: John Murray.
- Nielsen, P. (2009) 'Tid til velgørenhed', *Kritisk Debat*, June. [www.kritiskdebat.dk/articles.php?article_id=817].
- OECD (2011) *Divided we stand. Why inequality keeps rising*. [www.oecd.org/document/51/0,3746,en_2649_33933_49147827_I_I_I_I,00.html].
- Osborne, P. and P. Plastrik (1992) *Banishing bureaucracy. The five strategies for reinventing government*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Pine, B.J. and J.H. Gilmore (1999) *The experience economy. Work is theatre and every business a stage*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Poniewozik, J. (2005) 'The year of charitainment', *Time Magazine*, 19 December.
- Porter, M.E. and M.R. Kramer (2002) 'The competitive advantage of corporate philanthropy', *Harvard Business Review*, December.
- Prahalad, C.K. (2005) *The fortune at the bottom of the pyramid: Eradicating poverty through profits*. Upper Saddle River: Wharton School.
- Reich, R.B. (2006) 'A few hundred supernovas', *Prospect*, 2 October.
- Richey, L.A. and S. Ponte (2011) *Brand aid. Shopping well to save the world*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Ruiz, N. (2006) 'Gates' buffet, or fail-safe philanthropy', *Kritikos*, July. [<http://intertheory.org/gates-buffet.htm>].
- Shamir, R. (2004) 'The de-radicalization of corporate social responsibility', *Critical Sociology*, 30(3): 669-689.
- Shershow, S.C. (2005) *The work and the gift*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Singer, P. (2006) 'What should a billionaire give – and what should you?', *New York Times*, 17 December.
- Smith, C. (1994) 'The new corporate philanthropy', *Harvard Business Review*, May-June.
- Strom, S. (2006) 'What's wrong with profit?', *New York Times*, 13 November.
- The Economist* (2006) 'The business of giving. Special report: Wealth and philanthropy', February 25. [<http://www.economist.com/node/5517605>].

- Virno, P. (2004) *A grammar of the multitude*. [<http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcmultitude3.htm>].
- Weeden, C. (2011) *Smart giving is good business. How corporate philanthropy can benefit your company and society*. Hoboken: Jossey-Bass/Wiley.
- Weisberg, J. (2006) 'The philanthropist's handbook', *Slate*, 15 November.
- Wilkinson, R. and K. Pickett (2010) *The spirit level. Why equality is better for everyone*. London: Penguin.
- Wisman, J.D. and J.F. Smith (2011) 'Legitimizing inequality: Fooling most of the people all of the time', *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 70(4): 974-1013.
- Žižek, S. (2006) 'The liberal communists of Porto Davos', *In These Times*, 11 April. [www.inthesetimes.com/main/print/2574].
- Žižek, S. (2009) *First as tragedy, then as farce*. London and New York: Verso.

the author

Mikkel Thorup is Associate Professor in the History of Political Thought at the Institute of Culture and Society at the University of Aarhus, Denmark. His recent publications include *An Intellectual History of Terror* (Routledge, 2010) and he is co-editor of *Rousseau and Revolution* (Continuum, 2011); he was co-organizer of the conference *Designing and Transforming Capitalism*, 9-10 February, 2012 at the University of Aarhus.

Email: idemt@hum.au.dk



Communism, occupy and the question of form

Saroj Giri

abstract

Is it too bizarre to think of horizontalism and ‘prefigurative politics’ as opening the possibilities for a political form, like the (Leninist) party, one that will not be reified and abstracted from social relations? Can strategic politics converge with prefigurative politics – the latter ensuring the former is properly embedded in the social and no longer abstract? A serious understanding of Occupy provides some answers. Here was a form of the political that did not really come safely hedged by the ‘space of appearance of freedom’, but instead was laced with social contradictions and power relations. Occupied spaces were of course spaces of dense, interiorised hermeneutic practices of freedom – they were also, understood properly, incubators of a new political form firmly embedded in social contradiction and radical practices rupturing the dominant order. Occupy started out with questions of economic injustice but went on to come increasingly close to posing the question of political power. That is, Occupy exemplified ‘working through the economy’ and posited the economy as the realm of subjectivity. Without naming it, Occupy poses communism afresh.

Resonance

Occupy as a form has often been discussed. For Jodi Dean, Occupy gave form to structural inequality (1% vs. 99%) and acted like ‘a nascent party’ (2013: 60). However, even those who always lauded ‘micro-politics of resistance’ or ‘subaltern agency’ seem to now veer towards something like the idea of a form.

Judith Butler came close (but, of course, did not arrive at) to the idea of form when she argued that Occupy ‘gave body’ to a ‘united people’ against the illegitimacy of the power of our rulers (Butler, 2012). At another point, she celebrates Occupy as the ‘form of the sustaining social bond’ (Butler, 2011a: 13).

And with Spivak, it feels like she is discovering how some kinds of political agency within ‘modernity’ can after all be supported – hence she went ahead and supported the General Strike (Spivak, 2011). The problem started with her theorizing – for now the General Strike becomes merely a ‘pressure tactic’, detached from the working class and attached to some vague ‘people with anti-statist convictions’ (Spivak, 2011: 9)¹. The move is clear: since ignoring Occupy and the General Strike was not an option, they must be squeezed thin to fit the narrow confines of ‘subaltern agency’.

No wonder then that Butler would not really want to understand Occupy as a form, instead using terms like the ‘alliance of bodies’ and so on². She talks about the ‘vulnerability’ of those who ‘demonstrate without authorization, those who go, unarmed, and confront the police, the army or other security forces, those who are transgender in a transphobic environment, those who do not have visa in countries that criminalize those who want to become their citizens’ (translation in Lambert, 2013). She talks about ‘[g]athered bodies that find themselves and that constitute themselves as “we the people”’ (translation in Lambert, 2013).

Butler refuses to see how these ‘bodies’ do not allow their ‘vulnerability’ to come in the way of getting organized as a formidable force, as an incipient form of power. She seems too invested in their vulnerability, fetishizing it to fit the notion of a poststructuralist/subalternist ‘marginal voice’ or ‘micro-resistance’. Worse, the only way she apparently breaks with this ‘micropolitics’ is by way of resorting to a notion of a ‘united’ ‘we the people’ which seems highly populist. In this sense, Butler overlooks how, in Occupy, the ‘alliance of bodies’ and those who ‘demonstrate without authorisation’ reconstituted themselves in more revolutionary ways, incipiently moving towards what she would suppose to be unacceptably reified forms of power. Occupy, it seems, never properly registered on our theorists trapped in a particularly one-sided understanding of the notion of form and agency.

1 Spivak opines that for Sorel, the general strike was not about revolution but ‘a way to energize the working class’ (2011: 9)! Every civil disobedience is counted as General Strike – even Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement which he always called off whenever the working masses came out in significant numbers! (see Anonymous, 2011b).

2 Butler seems to have used ‘alliance of bodies’ before Occupy (Butler, 2011b). She extends it to Occupy: ‘when bodies gather as they do to express their indignation and to enact their plural existence in public space, they are also making broader demands’ (Butler, 2011a: 12).

Indeed, if not for the reality of the Occupy movement, the idea of a form is otherwise sought to be strictly avoided since it is likened to an 'empty and formal structure' marking certain 'kinds of exclusions' (Butler, 2000: 144). It would be likened to 'an ideal big Other, or an ideal small other, which is more fundamental than any of its social formulations' (*ibid.*). Any conception of Occupy as form or a nascent party will then get regarded as an imposition on the decentred practices of encampments and experiments in 'prefigurative politics'. It would be regarded as 'Kantian formalism', the imposition of an abstract political on the social, full of exclusions of 'autonomous agency' (Butler, 2000: 144-146).

We also encounter the notion of form in Klossowski's interpretation of Nietzsche, in his discussion on the 'semiotic of impulses'. Impulses have intensities that fluctuate – these find 'forms' in gestures and movements (Klossowski, 1997: 37). These forms 'cannot be distinguished from the invention of signs, which stabilises them through abbreviation. For in abbreviating them, these signs reduce the impulses, apparently suspending their fluctuation once and for all' (*ibid.*). Ultimately, here form and sign or the 'abbreviation of signs' lead 'to the fallacious "unity" of the agent' (*ibid.*). Form is again regarded as what restricts, constricts, 'reduces the impulses' or abstracts from them.

However, we will make a counter argument: that it is not the emphasis on form but the move away from it that abstracts 'spaces of freedom' from social relations and from each other. There is no direct access to spaces of freedom without form. Similarly, there is no direct access to impulses and intensities without the forms of gestures and movements. Form cannot be separated from spaces of freedom or impulses. The move away from form leads to a self-contained and interiorized hermeneutics of freedom. Recall Jameson's description of late capitalism as marked by 'a coexistence not even of multiple and alternate worlds so much as of unrelated fuzzy sets and semiautonomous subsystems' (1991: 372)³. Each is marked by a strong spatial separation stemming 'from different zones of time or from unrelated compartments of social and material universe' (*ibid.*: 373).

3 This is however not to equate the space of appearance of the political, abstracted from social relations (say liberal equality or a pure 'practice of freedom'), to the simulacrum of postmodernist society. Instead for us, in Occupy, these practices of freedom are, contrary to what its practitioners think, a radical assertion in our sense of the term – that is, they are crucial for Occupy as a form. On this though, see Žižek: 'the political as the domain of appearance (opposed to the social reality of class and other distinctions, that is, of society as the articulated social body) has nothing in common with the postmodern notion that we are entering the era of universalized simulacra...' (2000: 195).

In other words, if occupied spaces were to be unrelated compartments, the novelty of the rupture with capitalism would soon be lost. Occupied spaces as the self-contained 'space of appearance' of freedom seem to so nicely make peace with capitalism. Negri pointed this out in his critique of Arendt's 'space of appearance of freedom', a term widely used in the context of Occupy: 'the continuous celebration of the fact that freedom preexists liberation and that the revolution is realized in the formation of the political space becomes the key to a historicist hermeneutics that systematically flattens down, or deforms, the novelty of the event and limits it to the American example' (Negri, 1999: 16).

I would like to consider another approach here. This one too has serious problems with the question of form and would emphasise decentred semiautonomous practices of freedom or occupied spaces. But it keeps the focus on anti-capitalism. For want of a better term, let us call it the approach of resonance. And an initial 'definition': *a form-sceptic anti-capitalist uncomfortable with a pure micro-politics of resistance can be said to subscribe to the resonance approach.*

This approach attempts to arrive at the notion of Occupy as a wider movement without however giving up the understanding of occupied spaces as spatially bounded and self-subsisting – not a very fruitful approach from our perspective. Once fixed in their self-subsistence and immanence, these spaces are then presented as resonating with each other. Thus referring to Occupy and other movements, Amin (2013: 3) writes: 'The street is a microcosm of multiple happenings and resonances from the distant spatial and temporal, a place of ebb and flow, an assemblage of the human and nonhuman'. Resonance from the distant spatial: this is how Occupy as 'connecting' all these occupied spaces, hence Occupy as a wider movement, seems to be understood here, if at all⁴.

One very significant earlier usage is in *The coming insurrection* (The Invisible Committee, 2009): 'Revolutionary movements do not spread by contamination but by resonance. Something that is constituted here resonates with the shock wave emitted by something constituted over there. A body that resonates does so according to its own mode'. Note the emphasis on the body, on space – the 'here' and the 'there'. The 'own mode' is not just spatial or territorial self-containment but emphasizes self-subsistence, strength, and immanence. Resonance here feels like a 'relation' between two bodies that cannot have a relation, for they exist in their absolute self-subsistence and immanence.

4 Another usage is in a paper entitled 'The crisis of representation and the resonance of the Real Democracy Movement from the Indignados to Occupy' (Oikonomakis and Roos, 2013).

What about those who reject the notion of immanence and subscribe to some notion of dialectics and contradiction (among those who reject the form argument)? Take John Holloway⁵. He is critical of 'pure micropolitics' and hence is not comfortable with autonomous spaces of freedom, with the spatial boundedness of occupied spaces. He wants to start or 'move from the particular' but this, he insists, 'does not mean a micropolitics' (2010: 208). Trying to move away from micropolitics to the level of the wider movement, he asks: 'how do struggles spread?' And here the form-sceptic Holloway falls back upon the idea of resonance: 'For one struggle to spill over into another, or to act as the spark that sets another burning, what is needed is a certain resonance, and these resonances do not follow formal organizational lines and are often hard to understand' (2010: 211). So Occupy cannot be a micropolitics, but nor can it be construed as a form, which will be for Holloway a slide into a reified form and organization.

So ultimately, for the resonance approach, the different zones of freedom, or say encampments in Occupy, resonating with each other is taken to be adequate for revolutionary politics. This emanates from *one key underlying assumption* of this approach: that the (individual) encampment, the 'space of freedom' is not in any sense diluted or unreal because of the existence of the larger matrix of capitalist social relations⁶. Captured in the term 'prefigurative politics', here freedom co-exists and makes peace, with capitalism, even though it is presented by the resonance theorists as challenging capitalism.

Hence, for Graeber discussing Occupy, capital is parasitic upon this freedom (which he assumes already exists under capitalism). Capital 'represents a certain logic that is actually parasitic upon a million other social relations, without which it couldn't exist' (in Wolfe and Graeber, 2012). These social relations are what already exist and upon which he wants to build a new society. So the new society will not be built out of whole cloth but with what is there, what already exists under the rule of capital. Occupy would be 'a question of building on what we are already doing, expanding the zones of freedom, until freedom becomes the ultimate organizing principle' (Graeber, 2013a: 295).

What we see here is an emphasis on camp-centric autonomous spaces, Occupy as isolated, decentered zones of freedom that Graeber imagines would become

5 Holloway is clear that rather than the positive movement suggested by the theory of immanence, 'subjectivity in capitalism is in the first place negative, the movement against the denial of subjectivity' (2005: 164).

6 See Žižek: 'Capitalism is not merely a category that delimits a positive social sphere but a formal-transcendental matrix that structures the entire social space – literally a mode of production' (Žižek, 2006: 567).

the ultimate organizing principle of society as a whole. But Graeber also focuses on the movement as a whole. He takes account of the solidarity across social classes and groups. He describes the support from trade unions and expresses amazement at how a group of educated, privileged white youth at Zucotti Park in September 2011 could trigger a movement that then has scores of workers and other marginalized groups who are part of it.

He refers to strategic questions. He refers to the wider ‘balance of political forces, where each side was essentially improvising, trying to get a sense of the state of the game and what they could get away with at any given moment’ (Graeber, 2013a: 250). Indeed, for him ‘it is best, in fact, to think of all occupations and street actions as a kind of war’ (*ibid.*: 251). He also knows that law is only for show: what really matters is actual power on the ground. He has great insights on how to deal with the police. ‘Making one strategic concession (the one tent) and using that as a wedge was a perfect strategy’ of the police to divide the occupiers and break their solidarity (*ibid.*).

So he creates this entirely realistic picture of the total dominance of structures of power and violence. With this awareness of the ‘realities of power’, where do we go? Well, be that as it may, just act as though you are free, as though these structures do not exist!

‘Everyone is perfectly well aware the power structure does exist. But acting this way [as though we are free, as though these power structures do not exist] denies any moral authority to their inevitable, usually violent, response’ (Graeber, 2013a: 233).

The moral high ground he seeks for the occupations is of course well understood. But this only means that he is not really interested in the actual organizing of the revolutionary masses into a fighting force. We are back to the interiorized hermeneutics of the practices of freedom.

What we have is a kind of exteriorization of the ‘balance of forces’ (of the ‘capitalist totality’ and the structures of power) so that the encampments can be ‘safely’ celebrated as zones of freedom, prefigurative politics taken in isolation from ‘strategic/effective politics’ and so on. This approach valorizes freedom and even though it takes account of necessity, of the determinations of capital and the state, it wishes for freedom through withdrawal. Such a freedom is nothing but ‘a subjective impulse that invisibly escapes the whole sensible order of ends, the whole rational fabric of causes’ – the ‘freedom of Kantian critique’ (Badiou, 2004: 79). Now we know who is really taking a Kantian formalist position. This sensible order of ends is packed into a pejorative ‘capitalist totality’ and declared

to ‘only exist in our imagination’ (Graeber, in Wolfe and Graeber, 2012)⁷. Direct action is taken to fetch immediate results, a direct uncoupling from capital’s command or the unveiling of the supposed immanent ‘communist’ relations already at work under capitalism.

Even when Graeber (2013a) talks about as wide and broad a notion as ‘dual power’, he retains this *binary of a self-contained zone of freedom and an externalized power of the state and capital*. The dual power situation is not oriented as a temporary situation with one power (the revolutionary forces) eventually directed towards dislodging the established power – the dual forever *remains* dual in Graeber.

That is, even when the resonance approach resorts to strategic thinking and talks about the ‘balance of forces’, it is as fanciful as the interiorized hermeneutics of freedom. Decentralized practices and occupied spaces seek wishful exemption from the ‘balance of forces’ and are frozen into inaction when confronted with state power and the brutal repression – but was this really the story of Occupy? Perhaps not. Occupy seemed to mark a break from the strategic thinness and paralyzing hermeneutic denseness proposed by the resonance approach and those like Butler and Spivak. It pointed towards something far more liberating.

Question of form

As we saw in Holloway, the assumption here is clearly that any ‘stronger’ (stronger than ‘resonance’) notion of Occupy would lead us to ‘follow formal organizational lines’ or towards valorizing reified forms. Eventually, ghosts of the party-state, or ‘totalitarian’ projects of ‘building communism’ are invoked to deter conceptions of Occupy as a form or a new kind of power⁸. Not power but anti-power, not form but decentralized practices or autonomous zones of freedom and their resonance – this is the focus of most accounts of Occupy.

However we must fine-tune our notion of form. In particular we want to state our difference with Butler, who never really confides in the term ‘form’, and Dean, who does.

7 Graeber (in Wolfe and Graeber, 2012): ‘I think the “capitalist totality” only exists in our imagination. I don’t think there is a capitalist totality. I think there’s capital, which is extraordinarily powerful, and represents a certain logic that is actually parasitic upon a million other social relations, without which it couldn’t exist.’

8 Elsewhere, I have tried to show how in Venezuelan Socialism participatory democracy or ‘communal democracy’ exist as only complementary to (and not in order to dislodge) the liberal representative institutions (see Giri, 2013).

Dean sees Occupy as giving form to structural inequality: 'Occupy provides a political form for the incompatibility, the irreducible gap, between capitalism and the people' (2013: 59). For Judith Butler, Occupy has 'drawn attention to forms of structural inequality'; it 'has surely brought attention to the general economic system that relies upon, and produces, inequality with increasing intensity' (2012: 11).

Dean sees Occupy as giving form to the 'people', to the 'we': 'because of Occupy, we now appear to *ourselves* as *us* – we say "we", even as we argue who we are and what we want' (2013: 59; emphasis in original). Butler sees Occupy as 'giving body' ('form?') to the idea of the united 'people': 'Abandoned by existing institutions, they [the 99%] assemble themselves in the name of a social and political equality, giving voice, body, movement, and visibility to an idea of "the people" regularly divided and effaced by existing power' (Butler, 2012).

Beyond this, there are obviously clear and strong differences between the two. Butler thinks of Occupy in terms of the alliance of bodies: 'the gathering together of bodies in a relentlessly public, obdurate, persisting, activist struggle that seeks to break and remake our political world' (Butler, 2011a: 13). Dean talks about the subjective capacity, quoting Badiou, upholding not just the rupture that is Occupy but also the 'organization of the consequences of that rupture' (2013: 59). She of course defends the notion of collective political subject and emphasizes the party.

More crucially, Dean trounces those who reject a new subjective form or capacity as merely some kind of 'representation'. The tables are turned on 'those who resist attempts to represent' for they, Dean points out, seem to be arguing that the movement is limited to only 'those who gather and act in its name'. As she points out, 'Occupy is more than the sum of its parts. It is the part and the sum' (2013: 59).

Dean, however, vacillates between the notion of form as 'subjective capacity' of the 'people' and one which stands, in her account, for the 'irreducible gap' between the 99% and 1%. It feels like the subjective capacity is to be mobilized not to do away with this gap, as the thrust of revolutionary politics, but to highlight the gap, bring it into focus and attention – but to what end? To keep highlighting it and possibly shame the rulers for presiding over an unjust system?

In other words, what we seem to get is a politics of opposition, not of a revolutionary alternative. After treating it as a form or 'nascent party', Dean reduces Occupy to 'opposition to capitalism': 'the problem of political

organization to which Occupy supplies a provisional answer is that of mobilizing and structuring opposition to capitalism' (Dean, 2013: 60). Thus when she goes on to emphasize class struggle it is not clear if she wants us to understand class struggle as only opposition to capitalism. The 'broad left party' she suggests, too, seems part of such a politics.

And finally consider this: 'a party names and expresses the movement's subjective capacity over and apart from the specificities of its actions, encampments, working groups and individual participants' (Dean, 2013: 61). She here nicely lends herself to all the attacks on Marxism for suggesting an abstract notion of the political not embedded in the specificities of action, encampments and so on – for example, the one by Negri: 'the theory of the workers' party presupposed the separation of the political from the social' (1996: 173), or of course Butler's charge of Kantian formalism.

What we intend to do here is to work out a notion of form and the party by engaging with decentered radical practices, viz., the 'specificities of actions, encampments, working groups' and also the idea and practices of consensus and horizontalism.

On their own, without a form, these radical practices are not already the space of appearance of freedom, as assumed by say the resonance theorists, but instead operate within the capitalist form (within, say, redistribution and rights, or as enclaves of freedom). For after all, the particular content of the capitalist universal is indeed about freedom as expressed in equivalent exchange, simulacrum and so on – and hence freedom within the determinations of capital. Graeber seems totally to ignore this when he imagines that we can go on 'expanding the zones of freedom, until freedom becomes the ultimate organizing principle' (2013: 295) – his communism envisions no break with the capitalist form and the inauguration of a new form. He wants to take a direct path from capitalist necessity to freedom – which is nothing but basking in the particular content of the capitalist universal, basking in one or the other version of 'formal equality' or the many transgressions and enclaves of freedom 'allowed by' late capitalism.

But we do not then want to now reject decentered practices of freedom and abstractly propose the notion of a form or party. Instead we try to show that these practices of freedom inaugurate a new form of the universal. What exactly appears in the 'space of appearance'? For us, "appearance" is thus not simply the domain of phenomena, but those "magic moments" in which another, noumenal dimension momentarily "appears" in ("shines through") some empirical/contingent phenomenon' (Žižek, 2000: 196). A new form shines

through practices of freedom and the resonance between them, much as, we will see below, Lenin saw that spontaneity already had elements of a revolutionary consciousness which the ‘economists’ refused to see. In other words, we take these practices seriously so that for us the political is inseparable from the social and form does not involve abstracting from social relations, or sliding into Kantian formalism.

Nor are we, in rejecting the theory of immanence and self-subsisting subjectivity, proposing just any kind of political articulation or subjectivation. In particular, we cannot go along with Ernesto Laclau’s critique of ‘radical immanentism’ and his emphasis on ‘political articulation’ (Laclau, 2001). His ‘political articulation’ too remains very much within the form of the capitalist universal – worse, it does not even pose the question of class struggle, which some radical immanentists like Negri do. No wonder, as Žižek points out, Laclau’s politics as the struggle for hegemony ‘forgets’ capitalism as a transcendental matrix (Žižek, 2006: 567).

A form which shines through social relations, contradictions, radical decentered practices of freedom and even the practices of horizontalism – such is the account Occupy allows us to develop. We start with two accounts of Occupy – one that leads to the reconstitution of the 99% into a populist ‘people’, which we will reject, and the other which leads to a radical reconstitution fissuring the ‘united people’ and headed towards a revolutionary politics, which we propose here.

Reconstitution of the social

Populist reconstitution

Consider a critical report on ‘the relations between the Occupy movement and chronically homeless, who have been present since its inception’ (Herring and Gluck, 2011). It argues that ‘the movement must take special care not to instrumentalize this precarious group in the way it seems the NYPD has’ (*ibid.*: 24). So the report argues that ‘the homeless question should be reframed as a question of how dissenters should treat those seeking food and a safe place to sleep’ (*ibid.*). Merely trying to help the homeless in terms of the welfareist calculus of costs and benefits would be to work with an idea of the 99% as handed down by existing dominant norms, the unreconstituted 99%. A reconstituted 99% would give us something like this: ‘the kitchens at Occupy Oakland and Occupy Philadelphia openly aim to feed the city’s homeless...’ (*ibid.*). Hence, the report concludes, ‘these efforts point to what new forms of solidarity and alliance could look like’ (*ibid.*).

A similar account of reconstitution and form: 'At Occupy, we created a new community from a group of disparate individual members of society – unemployed, students, union members, the homeless. Encampment gave us the proving ground we needed to build the internal relationships and trust necessary for collective political effort' (Snyder, 2011: 13). Clearly here you have a form defined by new internal relationships between the social components comprising the 99%.

Here the internal relations between different sections of the 99% are getting reoriented in a progressive direction. This is fundamental to the Occupy movement. However, there is nothing in this account of the reconstituted 99% which will stop it from say a populist 'united people' notwithstanding its 'anti-capitalism', à la Dean or Butler. So someone who emphasizes this 'progressive' reconstitution: 'The biggest and best goal implied by We are the ninety-nine percent is the reconstitution of the American "people" as progressive force bringing about a society that's just, sustainable, and free', easily goes on to in the same breath talk about building a populist left: 'the immense promise of the movement: nothing less than to build a left populism capable of rescuing the country in the name of the people of, by, and for whom it's allegedly governed' (Petersen, 2011: 30). Here Occupy as form is supposed to be about giving form and body to left populism.

Radical reconstitution

But turn to other accounts and then you see not a populist but a radical reconstitution of the social in Occupy. Consider this: 'I have never been directly oppressed by a member of this 1%, but I have been directly oppressed and exploited at the hands of police officers, queerbashers, sexual assaulters, landlords and bosses. Each of these enemies can surely claim a place within this 99%, yet that does not in any way mitigate our structural enmity' (Aragorn!, 2012: 168). Members of the 99% directly oppress other members of the 99%? What is going on?

Here we have fingers being pointed at each other within the 99%, accusations of collaboration, dissension, disunity – and yet also further probing of the relationship between the 99% and 1%. The picture is murky and not as heart-warming for a left looking for a populist 'we the 99%' anti-capitalism against the 1%! At the same time, this 'disunity' is really about strengthening the revolutionary camp since members of the police are called upon to no longer serve the 1% and join the 99% (even as many think that the police must in the first place be clearly counted as part of the 1%). Indeed, many police officers are supposed to have written an open letter declaring themselves part of the 99%:

‘We represent the 645 police officers who work hard every day to protect the citizens of Oakland. We, too, are the 99% fighting for better working conditions, fair treatment and the ability to provide a living for our children and families’ (Jilani, 2011).

Now this is a different kind of a reconstitution than what we saw above – for this does not make hurried, misplaced and often opportunist claims that the 1% is suddenly totally isolated and weak as against the (now mythically) united people or ‘we the 99%’. Instead, through Occupy, the bases of capitalism (say, among the 99% and those bases created through the particular content of freedom and ‘equivalent exchange’ in the capitalist universal) are gradually uncovered so that a consolidation of the revolutionary forces is possible – what takes place is, as we shall see, a ‘clarification of the situation’ in the course of the class struggle.

This means that Occupy had strong elements of going beyond a mere opposition to capitalism; it was not limited by an over-enthusiastic ‘love for freedom’ which abstractly proclaims that we are already free. Let it be noted that for our perspective, there is no problem as such in ‘acting as though we are free’ (a key anarchist precept) – for, after all, what else is the notion of the presupposition of communism, elaborated by say Lukács: ‘The theory of historical materialism therefore presupposes the universal actuality of the proletarian revolution’ (Lukács, 1970). Presupposing what is actual – a contradiction: such is the Marxist notion of acting as though one is free. It is from such a perspective that we approach say Graeber’s understanding of direct action as ‘acting as if you were already free otherwise’ and the *The coming insurrection*’s understanding of communism ‘as presupposition *and* as experiment... Communism as the matrix of a meticulous, audacious assault on domination’ (The Invisible Committee, 2009: 16).

So, our point: not freedom through withdrawal but through a real investment and embeddedness in the social and power relations, in effect breaking decisively with the ‘freedom of Kantian critique’. Let us here explore this radical reconstitution of social relations with regard to the working class and/or the proletariat in Occupy.

Two elements of radical reconstitution

Practice-as-rupture and form

Take the general strike of 2 November 2011 in Oakland⁹. It was not a usual strike. While the non-unionized workers (precarious labor) were more active they

9 Aragorn! (2012) and Epstein (2013) provide incisive accounts of these events.

also had a kind of a militant solidarity with the unionized workers. The latter too joined the strike at the ports. ‘The general strike of November 2, 2011 appeared as it did, not as the voluntary withdrawal of labor from large factories and the like, but rather as masses of people who work in unorganized workplaces, who are unemployed or underemployed or precarious in one way or another, converging on the chokepoints of capital flow’ (Aragorn!, 2012: 156)¹⁰.

Involving even precarious labor, dispersed across time and space under the regime of mobile capital, this strike ruptured the safe arrangements of capital. From traditional Marxists to anarchists, all seem to laud the success of this strike, which showed solidarity between the unionized workers and other sections of the proletariat. This marked a new, radical practice – practice-as-rupture. The point is that there was no form adequate to such a practice – the solidarity across classes then appeared as conjunctural. Now here Occupy must be understood as providing this ‘adequate’ form. Indeed here we have a case where, as Badiou puts it, ‘the revolutionary process of organization is itself reworked, recast, penetrated and split by the primacy of practice’ (2004: 76)¹¹.

Already, activists have noted the discovery of new mechanisms to facilitate this new practice. Not the old forms and means of organizing strike action by, say, a picket at the factory gates (whose importance still persists), but something novel – the flying picket: ‘the flying picket, originally developed as a secondary instrument of solidarity, becomes the primary mechanism of the strike’ (Aragorn!, 2012: 156).

Hence here we do not abstractly raise the flag of the party but grasp the form emerging in and through the radical practices and the corresponding

10 The otherwise brilliant accounts in Aragorn! tend to suffer from emphasis on circulation rather than production as the main theatre of revolutionary actions. Toscano’s critique of *The coming insurrection* on this point might be relevant: ‘It is no accident that the kind of sabotage envisioned in *The coming insurrection* is on lines and nodes of circulation, and not on the machinery of production itself’ (Toscano, 2011: 33).

11 Closer to home, in India, the current struggle by Maruti-Suzuki workers (from June 2011 onwards) has similarly recast the question of radical, ‘decentralized’, ‘horizontal’, non-unionised practice (strikes, slow-down, sit-in, unprecedented solidarity between permanent and contract workers, challenge to established social democratic unions), and organizational form. This struggle might of course lose steam and gradually dissipate into ‘civil society’ initiatives, or get reabsorbed into social democratic unions that are themselves tottering. But who knows it might as well find a form adequate to the radical practices that can make this struggle a beacon for communist politics. This struggle has unfortunately not evoked the kind of serious engagement it deserves but for starters we have Chandra (2012), Anonymous (2011a), Anonymous (2012b).

reconstitution of social relations. Indeed, if we go back to Lenin, we see that he took ‘radical, decentered practices’, the ‘spontaneous activity’ of workers, very seriously. Lenin was critical of those who regarded workers’ own activity to be bound within the narrow confines of economic struggle. For Lenin, it is certain intellectuals (the ‘economists’) who want the workers to be in the quagmire of the narrow economic struggle (Lenin, 1975). The workers themselves are saying that ‘we are not children to be fed on the thin gruel of “economic” politics alone; we want to know everything that others know, we want to learn the details of *all* aspects of political life and to take part *actively* in every single political event’ (Lenin, 1975: 90-91).

Social differentiation and form

This is only half the picture though. For such radical practices introduce a restructuring of social relations. These practices do not emanate from a purely subjective gesture or ‘action’, as Badiou would imagine, but has a basis in social relations. In particular, if workers do not want ‘to be fed on the thin gruel of “economic” politics alone’, then we must here reckon with the category of the ‘advanced worker’ whose emergence now marks a reconstitution of the social, of the 99%. This reconstitution is one marked by differentiation within the 99%; with, as we shall see, the emergence of a ‘radical minority’ (the ‘advanced worker’) now immediately accepted as a political majority. Ernest Mandel points out that this has an ‘objective basis’: ‘the category of “advanced workers” stems from the objectively inevitable stratification of the working class’ (Mandel, 1970). What we have here is an expression of the differentiation within the working class that Leninists have engaged with for a long time.

Radical practice being strongly rooted in the social relations (of which say even the unionized workers are a part), means that such practices that are the actions of a radical minority do not lead to disunity but to a higher revolutionary unity. Thus while even though only one section of the 99% took an active and determining role (say, only Occupy Oakland vis-à-vis the rest of the Occupy movement, or only nonunionized workers as in the General Strike), the dissension and disunity that it creates within the movement is nothing but a higher unity. This radical intervention supposedly bringing ‘disunity’, is ‘what everyone wants’, ‘what the situation demands’. It is such radical practices embedded in social relations that provides what Marx calls the ‘line of march’ for the movement as a whole (Marx, 2003: 9-10).¹²

¹² In *The communist manifesto*, Marx emphasizes ‘the interests of the movement as a whole’ and ‘clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate

Like the nonunionized workers above, then, there are many instances within Occupy where a radical minority initiates action which pushes the entire movement forward, providing a line of march. Thus blacks fighting police brutality and clashing with the police will now want to do it in the name of Occupy, as in Occupy the Hood. But since Occupy has many other sections of society, this means that the existing divisions between blacks and those among the white population now gets rearticulated. The action of a minority of blacks will then most likely become the action of all within the 99% now duly reconstituted. No longer is it a question of giving 'adequate representation' or rights and protection to blacks but of blacks in their minority, oppressed status now rising as a political subject in the name of the wider 99%. Hence Occupy the Hood or 'The Battle of Oakland' did not really divide Occupy Wall Street or the Occupy movement, but rather raised it to a different level. Occupy Oakland's actions raised the standards for all other Occupies. It radicalized Occupy, made it unusable for liberal democrats and the populist left, thereby clarifying the situation. The populist Mayor who started with supporting Occupy Wall Street ended up condemning Occupy Oakland and urged OWS to derecognize them! (Anonymous, 2012a).

Here one would ask: does not minority action (say violent confrontation with the police) alienate people from the movement? This is an important question, raised particularly with regard to Occupy Oakland¹³. No matter which way one answers this question, the crucial point is that questions of tactics cannot be detached from class struggle and social contradiction. One particular manifestation of this is to treat the 'use of violence' by protestors as a by-product of say 'alienation of the youth' due to austerity and cuts in the public and community services. This is how an important article in *The socialist register* seems to understand what it calls the Insurrectionists in Occupy Oakland (Epstein, 2013: 80). For Epstein, the Insurrectionists are engaging in 'highly confrontational politics' because of their 'desperate situation' and a 'deep sense of alienation from mainstream culture and politics' (*ibid.*). Detaching insurrection and 'use of violence' from the question of class struggle and social contradictions thus smacks of an elitist sociology akin to studying 'dangerous traits' in the underclass.

Indeed, there is no denying that such 'extreme tactics' can be counterproductive – but not always. Sometimes extreme tactics or use of violence alienates people and narrows the movement. At other times, however, it radicalizes the supporters and dis-alienates them. Consider the unprecedented level of violence

general results of the proletarian movement' (Marx, 2003: 9-10). I have dealt with this idea in Giri, 2013.

13 See a lucid account of this debate in Occupy Oakland in Epstein (2013).

used by the underclass in, say, the London riots of 2011 – did it empower or disempower the ‘feral underclass’ vis-à-vis the dominant order, state and capital¹⁴? There is no simple answer and hence no simple position to be taken against violence or against insurrection.

From the perspective of the movement, it becomes a choice between broadening and strengthening the movement, but at the cost of left-liberal or social democratic appropriation and control, or ‘narrowing’ it through extreme tactics – the catch is that this narrowing might actually be one which might lead to a broadening among the proletarian sections, which means that the ‘narrowing’ is most likely among more privileged but progressive upper middle class sections. With Occupy – which is where its uniqueness lies – it felt like you could narrow the movement, that is radicalize it with proletarian elements at the front, and yet not really lose much of the wider social base, among, say, the middle class (who, at least after the movement broadened post-Zucotti, lost their hegemony) – hence OWS could not simply disown Occupy Oakland and treat it as a band of alienated extremists, but reconcile with this new wave of radicalization.

The claim I make is therefore: Occupy becomes the form which allows this ‘minority’ to now emerge as the ‘majority’ in the sense that all of Occupy, indeed the entire country, is in solidarity with and accepts the ‘leadership’ of the minority (say, Occupy Oakland)¹⁵. Minority action *is* majority will. Badiou has got it right: those who are in the movement, ‘and who are obviously a minority, possess an accepted authority to proclaim that the historical destiny of the country (including the overwhelming majority comprising the people who are not there) is them’ (2012: 60).

Rejecting, however, Badiou’s formal schema, we showed how this process is inseparable from practice-as-rupture and differentiation (stratification) within the

14 The proletarian character of the London riots is emphasized, without underrating them as merely nihilistic (as Badiou would do), in Rocamadur/Blaumachen (2012). Even those too invested in the ‘organised Left’ (actually social democracy) now seem to appreciate the riots better as this report makes clear: ‘Riots are often seen as simply the chaotic symptom of radically unjust societies – however, it is becoming apparent that the riots have acted as the catalyst for a new movement of young people, committed that next time they will “riot better”’ (Rigby, 2013). Of course the ‘movement of young people’ sounds too inane, poised to domesticate the ‘riot generation’.

15 Jodi Dean correctly points out that ‘the movement is more than those who gather and act in its name’ – hence those who gather as a radical minority cannot be said to be imposing themselves on the rest or ‘representing’ the rest (2013: 59). She however does not go into the specifics of who this radical minority were. That would perhaps have brought her to a position like ours here.

working class and the restructuring of the social. Hence the fact that the more active elements in the Oakland strike were nonunionized workers is not a matter of detail but follows directly from their position in the relations of production as precarious labor¹⁶.

Consensus/horizontalism and form

Let us examine what was perhaps the most defining feature of Occupy: democratic decision-making and emphasis on consensus and horizontalism. Does it run counter to the notion of form we are trying to develop here?

A primer on the NYC General Assembly website explains: ‘Consensus is a creative thinking process. When we vote we decide between two alternatives. With consensus, we take an issue, hear the range of enthusiasm, ideas and concerns about it, and synthesize a proposal that best serves everybody’s vision’¹⁷.

‘Hearing the range of enthusiasm, ideas and concerns’ clearly means that different positions do not just get a formal representation but actually crisscross and come face to face, directly contend with each other. ‘Instead of voting a controversial plan up or down, groups that make decisions by consensus work to refine the plan until everyone finds it acceptable’ (Kauffman, 2011: 12). So it is not just a question of including or representing particular viewpoints but engaging with each other, ‘working, refining’. Further about the people’s microphone: ‘by repeating other peoples’ words, we are forced to actively engage with them – to actually hear them’ (Muse, 2011: 9). Hence, ‘it is an extraordinary tool for opening channels of empathy and solidarity’ (*ibid.*).

The principle of consensus does not just allow a free interplay of views, but is also oriented towards an active and engaged consideration of each individual position, of all proposals and opinions. Under such conditions, people might not want to egoistically hold to their positions as their own, *my* position. If consensus is not a formal process but a substantive one then it is not about accommodating each individual view, like assuaging individual egos, but precisely one where this

¹⁶ No wonder Badiou’s (2012) analysis in *The rebirth of history* moves at a purely formal level – where social relations do not enter the picture. Perhaps that is why there is so little on the proletarian character of, say, the London riots of 2011, or for that matter the Paris *banlieue* uprisings of 2005. His emphasis is overly focussed on demonstrations and ‘riots’ like the Arab Spring that have a strong middle class character and not just component. These are more proximate to his notion of ‘historical riot’ than the proletarian uprisings that seem to him to be only about nihilistic action.

¹⁷ See <http://www.nycga.net/group-documents/consensus-basics/>.

ends and the individuals, in solidarity, start working like a collective intelligence. For this of course consensus must function in an atmosphere of what Graeber calls equality and freedom (Graeber, 2013b).

So a position or line of action coming from one person might convince everyone who then might want to relinquish their earlier positions. What was one person's proposal is now everyone's – the substantive working of consensus and collective intelligence. So a radical position can emerge as the position that the majority adopts. A minority radical position, the maximalist position, has a good chance of emerging as the majority position. Minority position can emerge as majority will and horizontalism actively produces *vertical lines of action that are formally vertical but substantively horizontal*.

Further, 'decision-making' in the General Assembly always took place in the midst of new developments around – videos of protestors getting pepper sprayed by police early on (the incidents on Brooklyn Bridge and in UC Davis, whose videos went viral) suddenly pushed the movement ahead. *The Daily Mail* pejoratively reported on the UC Davis incident with a headline: 'Occupy Wall Street: Pepper spray attack has led to a temporary resurgence in this political theatre' (Fleming, 2011).

Similarly, the radical developments in Occupy Oakland pushed forward the Occupy movement as a whole. Hence the actual practice of consensus is so much about responding to the unfolding events rather than only going through the views of different individuals or giving formal equal weightage to all.

What does this mean? This means that, under certain conditions, a seemingly vertical 'line of action' can emerge out of consensus and the horizontal, democratic and decentered nature of the movement¹⁸. This is particularly true if consensus is not about sticking mechanically to formal rules where everyone must have a say, and each must appear as unique individual. Dean rightly points out how the Occupy movement had this dimension where 'anarchist emphases on individual autonomy' converged with those under neoliberalism 'who had been taught to celebrate their own uniqueness' (2013: 55). If consensus and horizontalism are not to remain stuck in nursing such quasi-neoliberal egos, then we must be able to delineate how they can contribute towards a more substantive notion of radical politics – one which also involves a verticalism. Perhaps this would be a better way of reviving a communist politics instead of taking politically correct vows of horizontalism and consensus. This is also how I

¹⁸ With a different slant I have discussed some of these questions in the context of Venezuelan Socialism (Giri, 2013).

would like to read Graeber's (2013a) attempt to challenge certain formalist understandings of consensus and horizontalism.

This means that democratic and decentered decision-making can co-exist with the emergence of certain hierarchies and structures outside of collective control; *horizontalism can be the basis for verticalism*. Take for example how alongside the General Assemblies, there emerged the Spokes Councils in order to carry out tasks that needed a more specialized team. 'While the GA is an incredibly necessary body for movement building, it is insufficient for on-going operational coordination and empowered decisionmaking' (Muse, 2011: 11). Hence Spokes Councils were put in place. 'Three nights a week the GA will be replaced by a spokes council, composed of operations groups and caucuses with the jurisdiction to make decisions related to the operations and finances of Occupy Wall Street' (Muse, 2011: 12). This means the emergence of a separate body which is not the movement: the Spokes Council 'is a structure within a movement and should not be confused with the movement itself' (*ibid.*). There were fears expressed in the GA about the Spokes Councils, about losing hold of the decentralized nature of our movement' (*ibid.*). Losing hold of the decentralized movement – was that a well-founded fear? Was centralization in itself a problem?

So we are dealing here with the existence of a separate body, which was not to be confused with the movement, taking key decisions and implementing them: was this (incipient) verticalism violating democratic decision making or was it the natural working of horizontalism, giving us a verticalism which is the unfolding of horizontalism, horizontalism's truth? What we can clearly see here is that, notwithstanding the verticalism, there is no necessary emergence of a reified subjectivity here.

What this means for us is this: consensus and horizontalism do feed into our notion of form, including everyone rather than excluding – and including not on the basis of a minimum consensus, but on the basis of a maximum minority position which would be the 'voice of all' providing the 'line of march' to the movement as a whole. Rather than jealously hold on to positions individualistically defined (my position), here was a process where the individual would identify with the movement of 'strategic determinations' – the individual voice tends to converge with what 'everyone wants', what the 'situation demands'. Hence, *the minority providing the line of march to the movement does not amount to a reified subjectivity*.

Occupy as a form of power

Bureaucratisation?

Let us recapitulate. We explored ‘spaces of freedom’, radical practices, social differentiation, actions of a radical minority, the practices of horizontalism and consensus, the working of the ‘collective intelligence’ and so on. What they all do is to enable the emergence of a form of power called Occupy. Form shines through Occupy and its many micro-practices. That is why even if ‘form’ reminds us of ‘bureaucratic sounding’ qualities like structure, hierarchy and function, such a bureaucratic slide is not inevitable. Occupy points to such a possibility. Holloway’s fear about reified form or Butler’s charge of Kantian formalism does not always hold true. The political is not abstracted from the social.

That is, the form or party is external and vanguardist only as an affirmation of the ‘inside’, of the micro-practices and decentred practices. As we saw above in Lenin the party as outside is also at the same time an expression of the ‘inside’. The Party then does not really uplift the workers to a higher level, in the manner of an external force – rather the party is the expression of that higher level achieved by the inside, which is a bit like a pre-form form, an inside on the cusp of engendering a cut in its body, the ‘advanced detachment’. The inside already anticipates the outside form¹⁹.

The inside, the social, was very instrumental in the form called Occupy. That is, the revolutionary reconstitution of the social relations was what was taking place, meaning the 99% was emerging as a force in the class struggle. It is only when this process stops, when the revolutionary reconstitution of the social relations is no longer on the agenda that the bureaucratic qualities of a party’s organizational form become purely bureaucratic and nothing else.

Clarifying the situation

What we are already doing is referring to the question of form as a form of power. As a form the movement now opposes capitalism and the dominant order not just through ‘practices of freedom’ but also through the concentrated force of a ‘form of power’. That is why *Occupy Oakland* is also at the same time the *Battle of Oakland*.

Does this lead to a spiral of violence, to, say, the Insurrectionists as ‘the cancer in Occupy’ (Hedges, 2012)? Does it lead to a replication of the capitalist state and its

19 Žižek rightly points out that the party provides the space, the realm within which a true break with the determinations of capital and the state can be effected (2002).

reified forms, to a reified, abstract party-state? It need not, so long as the party or form is an expression of radical practices and social reconstitution: the revolutionary reconstitution of social relations. We discussed this above with regard to the bureaucratic qualities. More crucially, in strategic terms, the appearance of the form is the only way that the situation gets clarified. What do we mean?

One report argues how ‘Occupy Oakland has accelerated’ this process of clarification. It points out that ‘the political decisions made [in Occupy Oakland – S. G.] have aided in the elucidation of antagonisms that, within other Occupy sites, are typically more incoherent and less defined’ (Selfcombust, 2012). The political decision was ‘that law enforcement officers, along with anyone who had actively worked with them, would not be allowed within the (occupied) space’. This was in contrast to many other Occupies that ‘succumbed to the seductive liberal logic of equating the police as those who exist within their own ranks’ and hence allowed the police within the occupied space. This meant that, in Occupy Oakland, the ‘police could no longer function as they typically might have, and their subsequent hassling of anyone inside or near the camp was deemed as unacceptable’. Soon it was clear that this one decision ‘made lucid the antagonism that exists between state power and a social movement whose focus rests on economic inequalities that cannot, and will not, be ameliorated within capitalist social relations’ (Selfcombust, 2012)²⁰.

Occupy here did not act as this kind of open space of freedom where ‘everyone’, even the police, could come in. Instead it acted as another form of power where the space of appearance of freedom was not possible without definite strategy and tactics. This reconstituted the terrain of struggle, sharpening contradictions and clarifying the situation. *It actually reconfigured the balance of forces* – not from an external standpoint, as per Graeber, but with the ‘99%’ itself as one of the forces, a form of power.

‘Structural inequality’, again

Marxists are however accused over and over again of creating a situation where two reified power structures (the revolutionary ‘army’ and the state forces) fight a meaningless battle for supremacy, a kind of a turf war, totally isolated from the questions of structural inequality, class struggle and social relations.

20 Such a clarification of the situation in the course of struggle only means that we will be fulfilling Sun Tzu’s call: know thy enemy. The point is you cannot know thy enemy unless you are able to concentrate your forces and precipitate a particular ‘crisis’ situation – the notion of form is what makes this possible.

This accusation is totally misplaced, since now the fight against the gap and deep inequalities actually deepens and radicalizes further. ‘Radical’ meaning ‘not use of extreme tactics, violence’ but ‘to the go to the root’. For this fight now goes past ‘wounded subjects’ seeking redress, goes beyond ‘states of injury’ as the basic fabric of social discontent (Brown, 1995). Instead, the movement as form and the emergence of the power of the collective seeks to move past all such liberal-egalitarian bonds of dependence and liberal-egalitarian forms of struggle. Now the majority is taking steps to free themselves from the relationship of dependence, moving towards expropriating the expropriators – the revolutionary masses are getting organized and are concentrating their power.

Here the movement is not about giving form to the opposition to the gap or structural inequality per se, but to the steps to eliminate this gap itself. Form founds the power of the expropriated. It aims to nullify the conditions that lead to the gap – it aims at the expropriation of the expropriators. That is, from what looked like a movement about economic inequalities, Occupy points towards a full-blown political struggle. Here, focusing on capitalism as a transcendental matrix is not just a question of ‘class struggle’ conceived in economic terms, of tweaking the capital-labor relations, or morally and discursively disputing the bourgeoisie – instead it is a question of political power. So we agree with Žižek that we must today focus on bringing down the very liberal parliamentary political form of capitalism (2006). However, the question is: how does one bridge the ‘class struggle’ with the struggle for political power – how does one make sure political subjectivity is grounded in social relations? Our endeavor here has been to look for answers to this question – and Occupy provides us some basic contours of a likely answer.

It is in this sense that we can think of Occupy as having reformulated the question of the economy and inequality. For a Marxist, it is not really about focusing on the economy per se and in that sense repeating ‘anti-capitalism’, or even talking about class struggle narrowly conceived. Occupy stands for *working through the economy*, where, as Lenin showed a long time back, the economic struggle is not a merely economic struggle but a political struggle. This is what we mean by treating the economy itself as the realm of subjectivity. Žižek therefore rightly critiques Badiou and Rancière for overlooking such a notion of the economy (2011: 199).

Žižek however tends to make the argument of the economy as realm of subjectivity rather abstractly. That is where we are here proposing the idea of working through the economy, since revolutionary subjectivity involves class struggle, clarification of the situation, radical minority action, decentred practices, horizontalism, the movement as a form of power and so on. Working

through the economy means to engage with social relations and radically decentered practices – and through that arrive at a notion of the political. At the risk of overestimating its significance, Occupy seems to point to ways towards moving away from ‘transcendental political subjectivity’ without sliding into an economistic ‘class struggle’. In this sense, Occupy concretely poses the question of communism today and reenergizes Marxism-Leninism.

But, in fact, if the economy (and, as we saw, the field of social relations) is the realm of subjectivity, then what sense does it make to look for the truly political in abstract ‘spaces of appearance’ of freedom (Mitchell, 2012: 11)? We are talking about many followers of Hannah Arendt who seem emboldened by ‘occupied spaces’. We can only tell them – learn from the Occupy movement!

references

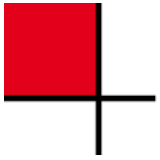
- Amin, A. (2013) ‘Animated space’, paper for *Political Lexicon*, Minerva Project, May. [<http://www.cades.be/debates/29/>].
- Anonymous (2011a) ‘India: Wildcat strike at Maruti Suzuki continues’, 9 June. [<http://libcom.org/news/india-wildcat-strike-maruti-suzuki-continues-may-spread-09062011>].
- Anonymous (2011b) ‘On Spivak’s non-violent, reformist General Strike’. [<http://wearestillthecrisis.wordpress.com/2011/12/09/on-spivaks-non-violent-reformist-general-strike/>].
- Anonymous (2012a) ‘Mayor Jean Quan wants OWS to disown Occupy Oakland’, *Russia Today*, 31 January. [<http://rt.com/usa/news/mayor-quan-occupy-oakland-121/>].
- Anonymous (2012b) ‘Maruti workers struggle’, 27 September. [<http://redpolemique.wordpress.com/2012/09/27/maruti-workers-struggle-and-the-far-left-fallacy-of-the-new-philosophers-of-india/>].
- Aragorn! (ed.) (2012) *Occupy everything: Anarchists in the Occupy movement, 2009-2011*. Berkeley, CA: LBC Books.
- Badiou, A. (2004) ‘The flux and the party: In the margins of Anti-Oedipus’, *Polygraph*, 15/16: 75-92.
- Badiou, A. (2012) *The rebirth of history*. London: Verso.
- Brown, W. (1995) *States of injury*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Butler, J. (2000) ‘Competing universalities’, in J. Butler, E. Laclau and S. Žižek (2000) *Contingency, hegemony, universality*. London: Verso.
- Butler, J. (2011a) ‘For and against precarity’, *Tidal: Occupy Theory, Occupy Strategy*, 1(December): 12-13. [http://tidalmag.org/pdf/tidal1_the-beginning-is-near.pdf].
- Butler, J. (2011b) ‘Bodies in alliance and the politics of the street’, *transversal*, October. [<http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en>].
- Butler, J. (2012) ‘So, what are the demands? And where do they go from here?’, *Tidal: Occupy Theory, Occupy Strategy*, 2(March): 8-11 [http://tidalmag.org/pdf/tidal2_spring-is-coming.pdf].

- Chandra, P. (2012) 'Maruti: A moment in workers' self-organisation in India', *Radical Notes*, 12 September. [<http://radicalnotes.com/2012/09/12/maruti-a-moment-in-workers-self-organisation-in-india/>].
- Dean, J. (2013) 'Occupy Wall Street: After the anarchist moment', *Socialist Register*, 49: 52-62.
- Epstein, B. (2013) 'Occupy Oakland: The question of violence', *Socialist Register*, 49: 63-83.
- Fleming, T. (2011) 'Occupy Wall Street: Pepper spray attack has led to a temporary resurgence in this political theatre', *The Daily Mail*, 21 November. [<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2064381/Occupy-Wall-Street-Pepper-spray-attack-led-temporary-resurgence-political-theatre.html>].
- Giri, S. (2013) 'Capitalism expands but the discourse is radicalized: Whither "21st century Venezuelan Socialism"?', *Critical Sociology*, 39(1): 21-36.
- Graeber, D. (2013a) *The democracy project: A history, A crisis, A movement*. New York: Spiegel and Grau.
- Graeber, D. (2013b) 'Some remarks on consensus'. [<http://occupywallstreet.net/story/some-remarks-consensus>].
- Hedges, C. (2012) 'The cancer in Occupy', *Truthdig*, 6 February. [http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/the_cancer_of_occupy_20120206/].
- Herring, C., and Z. Gluck (2011) 'The homeless question', *OCCUPY! Gazette*, 2: 22-25. [<http://www.nplusonemag.com/GAZETTE-2.pdf>].
- Holloway, J. (2005) *Change the world without taking power*. London: Pluto.
- Holloway, J. (2010) *Crack capitalism*. London: Pluto.
- The Invisible Committee (2009) *The coming insurrection*. New York: Semiotext(e).
- Jameson, F. (1991) *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Jilani, Z. (2011) 'Oakland police officers write an open letter', 1 November. [<http://thinkprogress.org/special/2011/11/01/358761/oakland-police-we-are-99/>].
- Kauffman, L.A. (2011) 'The theology of consensus', *OCCUPY! Gazette*, 2: 12-13. [<http://www.nplusonemag.com/GAZETTE-2.pdf>].
- Klossowski, P. (1997) *Nietzsche and the vicious circle*. London: Continuum.
- Laclau, E. (2001) 'Can immanence explain social struggles?', *Diacritics*, 31(4): 3-10.
- Lambert, L. (2013) 'Politics: What is a people?' [<http://thefunambulist.net/2013/07/10/politics-what-is-a-people-butler-badiou-bourdieu-ranciere-khiari-didi-huberman-for-la-fabrique/>]
- Lenin, V.I. (1919) *The Soviets at work*. New York: Rand School of Social Science.
- Lenin, V.I. (1975[1902]) *What is to be done?* Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.
- Lukács, G. (1970) *Lenin: A study on the unity of his thought*, trans. N.Jacobs. [<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/1924/lenin/index.htm>].
- Mitchell, W. J. T. (2012) 'Image, space, revolution: The arts of occupation', *Critical Inquiry*, 39(1): 8-32.
- Mandel, E. (1970) 'The Leninist theory of organisation', *International Socialist Review*, 31(9). [<https://www.marxists.org/archive/mandel/196x/leninism/index.htm>].
- Marx, K and F. Engels (2003 [1848]) *The communist manifesto*. New York: Norton.
- Muse, B. (2011) 'From GA to Spokes Council', *OCCUPY! Gazette*, 2: 9-12. [<http://www.nplusonemag.com/GAZETTE-2.pdf>].

- Negri, A. (1996) 'Twenty theses on Marx', in S. Makdisi, C. Casarino and R.E. Karl (eds.) *Marxism beyond Marxism*. London: Routledge.
- Negri, A. (1999) *Insurgencies: Constituent power and the modern state*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Oikonomakis, L. and J.E. Roos (2013) 'The crisis of representation and the resonance of the real democracy movement from the Indignados to Occupy', *Roar Magazine*, 18 February. [<http://roarmag.org/2013/02/real-democracy-movement-resonance-indignados-occupy>].
- Petersen, C. (2011) 'The politics of the poor', *OCCUPY! Gazette*, 1: 30-32. [<http://www.nplusonemag.com/OCCUPY-GAZETTE.pdf>]
- Rigby, H. (2013) 'Two years on: Has the left done enough to engage the voices of the riots generation?', 8 June. [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/holly-rigby/london-riots-two-years-on_b_3704547.html].
- Rocamadur/Blaumachen (2012) 'The feral underclass hits the streets: On the English riots and other ordeals', *SIC: International Journal for Communization*. [<http://sic.communisation.net/en/the-feral-underclass-hits-the-streets>]
- Selfcombust (2012) 'Some notes on Occupy Oakland and the police', 1 February. [<http://selfcombust.wordpress.com/2012/02/01/some-notes-on-occupy-oakland-and-the-police/>].
- Snyder, G. (2011) 'Campaign vs. encampment', *OCCUPY! Gazette*, 3: 13-14. [<http://www.nplusonemag.com/occupygazette3.pdf>].
- Spivak, G. C. (2011) 'General strike', *Tidal: Occupy Theory, Occupy Strategy*, 1(December): 9. [<http://tidalmag.org/pdf/tidal1-the-beginning-is-near.pdf>].
- Toscano, A. (2011) 'Logistics and opposition', *Mute*, 3(2): 30-41.
- Wolfe, R. and D. Graeber (2012) 'The movement as an end in itself? An interview with David Graeber', *Platypus*, 43. [<http://platypus1917.org/2012/01/31/interview-with-david-graeber/>].
- Žižek, S. (2000) *The ticklish subject*. London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2002) *Revolution at the gates*. London: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2006) 'Against the populist temptation', *Critical Inquiry*, 32(spring): 551-574.
- Žižek, S. (2011) *Living in the end times*. London: Verso.

the author

Saroj Giri is lecturer in Politics at the University of Delhi.
Email: saroj_giri@yahoo.com



Does capital need a commons fix?

Massimo De Angelis

Today economic crisis is a capitalist crisis of social stability, not a simple recession, that is, a crisis that requires a realignment of class/power relations and new systems of governance in order to re-establish growth and accumulation¹. The last two times in which a real change in capital's governance occurred (in the

¹ For a discussion of crisis of social stability as opposed to other forms of crisis, say a recession, see De Angelis (2007a). Here social stability is defined as 'the stability of social arrangements and interaction in forms compatible with the accumulation process, the extensive commodification of life, particular forms of disciplinary processes of market interaction and extraction of work. It is ultimately a stability of the coupling between reproduction and production, between the value practices centred on life preservation in the broad sense and the value practices centred on the preservation of capital. Thus, there are potentially many instances in which social stability thus defined enters into crisis: [1] when capital is increasingly unable to guarantee access to the goods and services necessary for reproducing bodies and social cohesion corresponding to given "class compositions"; [2] or when the aspirations of new generations are at odds with the "deals" agreed by older generations and their struggles begin to shape the times; [3] or when subjectification has gone so far as to erase all hope and bring exasperation to large sectors of the population; [4] or when, on the contrary, hope is self-generated by social movements that challenge what they believe is the subordination of nature, dignity, peace, justice, life to greed, but that we can read as the systemic drive of accumulation; [5] or when a combination of these and other factors emerges in particular historical circumstances so as to threaten the legitimacy of many of the enclosures and integration practices and processes at the root of accumulation.' Today I believe we are closer to the first three of these cases, with some movements touching upon [4]. In any case, 'these are all the cases that, from the perspective of capital's conatus of self-preservation, require strategic intervention beyond mere repression and coercion. What capital needs here is an approach that allows the acknowledgment of the problems and issues at the basis of the crisis as "social stability", but at the same time co-opts them within the mechanism of accumulation and its value practices' (De Angelis, 2007a: 87-88).

post-World War II period with the embracement of ‘Keynesianism’ and in the late 1970s with the shift to neoliberalism) followed periods of intense social struggles that helped social movements imagine alternative socio-economic arrangements. Capital, fearing that ‘ideas gripping the masses’ might turn to propel a radical transformation, was suddenly willing to shift its ‘governance’ paradigm to accommodate some social demands while cutting deals with some segments of the movement and displacing the cost of doing the new paradigm onto other communities and environments across the globe. Pitting one sector of the social body against others has always been a strategy of capital development². But this time, things are getting a bit more complicated. My first thesis is that in facing *this* crisis of social stability capital faces an *impasse*. By ‘impasse’ I mean that vital support for the growth of the social system is no longer forthcoming in sufficient degree, especially from the *environment* in which the capitalist system operates.

Capital, understood as social force organizing social cooperation for the purpose of accumulation, has a twofold environment. The first is constituted by social systems that reproduce the various facets of life in non-commodified ways. Access to money is, at most, only a means through which needs are satisfied and not an end in itself, as it is for capital. When the purchased commodities exit the market sphere and enter the spheres of social cooperation (households, associations, networks, etc.), they often enter the complex, culturally and politically diverse and variegated sphere of the commons. It is here that the cultural and physical reproduction of labour power, the value-creating commodity so critically important for capital, occurs – outside the control of capital but, of course, strictly coupled to it.

The other system that capital depends upon is the ecological systems upon which all life and social organization depends. The *impasse* that capital faces consists of the devastation of systems of social reproduction through reductions of wages and welfare over the past 30 years as work has become more atomised, flexible and precarious. And the increasing inability of natural ecosystems to support

2 For an historical and theoretical discussion of how Keynesianism was founded on particular deals with sections of the working class, see De Angelis (2000). For a theoretical discussion of the relation between capitalist development and social stratification, see the interventions in *The Commoner*, 12(Spring/Summer), 2007. For a discussion of the current crisis along the lines proposed here, Midnight Notes Collective and Friends (2009).

capital in its endless quest for greater resource extraction and cost-shifting externalities, such as the free use of the atmosphere as a waste dump³.

In this sense, capitalism has reached an impasse, the overcoming of which, if done in its own terms, will produce a social and ecological apocalypse at worst, and an intensification of social conflict at best.

How can capital overcome this impasse? The difficulty lies in the fact that if the system has to survive it will have to continue to push for strategies of growth (i.e. accumulation). Capital's systemic necessity for growth derives not only from its elemental need for accumulation through a cost-cutting and cost-externalizing process of competition. Growth is also necessary as a way to reconcile a profit-maximizing mode of *production* with hierarchical modes of *distribution*. If 'all boats are lifted by a rising tide', there will be less pressure to address inequality and redistribution called upon by struggles for social justice.

Yet today, all the strategies and fixes available for capital to pursue growth in the world system, will only intensify the crisis of social and ecological reproduction, amplifying and widening the range of resistance even if there is no focal, programmatic point. Capital is therefore pressed to shift the mode of governance of social relations, or at least to fine-tune neoliberal governance in such a way to contain the costs associated to the crisis of social reproduction and limit public expenditures necessary to police and control the rebellions generated by the crisis. In either case, capital needs other systems and forms of sociability to fortify its agenda. The 'fix' needed by capital in condition of crisis of social stability cannot rely only on the usual fixes to adopt in times of cyclical recessions, that is periodic crises of over-accumulation that can be dealt with only with relocation of investment, localized devaluation of assets and labour power (De Angelis, 2007a: 270, n. 17) or spatial fix (Harvey, 1999), that is, the creation of the built environment to displace crisis.

This leads me to my second thesis: to solve or at least to address this impasse capital needs the commons, or at least specific, domesticated versions of them. It needs a *commons fix*, especially in order to deal with the devastation of the social fabric as a result of the current crisis of reproduction. Since neoliberalism is not about to give up its management of the world, it will likely have to ask the

3 It may be worthwhile to point out that this language of systems I use here is not a replacement for 'class' and 'power' based discourses. As I discuss in De Angelis (2007a), the effects of class struggle given certain power relations, and its precondition as a particular class composition, are both occurrences within capital's systemic dynamics.

commons to help manage the devastation it creates. And if the commons are not there, capital will have to promote them somehow.

On the other hand, commons are also systems that could do the opposite: they could create a social basis for alternative ways of articulating social production, independent from capital and its prerogatives. Indeed, it is difficult today to conceive emancipation from capital – and achieving new solutions to the demands of *buen vivir* social and ecological justice – without at the same time organizing on the terrain of commons, the non-commodified systems of social production. Commons are not just a ‘third way’ beyond state and market failures; they are a vehicle for *claiming ownership* in the conditions needed for life and its reproduction. The demands for greater democracy since the 1970s now exploding worldwide in the face of the social and economic crisis, are really grassroots democratic demands to control the means of social reproduction. Democratic freedoms imply personal investments and *responsibilities*, and commons are vehicles for negotiating these responsibilities and corresponding social relations and *modes* of production through what Peter Linebough calls ‘commoning’.

Hence, there is in fact a double impasse, for both capital and the social movements. Capital needs the commons to deal with the crisis as much as social movements need to confront capital’s enclosures of the commons in order to construct serious alternatives and prevent capital’s attempts to co-opt the commons. Hence, it is crucial not only to defend existing commons from enclosures, but also to shape new commons as they become a crucial terrain of struggle. This value struggle lies at the heart of the commons’ potential as a social system and force that might overcome the hegemony of capital. This struggle between the value-generating logic of the two systems has not been sufficiently addressed in commons literature.

Commons and capital as social systems

When we speak of commons and capital as social systems, we in the first place point at their unity, that is their common character in relations to non-social systems, what distinguishes them from non-social systems (for example a psychic, a biological or a mechanical system). In this sense, both commons and capital involve processes of self-reproduction, which in turn involve people and expenditure of their life-energies, involve communicative processes, the establishment of goals, and involve particular social relations. Autopoietic organization is a term we use to indicate processes of systems reproduction. An autopoietic system reproduces the elements it consists of through these elements

themselves and their operations. Social systems are autopoietically closed in the sense that while they use and rely on resources from their environment, those resources are only the substrata of the systems' operations. To clarify, although these resources are necessary, it is not these resources that generate the autopoietic operations of the social system, but every type of social system develop its own system-generated autopoietic operations. In the process of operating, they re-produce the social relations through which they operate⁴. Autopoiesis applies to the commons as to any other social system, although in different modes. We could thus reframe the Marxian concept of mode of production in terms of the specific ways in which autopoiesis occurs and is structured.

Thus, when we speak of commons and capital as social systems, we speak of them as having a distinct autopoietic organization from, say, biological or psychic systems. On the other hand, when we speak of commons and capital as *distinct* social systems, the character of this distinction cannot be attributed to the particular structural elements comprising them. For example, both commons and capital may employ high or low tech, make use of oil or not, have functions that require a certain level of authority, may or may not have a community divided into wealth hierarchies, although we expect these divisions to be far less in commons systems. Talking about commons therefore does not mean to talk about utopia, nor when we say capital we are pointing to dystopia. We certainly do not believe that capital can walk us to utopia, since its own *conatus* of self preservation is boundless accumulation, and the processes for actualising the latter are not only environmentally destructive, but also socially divisive and exploitative. But we certainly cannot claim that an expanded reproduction of commons will lead us inevitably to utopia, since 'utopias', to put it with Eduardo Galeano, are just 'horizons that allows us to walk'⁵ but the actual 'walking', or the process of evolution of commons that is in front of us, is a journey filled with challenges and power struggles, whose result nobody can anticipate. What we

4 This broadly follows Luhmann's (2012) idea of social systems as self-referential (operationally closed) systems. Systems consist of operations, while operating is what systems do. Autopoiesis literally means 'auto (self)-creation' (from the Greek: αὐτό – auto for 'self'; and ποιήσις – poiesis for 'creation or production'), or auto-reproduction. The term was originally introduced by Chilean biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1972). The term was originally used to explain the emergence and reproduction of biological cells and bodily systems such as the metabolic system.

5 'Utopia lies at the horizon. When I draw nearer by two steps, it retreats two steps. If I proceed ten steps forward, it swiftly slips ten steps ahead. No matter how far I go, I can never reach it. What, then, is the purpose of utopia? It is to cause us to advance.' Translation taken from <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/33846-utopia-lies-at-the-horizon-when-i-draw-nearer-by>.

can claim though is that the *autopoietic organizations* of commons and capital have a distinct character. The key questions therefore are: what is the organization that defines commons as a class of social systems? And what is the organization that defines capital as a class of social systems?

Commons are social systems in which not only resources are shared and communities set rules for this sharing, but the goal of autopoiesis is the reproduction of these shared resources and communities. The commons and their elements (communities and pooled resources) occur both at the beginning and at the end of a social process of commoning, of social cooperations among commoners⁶. All the same, in the money circuit of capital, money occurs both at the beginning and at the end of the process of expanded reproduction, or accumulation⁷. This illustrates the fact that the commons and money are an end in themselves in the two different systems, or, to put it in another way, they are autopoietically closed self-reproducing systems, systems that reproduce themselves, through the renovation of their elements and the recasting of their relations. While in one case, commons are for commons sake (and money at most an instrument for the reproduction of the commons), in the other case, capitals are systems in which money is for money's sake (and labour power and the environment at most an instrument to perpetuate accumulation).

An immediate conclusion about the specific autopoietic requirements of each system is that what we conventionally call 'economic growth' – which incidentally links to growth of greenhouse gases – is only an indispensable requirement for the sustainability of capital systems, not of commons systems. In principles, commons systems could reproduce themselves in a condition of what some environmentalist thinking has called 'a-growth'⁸ without at all undermining their expanded reproduction as autopoietical systems and improvement in the quality of their processes. Thus, overall reduction of GDP could at the same time be compatible with a betterment of living conditions through a) extension and pervasiveness of commons circuits, for example coinciding with relocalisation of many production chains (such as food and basic light manufacturing), the deep democratisation of many state functions, the communalisation of public utilities, the de-commodification of knowledge, education and culture, and b) the extension of the realms of non commodity

6 Peter Linebaugh (2008) rediscovered the use of this verb among the XIIIth Century English commoners describing their activities in the forest commons.

7 With this I mean circuits based on the M-C-M' formula (i.e. money-commodity-more money) that Marx discusses in Chapter 3 of *Capital*. For a discussion of contemporary capitalism following Marx's circuits analysis, see De Angelis (2007a).

8 For a discussion of this thesis see for example Latouche (2009).

exchanges, such as administrative or gift exchanges in Polanyi's tradition, and globalising solidarity economies. Indeed, both a) and b) can and have been conceived as part of virtuous hybrids with market functions, to the extent that we link them to simple commodity circuits (and not capital circuits). Take for example Community Supported Agriculture schemes. They do involve both commodity exchanges (i.e. farmers selling produce to consumers) and at the same time commoning between consumers and small farmers to negotiate quality, quantity and price of produce guaranteeing an income to farmers.

To regard commons as autopoietic social systems that operate outside of capital *in terms of their own operations*, allows us to locate them *either* outside or inside capital's *organizations*. Thus we find commons as community organizations and associations, social centres, neighbourhood associations, indigenous practices, households, peer-to-peer networks in cyberspace, and in the reproduction of community activities that are organized within faith communities⁹. However, we also find commons on the shop floor of capitalist factories and offices among co-workers supporting one another, sharing their lunch and developing forms of solidarity and mutual aid, or even organizing a strike, that is reproducing autopoietical systems that *from the point of view of their own operations* are quite distinct if not clashing, with the autopoiesis of capital. It is indeed only at the point of their distinct autopoiesis that we encounter the *untranslatability* between commons and capital.

Commons and capital

The relation between commons and capital is necessarily ambiguous, since their co-dependence and co-evolution makes it difficult to point out which of the two systems uses the other. This ambiguity can best be illustrated by looking at the paradigmatic role that the 'village commons' have in relation to capital. In a classic study, the anthropologist Claude Meillassoux argued that the work of reproduction and subsistence going on in the village commons in South Africa (mostly carried out by women) allows male labourers to migrate and be available

9 We must clarify here that my use of the term 'commons' does not necessarily match with the terms, institutional configurations and self-identities used by the members of a different variety of non-capitalist associations. For example, it is argued that the idea of commons does not work with indigenous communities, since, owing to different genealogies and practices, they talk about the 'communal'. (Mignolo, 2011) However, it is also true that catholic churches talk about 'communion', household members refer to families, neighbourhood associations talk about communities, many African people identify in tribes, and urban activists in Europe talk about 'social centres'. In my take, all these are different modulations of the theoretical construct I refer to as commons.

for employment for cash crop or other types of waged work. The work in the village commons reduced the cost of reproduction of these male workers since capitalists who hired them did not have to pay for the cost of their upbringing, or contribute to any social security in case of illness, unemployment or old age retirement (Meillassoux, 1981: 110-111). But Meillassoux also recognised the ambiguous character of the contemporary village commons. If the subsistence-producing commons is too 'unproductive', capital loses important aspects of the 'free gift' of labour power, while if it is too 'productive', fewer workers would migrate out of the village commons, pushing wages up (Caffentzis, 2004).

In other words, the relation between the commons and capital is a relation between two autopoietic social systems of production whose mutual interlocking and metabolic flows are regulated by the internal dynamic in each system.

This ambiguity at the heart of the relation between commons and capital means that questions of social powers (understood as access to resources and the sense-orientation of the commoners vis-à-vis capital) can be pivotal. The social contingencies of this struggle mean that questions of whether a commons can be co-opted cannot be addressed *ideologically*. The question of co-optation is a strategic field of possibilities, one that requires situated judgments based on context and scale. For example, many would argue that access by commons to markets, for example to meet some of their needs, is by definition evidence of their co-optation, while in fact it could be a contingent strategy of survival and a precondition for their reproduction.

One key variable in defining the outcome of this ambiguity is the wage rate, in both its 'private' and social component. A lower wage rate reduces, all other things being constant, the ability of people to spend time and pool social resources in the commons – to engage in commoning.

Some current examples of commons co-optation

The increasing dependence by capital on the commons does not curb its desire to enclose commons, however, as we see, for example, in the recent international land grabs now underway¹⁰. Rather, it is likely that, in addition to enclosures, capital will also attempt to use commons to fix many social problems created by the crisis and co-opt the commons as a possible challenge to capital's management. Enclosures (the appropriation and expropriation of commons resources) and commons co-optation (the use of commons to work for capital

¹⁰ See essay by Liz Alden Wily at <http://wealthofthecommons.org/essay/global-land-grab-new-enclosures>.

and not simply for the reproduction of commons themselves)¹¹ seem to be the two complementary coordinates of a new capitalist strategy.

This can be seen in the World Bank's approach to development in the Global South. For years it has emphasized the importance of some aspects of commons management, such as pooled resources, community participation, and 'trust' as social capital, all other things being constant. Whereas communities may create credit associations to pool savings and self-govern their distribution through 'financial money commons' (Podlashuc, 2009), development agencies rely on the same principles to tie communities to banks and microcredit institutions and so promote their dependence on global market circuits. In this fashion bonds of solidarity and cooperation that are nurtured in commons are turned into mutual control and the threat of shame to serve market interests (Karim, 2008).

In Britain, a coalition government of conservatives and liberal democrats have overseen massive cuts in public spending since 2010, and now are promoting a vision of 'Big Society' that claims to support community empowerment to address social upheavals. The agenda of the neoliberal era is continuing apace, as if no crisis has happened, even as the ruling class clearly recognises the social and environmental problems caused by this agenda. Unlike Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, who said that society 'does not exist', the conservative prime minister Cameron wants to turn it into a 'Big Society' – continuing a strategy of community involvement already pursued by New Labour in the UK, as well as by governments in the US and Canada (De Filippis et al., 2010: ch. 4). According to Cameron, governments urgently need to 'open up public services to new providers like charities, social enterprises and private companies so we get more innovation, diversity and responsiveness to public need' and to 'create communities with oomph'.

But this approach requires recognizing that resources are not simply financial, but the resources that lie dormant in fragmented and atomised communities, and need to be activated through some form of commoning. People need to take matters into their own hands by, for example, connecting diabetes patients, the elderly or the marginalised youth into self-help groups¹². There is of course nothing new about the idea of mobilising communities to clean up their neighbourhoods. But what seems to be emerging in discourses such as the 'Big Society' is a commitment to a faster speed and scale of change, since, as widely recognised, social innovation can take a long time to be adopted.

11 In system theory co-optation can perhaps be translated as 'structural coupling'.

12 In the U.K., this type of approach taps into the work of social entrepreneurs such as Hilary Cottam and Charles Ledbeater of www.participle.net.

Another discourse pioneered by capital to use the commons to serve its interests is the idea of ‘sustainable communities’; a term used in urban planning and design circles when proposing new financial centres, shopping malls or mega-venues like the Olympics. The basic idea of ‘sustainable communities’ is that they ‘can stand on their own feet and adapt to the changing demands of modern life’ (ODP, 2003). In other words, they do not decline while facing the on-going transformations that the relentless, ever-changing requirements of the global economy impose. But this idea – with its emphasis on education, training, environment, governance, participation, and, of course, sustainability, amounts to an oxymoronic utopia. It is a vision in which communities never seem to tire of playing competitive games with other communities somewhere else in the world in order to overcome the disruptions and inequalities of wealth and income inflicted by competitive markets. In this way ‘commoning’ is annexed to a divisive, competitive process in order to keep the whole game going. This oxymoronic ontology of our condition seems to be the key to the sustainability for capital (De Angelis, 2007b).

In all these cases, commoning is turned into something for a purpose outside the commons themselves. The purpose is not to provide alternatives to capital, but to make a particular node of capital – a region or a city – more competitive, while somehow addressing the problems of reproduction at the same time. But we must take heart in the fact that, in spite of capital’s strategies to use a commons fix to the problems it creates, while never really solving them, commons may well be part of a different historical development. The spectre of commonism is already starting to haunt the globe.

Conclusion

Writing in prison at a time of the consolidation of fascism in Italy, Antonio Gramsci wrote in an often-quoted passage: ‘The old world is dying away, and the new world struggles to come forth: now is the time of monsters’ (Gramsci, 1971). A monster is an imaginary or legendary creature that combines parts from various animal or human forms. Fascism and Nazism were one type of this monster. Stalinism was another. Today, the articulation between capital, a system that recognises no limit in its boundless accumulation, and a system that must recognise limits because it is only from within limits that it can reproduce life, love, affects, care and sustainability, may well give way to another monstrous social construction... or not.

Much will depend on us. Whether the avenue ahead is one of commons co-optation or emancipation, is not a given. It will depend on political processes that

have yet to be developed. Although a critical analysis of capital is necessary, it is not sufficient. The ‘cell’ form of the social force that is responsible to establish and reproduce life (or alternatively, fail to sustain life, depending upon the power relations), and *by this* to abolish capital, we call today ‘the commons’. By cell form I here mean the general social form upon which this movement *can be* generated, the *sine qua non* without which no weaving of cells into a new social fabric without oppression, exploitation and injustice is possible. The commons is the cell form within which social cooperation for life-reproduction generates *powers-to*¹³ – *the only* basis by which people can multiply their powers to the nth degree through networked commons that overcome the boundaries of locality and challenge the *power-over* the commons established by different forms by capital.

There are at least two things that need to be taken into consideration in order to develop *powers-to* as an effective force. First, we should not romanticise commons. Actual commons can be distorted, oppressive or emancipatory. When we enter the system-like loops of an established commons, we immediately notice what’s at odds with our best-held values, beliefs and cultural mores. Too often however we decide to judge the commons on the basis of the values they express in relation to ours. Some activists tend to build communities based on political affinity, other on the basis of religious faith.

In these *identity-based* commons, a clear boundary is established around the commons that prevent it from expanding *unless* the outside embraces the values of the inside. ‘Conversion’ here is the main mechanism of commons development, a mechanism, however, so inadequate from the perspective of the challenges of building an alternative to capital in the midst of an emergent crisis of social reproduction. I have run across radical social centres that refused to engage with the local community on the terrain of reproduction because the cultural marks of that community did not match with the principles of the activists. Thus, instead of triggering a process in which these cultural marks could be engaged on the terrain of practice with the local community – for example by promoting forms of communalisation of reproduction such as child or elder care – clear identity boundaries were embedded in the social centre commons, thus ensuring its insularity and vulnerability. Identity politics here is a barrier to the development of new emancipatory identities through commoning.

13 For a discussion of power-to as contrasted to power-over see Holloway (2002). For a critical engagement in light of the problematic of the organization of alternatives to capital see De Angelis (2005).

Second, capital can be confronted only to the extent that commons of social reproduction, and of everyday life reproduction in particular (Federici, 2011), are developed as key sources of powers-to. The social reproduction commons are those commons developed out of the needs of its participants to reproduce some basic aspects of their own lives: health, food, water, education, housing, care, energy. The development of these commons is strategically crucial in developing emancipatory and progressive alternatives. Such commons must address people's basic needs and that empower them to refuse the demands of capital by offering access to alternative means of life.

references

- Caffentzis, G. (2004) 'A Tale of two conferences: Globalization, the crisis of neoliberalism and the question of the commons', *The Commoner* [<http://www.commoner.org.uk/?p=96>].
- De Angelis, M. (2000) *Keynesianism, social conflict and political economy*. London: Macmillan.
- De Angelis, M. (2005) "How?!?! An essay on John Holloway's *Change the world without taking power*", *Historical Materialism*, 13(4): 233-249.
- De Angelis, M. (2007a) *The beginning of history: Value struggles and global capital*. London: Pluto.
- De Angelis, M. (2007b) 'Oxymoronic creatures along the river Thames: Reflections on "sustainable communities", neoliberal governance and capital's globalisation', *The Commoner* [<http://www.commoner.org.uk/?p=38>].
- De Filippis, J., R. Fisher and E. Shragge (2010) *Contesting communities: The limits and potential of local organizing*. London: Rutgers University Press.
- Federici, S. (2011) 'Feminism and the politics of the commons', *The Commoner* [<http://www.commoner.org.uk/?p=113>].
- Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections from the prison notebooks*. New York: International Publishers.
- Harvey, D. (1999) *The limits to capital*. London: Verso.
- Karim, L. (2008) 'Demystifying micro-credit: The Grameen Bank, NGOs, and neoliberalism in Bangladesh', *Cultural Dynamics*, 20(1), 5-29.
- Holloway, J. (2002) *Change the world without taking power*. London: Pluto Press.
- Latouche, S. (2009) *Farewell to growth*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Linebaugh, P. (2008). *The Magna Carta manifesto: Liberties and commons for all*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Luhmann, N. (2012) *Introduction to systems theory*. Chichester: Wiley.
- Maturana, H.R. and F.J. Varela (1972). *Autopoiesis and cognition: The realization of the living*. London: D. Reidel Publishing Company.
- Meillassoux, C. (1981) *Maidens, meal and money: Capitalism and the domestic community*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Midnight Notes Collective and Friends (2009) 'From crisis to commons'. [www.midnightnotes.org/Promissory%20Notes.pdf]

Mignolo, W. (2011) 'The communal and the decolonial', *Turbulence*, 5[<http://turbulence.org.uk/turbulence-5/decolonial/>]

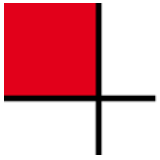
Podlashuc, L. (2009) 'Saving women: Saving the commons', in A. Salleh (ed.) *Eco-sufficiency and global justice*. New York, London: Palgrave.

ODP (2003) *Sustainable communities: Building for the future*. London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. [<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20060502043818/>].

the author

Massimo De Angelis is Professor of Political Economy at the University of East London. He is editor of *The Commoner* web journal and author, among other works, of the *Beginning of History: value struggles and global capital* (Pluto: 2007). He is currently working on a new monograph on the commons.

E-mail: M.Deangelis@uel.ac.uk



Communicity

Colin Cremin

The Idea of communism, as Alain Badiou (2008: 98) explains, is an historical anchoring point ‘of everything elusive, slippery and evanescent’, a becoming-truth that negates capitalism, the institutions which support it and the ideology of ‘there is no alternative’. A communistic impulse is arguably present in all of us, an impulse for equality, self-determination and justice: an impulse that business and politicians capture in claims about fairness, inclusivity and now sensitivity to the environment. It is an uncanny kind of communism they evoke, one not quite as it seems. When talking of ethical responsibilities they catch us momentarily off guard, but more often than not failing in their attempts to interpellate us with their claims of being kind to the soil and hired hands. To a critical mind, Bill Gates – the exemplary liberal communist described by Slavoj Žižek (2008) – is obviously hypocritical, giving with one hand by taking from others: armies of exploited workers and consumers dependent on industry standard software. But these same critical minds adopt lifestyles, engage and proselytise all kinds of practices that legitimate the myth of an ethical capitalism. This short piece is on the uncanny communism of three left-liberal archetypes¹: Richard Branson (the liberal communist), Wal-Mart (the communistic firm) and Colin – ‘No Impact Man’ – Beavan (the communistic consumer). They each reproduce visual and linguistic signifiers of communism, described here as an image-communism or *communicity* – a term adapted from Roland Barthes’ analysis of an advertisement for the pasta brand Panzani.

Images, according to Barthes, carry a range of different meanings or connotations acquiring a common sense or denotive power by registering with a preformed cultural knowledge. While an artist’s intentionality is often

1 I unpack the notion of left-liberalism in *Capitalism’s new clothes* (2011).

ambiguous, advertisers have only one intention: to sell us things by association. Barthes' deconstruction of the Panzani image showed how various signs operating in conjunction with one another create an affective bourgeois mythology designed to resonate with a target audience. The tableau included a netted shopping bag spilling pasta products and a tomato and mushroom. The predominant colours of green, white and red evoked the Italian flag. Barthes (2009) identified four signs here: 'a return to market', 'a total culinary service', 'a still life' and 'Italianicity', a likeness to Italy. The various signs, visual and linguistic, that evoke a communistic capitalism together signal what I want to call communicity: a likeness to communism. It is a sign that is produced/reproduced by various social actors, corporations and the mass media. The intentionality is clear: to create through various signs an affective association between the producer (those promoting the mythology) and consumer (those identifying through their actions with the mythology) to humanitarian values. Communicity is reproduced in a single image such as a celebrity posing for an aid organisation, a speech such as those made by Bill Gates, a corporate brochure containing information on the company's ethical values and so on. The emotive force of the image depends on a preformed knowledge about what Badiou calls the 'egregious' conditions the capitalist mode of production gives rise to. The various individuals, organisations and institutions that manufacture and reproduce communicity constitute a culture of crisis industry. As with Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of the culture industry, the term is intended to infer a broad range of cultural producers that aim to provoke and manipulate a desire for mass marketed products. The difference here is that the 'product' is any object or service that evokes communicity and appeals to a demand for a 'solution' to the various significations of 'crisis' reproduced from real life events in popular media. Hence it is no one 'industry' in particular but companies, organisations, political parties and individuals that evoke and embellish products or services whether directly or indirectly with communicity. In buying into myth, literally and metaphorically, the subject is able to get rid of or repress the feelings of guilt such products evoke.

Through images of death and destruction, the culture of crisis industry reminds us of the hardships, suffering and degradations of various kinds, and associates them with objects and practices imbued with the euphoric values of communicity. It connects famines, tsunamis, human rights violations and HIV/AIDS epidemics with a range of intermediaries who provide the means and injunctions for the ordinary consumer with no effective agency to do something. Promising a kind of *jouissance*, the object ('it') is one that we can never get enough of because the image of suffering and need for a common solution never goes away. A need is manufactured for a false kind of politics, one that has no tangible impact and so the object embellished with communicity becomes a

substitute for effective political solutions. The pressure to act on such images extends to (prospective) workers often screened for their 'ethical' credentials, commitments to fairness, inclusivity and so on. The myth of communnicity is pervasive and, in a Gramscian sense, hegemonic, creating a consensus about the need to reduce, say, poverty or carbon emissions even though in practice the correspondence between image and action is limited and often downright contradictory. It is the myth of a humanity coming together to address the most pressing issues of our time, an ideology that penetrates into everyday life, reaching a saturation point with 'capitalism' and 'neoliberalism' readily identifiable (empty) signifiers of a problem. In these respects communistic capitalism is historically distinctive from previous examples of philanthropy.

In short, there is a circular and self-expanding motion that begins with a preformed knowledge about social conditions. These are the raw materials that are mined for the purposes of producing communnicity. A false need for the products, services, lifestyles and so forth is created through the sign that a culture of crisis industry helps manufacture and/or promote. The motion circulates and expands as conditions worsen and the need for action intensifies. The remainder of the short essay examines this process and the relations through the aforementioned exemplars of the mythology, namely Richard Branson, Wal-Mart and Colin Beavan.

Chairman Branson

Communnicity is the sign of communism appropriated for the market, evoked in advertising, on the news, by the entertainment complex and the chief beneficiaries and defenders of free-market capitalism. Figures such as Bill Gates and Richard Branson become the literal human faces of communnicity, the Vladimir Lenin and Chairman Mao of left or communistic liberalism.

In *The man who mistook his wife for a hat*, Oliver Sacks describes the unfortunate case of a woman who, in the vein of a Tourette's sufferer, mimicked the expressions of every person she encountered. 'In the course of a short city-block', Sacks (1986: 117) observed, 'this frantic old woman frenetically caricatured the features of forty or fifty passers-by, in a quick-fire sequence of kaleidoscopic imitations, each lasting a second or two, sometimes less, and the whole dizzying sequence scarcely more than two minutes'. Something akin to this is happening today. In the course of the short period of capitalism, business has learned to mimic and 'congeal' in ever more exaggerated ways the politics of 'dead' revolutionaries. Today's liberal communist is not simply making the odd philanthropic gesture: he is a provocateur, a militant and a radical who speaks

the language of the left. He is the de facto leader of the more dispersed and less articulate 'multitude' offering 'practical' solutions when protesters are merely agitating. Liberal communists, Žižek (2008) explains, endorse anti-capitalist causes; they are against centralised bureaucracy, for cooperation, flexibility and spontaneity; they identify concrete problems they can act pragmatically to resolve. 'While they fight subjective violence', Žižek (2008: 31) writes, 'liberal communists are the very agents of the structural violence which creates the conditions for the explosions of subjective violence'.

We can see why Bill Gates is Žižek paradigm example. At the 2008 World Economic Forum in Davos, Gates played to the neoliberal Janus face, identifying in human nature the dialectic of 'self-interest and caring for others' arguing that

Recognition [of capitalism's victims] enhances a company's reputation and appeals to customers; Above all, it attracts good people to an organisation. As such, recognition triggers a market-based reward for good behaviour. In markets where profits are not possible, recognition is a proxy. In markets where profits are possible, recognition can be an added incentive².

Unlike the affluent consumer who chooses lifestyle ethics rather than revolutionary politics, Gates ontologically on the side of capital within the relations of production can only ever engage in a gestural ethics. His economic power and public status is the means by which he can initiate, finance and promote various campaigns and embellish objects with the sign of communality for mass consumption. His highly publicised philanthropic gestures situate him as both producer and consumer of the mythology, a difference in scale rather than in kind from those active within the circuit on the other side of capitalist relations. He shames by example those without the agency to affect any substantive response to conditions they had no role in creating. He provides the objects in the form of schemes such as Project Red into which the now shamed consumer can offload their guilt and put the poverty of their politics to one side³.

2 See <http://www.microsoft.com/en-us/news/exec/billg/speeches/2008/01-24WEFDavos.aspx>.

3 The fetishisation of guilt is illustrated in Capitalism's new clothes with reference to the Fairtrade chocolate brand Divine. A series of advertisements were produced that contained images of healthy looking black women framed by images evoking African villages. Captions included 'Eat Poverty History' and 'Not so guilty pleasure'. In the former the woman teases us with a piece of chocolate held between her fingers, the 'little' piece of something missing from our lives that incessantly drives our desire to consume and thus get rid of the (image of) poverty (of our politics).

Communnicity is a product of free-market capitalism in a two-fold sense. Capitalism provides the authentic image of deprivation and the (ideological and market-based) means for exchanging the image. No matter how critical the rhetoric, every evocation of communnicity extends the myth that the solution is in the cause. Richard Branson's (2011) anti-capitalist manifesto *Screw business as usual* illustrates the relation and limits of communistic capitalism. Whether intentionally or not, Branson paraphrases Marx and Engels in their admiration of capitalism as a productive force while also condemning its social consequences. He writes:

Capitalism as we know it, which essentially started around the time of the Industrial Revolution, has certainly created economic growth in the world and brought many wonderful benefits to people, but all this has come at a cost that is not reflected on the balance sheet. The focus on profit being king has caused significant negative, unintended consequences... For over a century and a half cheap labour, damaged lives, a destroyed planet and polluted seas were all irrelevant when set against the need for profit...

The only solutions that figures such as Branson can propose are market-based ones, 'a new kind of capitalism' that 'has slowly been gathering force in the last ten or twenty years'. A culture of crisis industry is operationalised:

... not just coming from celebrities and well-known figures in the social sector: this community was a wonderful melting pot of people from all walks of life. What binds them is their willingness to listen to and learn from people on the front line to create new entrepreneurial approaches, and their firm belief that we should never accept the unacceptable⁴.

For the communistic capitalist there really is no alternative to the market, all alternatives are utopian, but what they promote is in itself the answer to a possible refusal of such a pervasive ideology. They promote the possibility of overcoming the symptoms of capitalism thereby rendering critique superfluous. People do not have to be 'duped' by these calls for the operation to be effective. The palliative is ultimately all we have when there appears to be no effective political means for addressing an image that never goes away. Companies are either compelled to recognise this problem because of consumer demand or find in a growing 'market' for ethical products a means to add value to their merchandise. Whether individual CEOs genuinely want to see social change is moot, they have no choice ultimately than to pursue profit. Chains such as Planet Organic are an obvious example of business profiting from such consumer demand/awareness but it is the wider embrace of the ideology that suggests a hegemonic penetration, hence my reason for turning to Wal-Mart.

4 See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/money/2011/nov/18/business-as-usual-cause-economic-problems>.

Wal-Mart

Communiversity relies on cultural knowledge, knowledge of the conditions of those labouring to produce things that Western consumers have come to rely on. However sophisticated though is our knowledge about the manner in which something is produced and about processes through which it came into our possession, most of us ultimately have no choice other than to make purchases according to the monetary price at which objects exchange. This enables companies exposed for their labour practices to continue without seeing profits unduly affected while also having opportunities through such exposures of adding value to the brand through the sign of communiversity. Hence Mike Duke, the president and CEO of Wal-Mart, can say without irony that

Customers do want low prices, but not by sacrificing quality. They want products that are more efficient, that last longer and perform better. And increasingly they want information about the entire lifecycle of a product so that they can feel good about buying it. They want to know that the materials in the product are safe... that it was made well... and that it was produced in a responsible way⁵.

The customer who shops at Wal-Mart because the goods are affordable and the location accessible becomes responsible for the conditions Wal-Mart helps create. The ideological efficacy of the sign is in part due to the fact that neither party can extricate themselves from the conditions they find themselves in. In the case of the consumer, as Adorno and Horkheimer (1997: 139) put it, 'the diner must be satisfied with the menu'. In a staged act of contrition, the business and consumer self-shame themselves into exchanging their guilt for an object that satisfies a need to get rid of the intolerable image of another's suffering. In *The emancipated spectator* Jacques Rancière writes:

For the image to produce its political effect, the spectator must already be convinced that what it shows is American imperialism, not the madness of human beings in general. She must also be convinced that she is herself guilty of sharing in the prosperity rooted in imperialist exploitation of the world. And she must feel further guilty about being there and doing nothing... she must already feel guilty about viewing the image that is to create the feeling of guilt. (2009: 85)

Communiversity relies on a psychic image of exploitation. But the effect it produces is always post-political in the sense that it has no political consequences except perhaps to improve the image of those already benefitting from the conditions such 'politics' wants to expose; the object is only ever an emollient. Short of transforming the underlying structure, communiversity is all we have. Wal-Mart

⁵ See <http://www.informationweek.com/wal-mart-to-set-sustainability-standards/218501046>.

contributes to a consensus that something has to be done about the egregious symptoms/affective image-effect of capitalism.

Fredric Jameson (2002) reminds us that Marxist dialectical thinking necessarily involves both a negative *and* positive hermeneutic. Jameson (2010) identifies the positive in Wal-Mart's monopoly power. By driving down prices Wal-Mart is exemplary of the efficient market hypothesis and also by becoming a monopoly power its very negation. As one CEO, quoted by Jameson (2010: 30), says on Wal-Mart: 'They have killed free-market capitalism in America'. Ideologically, Wal-Mart demonstrates that there is a popular demand for solutions to problems typically identified by leftists. As part of a broader culture of crisis operation, they remind us that there is a need for political action. Communistic capitalism is in a certain respect doing the mundane job of leftists by highlighting the negative effects of capitalism on people and planet. The principal point though that capital can never make is the dialectical one about the internal relations that show why capitalist ethics is indeed a myth, a point that needs drawing out in the communistic lifestyle practices embodied, proselytised and publicised by certain individuals.

The Beavanites

Antonio Gramsci coined the phrase organic intellectual to describe the segments of certain classes or groups that stand for or embody a general position either hegemonic or counter-hegemonic. They are not intellectuals in the scholarly sense but rather in the talking heads sense: the kind today that shares its opinion on current affairs programmes. Richard Branson is an organic intellectual of a hegemonic left-liberal ideology. But there are also those from the lower classes who do their bit of authenticating the ideology through actions and lifestyles promoted to others. A hegemonic power operates via consensus possible only if there is an option for dissent; the image-communism signals the incorporation of what could be described as staged dissent, such as that embodied in the lifestyles that concerned citizens adopt and promote to others. According to Žižek:

The exemplary figures of evil today are not ordinary consumers who pollute the environment and live in a violent world of disintegrating social links, but those who, while fully engaged in creating the conditions for such universal devastation and pollution, buy their way out of their own activity, living in gated communities, eating organic food, taking holidays in wildlife preserves, and so on. (2008: 23)

Taken at face value, this statement supports an ideologically indeterminate viewpoint by implicating anyone who buys an organic produce, recycles a bottle

or cycles into work rather than driving a car. The ‘ordinary’ consumer is just as if not *more* guilty according to such a logic than the capitalist firm they purchase ‘ethical’ and ‘ecological’ goods from. The missing qualification is that the ‘worst’ offenders in authenticating the ideology are those who embody *and* proselytise it either as a solution or means simply to ameliorate whatever conditions are being enacted on. Colin Beavan – ‘No Impact Man’ – is an exemplary figure of such ‘evil’.

The no impact project ‘not-for-profit’ environmental group has a mission ‘to empower citizens to make choices which better their lives and lower their environmental impact through lifestyle change, community action, and participation in environmental politics’. Colin Beavan, the self-defined ‘No Impact Man’⁶, fronts the enterprise. He wrote a blog, published a book and made a film chronicling ‘his family’s year-long experiment living a zero-waste lifestyle in New York’. The website contains tips on how to live a sustainable life, campaign tools and information on public events. By relying on the very materials, infrastructure, tools, appliances and so forth that enable such lifestyles, in this case ‘sustained’ for just a year, Beavan illustrates the absurdity of such gestures. It also illustrates that knowledge of environmental degradation or, in a different register, poverty and extreme exploitation, does not necessarily coincide with an understanding of structural relations. Sometimes people really do believe that products magically appear on shelves, houses pop up from nowhere and Fairtrade products are teleported to their destination.

A now established genre of popular books that in various ways denounce capitalism reinforces the ideology⁷, providing the ‘shock’ statistics, vignettes and general information on the cycles of production. They typically propose solutions that invariably involve some kind of change of lifestyle and the call for governments and corporations to adopt more ethical and sustainable codes of practice, perhaps through popular pressure. It is a message that is ideologically consistent with the aforementioned in that the solution is still ultimately in the cause. The No Impact Man type is embodied in the everyday practices of well-meaning individuals who self-consciously reinforce the ethical and eco-myth to friends, family and colleagues. He is embodied in sociologists such as Ulrich Beck, John Urry and Anthony Giddens who identify in the ‘self-reflexive’ businesses, CEOs and consumers the potential for a managed solution to climate change. A Marxist negative hermeneutics should first and foremost demythologise communicability at the everyday level and the ideologies that lend

6 See <http://noimpactproject.org>.

7 *The story of stuff* (2010), *The Wal-Mart effect* (2011) and *Confessions of an eco-sinner* (2008) are popular examples of this genre.

credence to the ethical and ecological efficacy of everyday practices. For it is at the everyday level where the ideology has become embedded and thereby 'invisible'. The positive is in the exception, what such ethics circulate around and founder on.

Conclusion

The essay has examined the denotive power of the uncanny communism of communism. It is the image of a superficially communism-friendly capitalism exemplified by Richard Branson, Wal-Mart and 'No Impact Man'. The impossibility of ethics for both business and the individuated individual binds the two in a schizoid relationship, negating and reinforcing the ideology of the other.

The 'duped' buys into the myth, the cynic pours scorn at the dupe snatching her own piece of *jouissance* by refusing to recycle or whatever. In one way or another we are all interpellated into 'resisting' capitalism by enacting on the common sense image from which communism is constructed. Perhaps the only way out of this is to adopt the position of 'enlightened false-consciousness', to know the fallacy yet do it anyway with the qualification of proselytising and where possible acting on the need for self-conscious and collective revolutionary action. The critique should centre not on the practice as such but on the ideology that supports it. Critiquing the ideology rather than taking a moral stance against the individual, whether for embracing or 'resisting' the myth, is the first step in formulating and putting into practice a properly ethical response to the problem such gestures disavow. It is a refusal of the question of whether to support such gestures, a question that only makes sense when capitalism is naturalised.

Communism is the communism appropriated from the left. The efficacy of the sign lies in the kernel of truth that the left needs to recover. Communist capitalism prepares the ground for such a recovery signalling the limit of what capital can ideologically appropriate from the left without causing its own demythologisation. Hegemonic in scope, embedded in everyday life, brushing against the 'real' cause without quite connecting with it, ideology as a distorting force has reached the limit of what it can register. Positively, the ideology indicates a humanist normativity that may just serve as a bulwark against fascism as administrations lurch ever closer to a more authoritarian form of control. Positively, those at the top who proselytise ethical capitalism indicate that there may well be divisions within the bourgeois class that the left at some stage may itself be able to exploit (revolutions depend on such divisions).

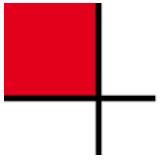
references

- Adorno, T. and M. Horkheimer (1997) *Dialectic of enlightenment*. London: Verso.
- Badiou, A. (2008) *The meaning of Sarkozy*. London: Verso.
- Barthes, R. (2009) 'Rhetoric of the image', in S. Hall and J. Evans, (eds.) *Visual culture: A reader*. London: Sage.
- Branson, R. (2011) *Screw business as usual*. London: Virgin Books.
- Cremin, C. (2011) *Capitalism's new clothes: Enterprise, ethics and enjoyment in times of crisis*. London: Pluto Press.
- Cremin, C. (2012) *iCommunism*. Hants: Zero Books.
- Fishman, C. (2011) *The Wal-Mart effect*. London: Penguin.
- Jameson, F. (2002) *The political unconscious*. London: Routledge.
- Jameson, F. (2010) 'Utopia as method, or the uses of the future', in M. Gordin, H. Tilley and G. Prakash (eds.) *Utopia/dystopia: Conditions of historical possibility*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Leonard, A. (2010) *The story of stuff: How our obsession with stuff is trashing the planet, our communities, and our health – and a vision for change*. London: Constable.
- Pearce, F. (2008) *Confessions of an eco-sinner: Tracking down the sources of my stuff*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Rancière, J. (2009) *The emancipated spectator*. London: Verso.
- Sacks, O. (1986) *The man who mistook his wife for a hat*. London: Picador.
- Wolff, R.P., B. Moore and H. Marcuse (1969) *A critique of pure tolerance*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Žižek, S. (2008) *Violence*. London: Profile Books.

the author

Colin Cremin is senior lecturer in sociology at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. He is the author of *Capitalism's new clothes: Enterprise, ethics and enjoyment in times of crisis*, published with Pluto Press in 2011, and *iCommunism*, published with Zero Books in 2012. He is currently working on a new book entitled *Eros and apocalypse: The excessive subject and the excesses of capitalism*, forthcoming with Pluto Press.

Email: c.cremin@auckland.ac.nz



Common as silence

Peter Fleming

All this – all the meanness and agony without end
I sitting look out upon
See, hear and am silent.

- Walt Whitman, 'I Sit and Look'

I.

Is something changing in the way neoliberalism is being refused today? And if so, for better or worse? Two recent events indicate something is going on. In the late summer of 2011, the streets of London were ablaze. After the police shot and killed Mark Duggin in the north of the city one warm afternoon, a large gathering of concerned citizens assembled outside the local police station. Feelings between them and the Tottenham constabulary had been tense for some time, and this appeared to be the final straw. The gathering was met with police hostility, and all out violence ensued. The dispute spread throughout the city and other major UK centres, including Manchester and Birmingham. A good majority of those involved were younger people, in their teens, and proficient in the art of self-organization.

On the surface, such unrest is not that surprising. Like other large cities marked by excessive wealth inequalities and manufactured deprivation, London has long been prone to street fighting of this sort, as E. P. Thompson (1963) records in his history of the English working class. And as the media started to report on the events, the customary question emerged almost immediately. *Why are they doing this? What is their rationale? What are they trying to achieve?* In the conservative press, typical scorn about ungrateful welfare recipients abound. The looting was opportunistic, symptomatic of a 'Broken Britain' whose light touch on unsocial

behaviour was now bearing fruit. On the other side of the coin, the liberal media gave more socio-economic explanations about ‘alienated youth’, education cuts, exclusion and poverty.

Both sides, of course, missed the point. One of the most striking aspects of these revolts was the outward representative *silence* of those involved – especially regarding their rationale, purpose, objectives, etc. Official voice was solely the preserve of the middle class media, policy pundits, and moralists. And this silence confused the government and its hired ‘experts’ profoundly. When pressed to communicate the programme motivating their behaviour, no representative or leader emerged to speak, no charter was delivered. Apart from the dramatic demolition of their own disenfranchised conditions, only a taciturn withdrawal from the machinery of dialogue was evident.

Braving the second night of arson attacks and unrest, I wandered through my East London neighbourhood eager to discover ‘their’ side of the story. Many of the young people I approached were courteously disinterested in my ‘inquiries’ as they regrouped around a large supermarket. I too was met with mute non-recognition. Of course, this did not mean that they were not talking among themselves, planning and deliberating on the nature of their refusal. A rich stratum of communication was patently apparent. But when encouraged by power to account for their actions the mood decidedly changed. It was as if a secret compact had been made: best to remain opaque rather than gift to David Cameron et al. what they so fervently sought: *their voice*.

2.

And didn’t this silence also frustrate many observers in 2011 when Wall Street was occupied, then Zuccotti Park, and then so many other privatized public spaces including St. Paul’s in London? Commentators on the Left and Right were perplexed: What do they want? What is their alternative? We ask them, but they seem to have no workable plan. They don’t even seem to be interested in making a plan. And so on. Of course, there were many experts at hand ready to speak on the occupier’s behalf. Even Bill Clinton and Slavoj Žižek got in on the act. Inside the movement, of course, much debate and dialogue was pivotal for its mobilization. Assemblies were held, political concepts debated and new modes of democratic self-organization tested. But a curious structural silence prevailed (it was enough to simply state, ‘we are the 99%’ ... we are you). This reticence was no more evident than when called upon by the extreme neoliberal apparatus (the corporate-state alliance) to testify, to represent, to deliver a policy, a point-by-point charter of demands. Spray-painted on a wall in East London (Norton Folgate

Street), the anonymous reply to this invitation was borrowed from the streets of Paris '68: *We ask nothing, we will demand nothing, we will take, we will occupy.*

What is the logic of this silence? How does it function in the context of what some call 'extreme neoliberalism', and why does it appear at the present juncture? The first point we must observe is that this refusal to represent is not itself internally (or externally) bereft of words or expression. In fact, the exact opposite. The Occupy Movement, for example, was a swarming din of tactics, alternatives and molecular moments of collective exchange. It just chose not to talk to power, especially in the manner that power wanted them to. Occupiers refused to enter into the discursive mirror game that is now governing so much liberal discourse. The erstwhile radical clarion call to be 'recognized' (Habermas, Honneth, etc.) is here displaced by what we might term a *post-recognition politics*. Many are now suspicious about 'participation' and 'being counted'. Recognition by the powerful is just another way of being sucked back into a one-sided arrangement, crippling compromises and pointless commitments. The refusal to be recognized might therefore convey a kind of social preservation. As Kolowratnik and Miessen (2012) conclude, to wake up from the 'nightmare of participation' means reclaiming the means of self-defence.

Perhaps, then, neoliberal power is not merely maintained today by too few words, but too many words to the wrong people. When we speak to the manager, the teacher, the police officer, the bureaucrat, even transgressively, we are identified once more, fixed within a constellation that will never accept the preconditions of what this voice means. What Moten and Harney (2012) call 'managed self-management' functions via a plethora of accounts (to be accountable), responses (to be responsible) and reports (to be reportable). Hence a confusing paradox: 'Today nobody can hear you over the noise of talk' (Moten and Harney, 2012: 359).

And yet... so much silence. Why would we want to theorize it, practice it, conserve it, use it, strategize it, share it, enrich it or occupy it? I want to experiment with the idea that silence might be suggestive of an emergent kind of sub-commons, no doubt transitory, but crucially collective. Its commonality is founded on the shared misgiving that the neoliberal project now gains sustenance from any kind of communicative participation between it and 'the 99%'. In its last dying stage of development, corporate hegemony even welcomes critical discourse into its language game, as long as it abides by prefixed rules. Accordingly, I want to propose that the silent commons is anything but reserved quietude or fearful seclusion. At the present juncture at least, in which a myopic economic formalism has colonized so many modes of social representation,

mute opacity in the face of an invitation to 'participate' might tilt towards something transversal, truly communal and classless.

3.

This outward aphasia, of course, has incited much talk among the powerful who thrive on representation, the frustrated liberal Left and the tired office worker who sees no 'underlying principle' behind their disrupted commute. From an analytical point of view, moreover, theorists also tend to view political non-speech with consternation. When it comes to the functioning of power and social domination, is not silence a synonym for secrecy and agenda setting? And on the other side of the coin: consent, capitulation and fear?

This *anti-silence* stance is certainly understandable from the point of view of the neoliberal agenda, which would love nothing more than to have us enter its discourse and squirm using its words. However, non-representability is also viewed with deep suspicion among those interested in post-capitalist projects. Silence in the political sphere usually points to some kind of grievous *lack*. That is to say, the refusal to speak is the ultimate emblem of powerlessness. What unites a good deal of contemporary liberal and radical thinking today is the premise that one must be able to volubly express in order to resist. And is not this a reasonable assumption? Those deprived of voice, rendered speechless before the law pose a double travesty. Silence not only indicates a) the sheer enormity of an individual's or group's oppression (since for Anne Frank in her secret attic or Winston Smith in Orwell's *Nineteen eighty four*, speaking would surely equal death); but also b) a dangerous opportunity for the oppressors themselves to speak on the behalf of the silenced. The circle of power is thus closed.

The case against silence has antecedents in the pro-recognition politics forged in the US. The influential 'community power debates' during the 1960s are illustrative here. C. Wright Mills among others revealed how elites partially manage populations by erasing certain issues from public discourse – especially those that might reveal hypocritical truths (Lukes, 2005). The cold war context undoubtedly inspired some of these observations. A key tool of totalitarian societies consists of regulating the very words used (and not used) in everyday parlance. During the dark years of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, party officials hoped that manufactured non-signification would disappear the very thought alluded to by the word. Comrade Beria knew of the magical power of discourse in carving up the social world as well as any contemporary post-structuralist. Who could ever forget those wonderful propaganda posters picturing a stern peasant

woman, forefinger pressed to her lips: 'Keep your mouth shut! Yabbering goes hand in hand with treason!'

But is deficit the only component of public silence or might it have strengths of its own? This is the problem Jean Baudrillard grapples with in his book *In the shadow of the silent majorities* (2007). He argues that the social – or its living modes of representation *apropos* class, peoples, cultures, nations, etc. – has been dissolved into a sheer single nothingness, only capable of being symbolized through the alienated abstractions of surveys and opinion polls. Silence 'despite it all' is now one of the most characteristic elements of this inscrutable mass. Behind the abstraction is a voiceless universe that merely soaks up, observes and sinks back into anonymous oblivion. The political index orientating this silence, however, is uncertain. On the one hand, it is symptomatic of a new constellation of dissent, one that emerges from a long (and fruitless) battle with the fetishizing principles of modernity. And this could well become 'an absolute weapon' (Baudrillard, 2007: 49) if its ironic signature disrupts the din of noisy talk in order lay the ground for a more transformative engagement with power.

On the other hand, however, Baudrillard argues that without any new and positive referents the silent majority will never gather enough explosive capacity to overcome its own negative content. In other words, Baudrillard insists we characterize the silent crowd as yet another instance of the oppressed failing to speak out. This makes them both refreshingly inaccessible to classical schemas – including emancipatory ones – but also perilously inert and pliant: 'the mass is dumb like beasts, and its silence is equal to the silence of beasts... its says neither whether the truth is to the left or to the right, nor whether it prefers revolution or repression... it is without conscience and without unconscious' (Baudrillard, 2007: 54). Because the silent majority is unreadable, a kind of codeless non-voice, it can never enter the lexicon of democratic exchange. It therefore absorbs the nothingness of its own non-existence, something encouraged by the neoliberal nullification of all imaginative alternatives.

4.

So, is there nothing salvageable in this silent majority for a post-capitalist project? I'm not sure. But we might begin by revisiting Marx and some of the most striking pages of *Capital* (1867/1972) where he gives graphic details of what factory work does to people – especially in the dark and dirty English workhouses of the early 19th century. The passages in 'The working day' (about overwork), 'The division of labour and manufacture' (about exploitation) and 'Machinery and large-scale industry' (about forced submission) are still remarkable in how

they depict the human misery underlying capitalist wealth production. But as Jameson (2011) argues in his recent rereading of *Capital*, something very strange is occurring here, which is essential to Marx's critique. As opposed to other reports on the horrors of life in the factory (or the coalmine, the nascent bureaucratic offices emerging at the time, etc.), Marx consistently refuses to describe hired labour power as living, breathing people. Even in the most disturbing sections, a worker's singular anguish must remain secondary to the whirl of a nonfigurative process.

Dickens breathes life into his workers so that we might identify with their predicament. The Utopian Socialists wrap them in effusive sentiment to shed light on the dreadfulness of their lives. Marx remains stubbornly stone cold (except, of course, for the amusing side jokes, ironic quips and references to Shakespearian literature in the footnotes). Jameson (2011) highlights this strange paradox, since the 'Bible of Labour' ultimately leaves its humanity mysteriously unrepresented. Why is this? According to Jameson, this is fundamentally necessary if Marx is to remain faithful to his understanding of capitalist exploitation. To imbue work with human qualities would fudge the reality of the labour process, inadvertently (and ideologically) transporting us 'outside of the realm of capital, which is not in the lived qualities of work as such, but only its quantity and the surplus values to be extracted' (Jameson, 2011: 112). Abstract labour cannot speak, for it is strictly lifeless, formalized dead time. It is only when the *impossibility* of the capital accumulation process appears – overworked bodies collapsing, overproduction of commodities, unsustainable immiseration – that individual personages with singular histories are allowed to emerge in *Capital*. This sort of 'vanishing point' of impossibility is essentially extraneous to the accumulation process, but more importantly, indicative of something preceding the dominance of dead time (i.e., the social surplus of living labour).

This thematic of impossibility is so central to Marx's analysis that hired labour power must remain mute if it is not to be crowned with the false virtues of bourgeois reconciliation. A silent workforce remains truthful to what it is, a conscious bearer of an unfeasible world. To speak to the boss or manager would participate in the fantasy that some kind of life under capitalism might be viable after all, blinding us to its untenable nature. This point was well understood by activists during the May '68 événements, especially the Situationist International. Public dialogue had to be approached with extreme caution. Otherwise it might sanctify an outmoded way of life. Meaningful anti-capitalist protest can therefore only be instigated in the idiom of a voiced impossibility. More recently, we saw this during the French *banlieues* riots in November 2005. As some astute commentators put it, 'the rioters didn't demand anything, they attacked their own condition, they made everything that produces and defines

them a target' (Théorie Communiste, 2012: 49). In other words, it was their very own impossibility that spoke with bricks and fire.

It is here that Vaneigem (2001) points to the combative elements of silence:

our freedom is that of an abstract temporality in which we are named in the language of power, with choice left to us to find officially recognized synonyms for ourselves. In contrast, the space of our authentic realization (the space of everyday life) is under the dominion of silence. There is no name to name the space of lived experience. (2001: 56)

Any naming would betray the unworkable social existence that currently passes for 'living' under capitalist conditions. Moreover, like a governmental 'consultation meeting' that invites many perspectives to legitimate an authoritarian decision already made, the form kills the content. Why so? First, addressing power (even critically) perpetuates the mistaken notion that this power has not reduced us to nothing (i.e., abstract, dead labour). And this gifts capitalism certain synergies with life, something it doesn't deserve. Second, the post-capitalist moment embedded in abstract labour's own impossibility is forsaken since the crisis becomes over-coded through its very relation to the enemy. Hence the event's closure, delivered back to us as an inescapable *post-limit* that becomes purely self-referential, without end or *coda*. In rather crass terms, think here of the stockbroker wearing a 'Capitalism sucks' t-shirt with an image of V.I Lenin giving the finger.

5.

A society based purely on neoliberalism wouldn't last a day. Not even an hour. Due to its anti-social tenets, it cannot reproduce itself on its own terms and thus requires something beyond its remit to continue. This is how we must define 'the social' today, a communist underbelly that both absorbs the shocks of extreme capitalism and provides the living sustenance it needs (the creative commons, knowledge sharing, non-market ways of life, co-operative mutual aid, etc.). Henceforth, living labour can be conceptualised as something autonomous to the datum of capital accumulation since the latter could never exist in a world that perfectly reflected its own principles. Neoliberalism persists despite itself and needs to cultivate ways of gaining our recognition, our attention and interest. Speaking to power in this parasitical setting, even critically, thus risks granting it something, implying worth to the addressee. Perhaps this is why emergent political movements are so hesitant about entering into dialogue with the corporation, the state, the military, etc. From the enigmatic provocations of The Invisible Committee to the anti-work co-operatives in the largest cities of Europe

and the Americas, it is *exit* or ‘opting out’ (Jones, 2012) that appears to be galvanizing democratic praxis. But what does ‘exit’ mean here and how is it related to radical silence?

Hobbes’ ghost still haunts us. Even much critical inquiry still thinks the Master makes the (albeit exploitative) world in which the Slave dwells. *Corporations rule the world. The state is still the ultimate director. Fight the cuts! The only thing worse about having a job is the thought of not having one, of being abandoned by power. Yes, it’s harmful, but without capitalism there would be no aeroplanes, penicillin or internet!* These curious presumptions echo the Slave’s belief that they are nothing without their Master. Much of Bauman’s (2004) recent work, for example, exemplifies this rationale. He deplores the millions of ‘wasted lives’ spat out by the global production/consumption system since they have been truly abandoned. To be forgotten by power, according to this line of thought, is the same as having no power. Even in more radical circles, the same logic is subtly present. Whether power lies in the means of production, the state or the private enterprise, it must be seized and turned towards non-capitalist ends. For this to occur we must first be recognized as important players in the statist game of *realpolitik*.

Others, however, are rethinking this Hobbesian model of power and resistance. Instead of struggling for recognition, a kind of post-recognition politics is animating the disparate refusal movement (for an overview see Fleming, 2012). It is underpinned by a new understanding of corporate and statist hegemony, one that doesn’t gift it so many constitutive powers. The corporation and private property do not create value or wealth. We do, often working around the rules of neoliberal property rights. Innovations and inventions are more often developed *despite* private property rights and commodification (Perelman, 2002). It’s the corporation that resists, not workers. In the realm of employment studies, it is astounding how many employees in large enterprise complain about how *useless* or superfluous most management is. The boss gets in the way more than anything else. This is because capitalist enterprises were never designed to be functional social systems. They are first and foremost *class structures* – highly irrational machines of capture that seldom ‘work’ for majority involved. Old-school pro-business writers are funny in this regard because they thought management was about achieving common objectives. Take these first impressions of a worried researcher studying a well-known US plant in the 1950s:

Management is so preoccupied with its efforts to establish control over the workers, that it loses sight of the presumed purpose of the organization. A casual visitor to the plant might indeed be surprised to learn that its purpose was to get out production. Certainly, if it had been possible to enforce some of the rules

described... the result would have been a slowing down of production. (Whyte, 1955: 65-66)

What makes this excerpt so amusing is that Whyte naively assumes he is witnessing 'bad management'. In truth, he is giving a fairly accurate definition of it in most situations under class conditions. For there is nothing 'common' in the capitalistic endeavour. This is why most of us find it so bewilderingly stupid. In this sense, the corporate form must logically *follow* rather than compose the social common that actually works around it. The neoliberal enterprise accentuates this logic as it encloses the massive amount of social wealth it simply cannot engender on its own terms. That is why it appears so unnecessarily.

Maybe now silence and exit are contiguous forces. Hardly anyone today fears being abandoned by power. That would be a blessing. No. What really frightens us is the idea of being included, forced to participate in an unwinnable mirror game with the Master. To make matters worse, the Master is now diffuse and increasingly difficult to identify. Lolowratnik and Miessen (2012) encapsulate this in their analysis of the nightmare of participation. From rightwing community liaison meetings, to the consultative 'listening exercises' of multinational firms, to team building meetings in the postmodern workplace – the new injunction is to enter a parasitical domain... and speak. Its objective, of course, is to render one's voice truly silent, profoundly impotent. Here, we might think of the self-serving logic of former US president George W. Bush when he declared that he was technically vindicated by the millions of protesters opposing his policies since it proved his commitment to free-speech.

Some critical elements of this *radical silence* can be traced back to Foucault's (1997; 2011) far-reaching insights regarding how biopower grips us in neoliberal societies. In an interview conducted in 1982 he suggests that silence can be grasped as a political weapon only when voice loses its disruptive content, overcoded by a reductive form (religious settings, bourgeois mannerisms, fake parliamentary exchange, etc.). Whatever we say in these settings, no matter however seditious, merely reinforces its totalizing setting. No proper rupture is possible. The speaking subject is also the subject of the statement, as Foucault (1976) famously cautioned. An obvious example is the catholic confessional, but so too is the frenetic compulsion to speak under liberalism and now, neo-liberalism (also see Foucault, 2011). There is undoubtedly an aspect of flippancy in the philosopher's remarks: 'Silence might be a much more interesting way of having a relation with people' (Foucault, 1997: 122). The tone, however, belies the seriousness of his investigations at the time. This becomes evident (in English, at least) in his last set of annual lectures entitled *Courage of truth* (Foucault, 2011).

Towards the end of his life, Foucault returned to ancient Greek thought in order to conceptually reassemble something like a pre-disciplinary subject. There is no romanticism or nostalgia here, but a strategic reinvention of techniques that might allow us to fight an enemy that has been inserted into our everyday subjectivity. As Hardt (2010) points out, this is especially important in the biopolitical era where economic optimalization is seemingly indistinguishable from 'life itself'. This is why, according to Foucault, biopower operates unlike anything we have seen before. Its currency is permanent visibility, binding us to a strange talking-person-machine or what the neoclassical economist Gary Becker preferred to call 'human capital'. And perhaps this is also why personal authenticity is so salient in recent management ideology: 'what is unique about *you*, what makes *you* stand out and how can it be enhanced, used and traded?' But what happens when human capital replies? Not unlike Marx's factory worker of yesteryear, it camouflages its own impossibility, having us believe that abstract labour might somehow 'have a life'.

Any kind of visibility in a biopolitical clearing, no matter how radical and subversive, can reconnect us to the machinic flows we are all keen to escape. Perhaps what Foucault (2011: 17) calls 'structural silence' is 'wise' because it points to social goods lying beyond the operative grid of neoliberal sociality (although he does not explicitly say so, it's obvious that the philosophical inspiration for this argument comes from 'The child with the mirror' in Nietzsche's *Thus spoke Zarathustra*). And if silence provides a space for inscrutable communication, then might it not also engender linkages of solidarity with those who have already awoken from the nightmare of work?

6.

The silent common is more than a reclamation of dignity 'despite everything' (see Foucault, 2011). Neither is it a kind of stylized politics, since that too is exactly what the unstated majoritarian now seeks to break away from. It's more a turning away from power. Again, in order to conceptualize this, we have to purge our analysis of any Hobbsian presuppositions. Rather than picturing the labouring majority as tragically dependent upon (yet systematically excluded from) an unfair institutional edifice that for better or worse produces worlds, we ought to reverse the scenario. Capitalism is a pure subtraction that feeds on modes of life struggling to supersede the stupidity of private property, timetables and an obsession with pointless jobs. Now we can appreciate why so many are currently refusing to recognize or be recognized by power. Silence here does not aim to send a signal to capitalism (i.e. a moment of aplomb amidst adversity, etc.). Nor does it attempt to bamboozle its maps of domination by remaining

mute amidst violent demands for our acknowledgment. It is more like a background ‘after image’ that flares up as we turn our backs on a world of useless work... and disappear. Non-signification is all that remains once the bio-proletariat escapes back into life.

If such inscrutability takes anything from the lexicon of power, then perhaps it is the one device that private property has always used to terrorize those who have nothing to sell but their labor power: *repossession*. The coming bio-proletariat turns away from an economized ‘life itself’ to auto-valorize what is currently being harvested for capitalistic ends: our social intelligence, open co-operation and artisanal inventiveness (also see Pasquinelli, 2008; Shukaitis, 2009). Silence is all that remains following its disentanglement from corporate capture, when our socially determined ‘free work’ (that capitalism is so dependent upon) is truly *freed* from a parasitical system and rendered collective once again. Not in any weird survivalist sense ala *How to disappear in America* (2008) or isolated bourgeois individualism. These types of escape merely reflect what they negate. What we might call a new workers’ repossession movement takes back what it already is, leaving a moribund and self-destructive ossification behind it. From the viewpoint of neoliberal reason, silence, invisibility and exit are now synonymous. From the perspective of living labour, of course, speaking can resume once more.

7.

A final instance of common silence might be posited. An important aspect of the biopolitical terrain of contemporary work is the way it has assumed a ‘gaseous’ form, rendering obsolete traditional divisions like work time/free time, public/private or fixed/variable capital. Deleuze (1992) hints at this in his essay ‘Postscript on the societies of control’. The ideology of ‘human capital’ seeks to spread the logic of work throughout the entire social body like a kind of virus. We find it invading our dreams (Lucas, 2009), our putative free time (Gregg, 2011) our social inventiveness (Michel, 2012) and even our desire to escape (McGuigan, 2009). As a result, our relationship to work has changed substantially. Unlike the factory of yesteryear where we could disappear from it upon checking out, now we *are* the job – 24/7. The irony, of course, is that like neoliberalism, this ideology of work only functions through the social ‘other’ it cannot provide on its own accord, and would immediately halt if it got what it really wanted.

But when work aspires to capture everything about us – transcending the old vertical boundaries (i.e. ruling and subordinate classes) and horizontal divisions (i.e., occupational differentiation, work and non-work) – a new universal

emerges. Unlike preceding eras of capitalist accumulation, labor's lament is just as likely to be heard among perversely salaried bankers as it is with lowly call-centre workers. Since the curse of work is now detached from its material moorings and is inserted inside all of us as something properly concrete, its malaise becomes generalized and bodily. This is why the line in the sand today is no longer only between labor and capital but *capital and life*. And this shifts the nature of its power and the co-ordinates of its social refusal, as Tiqqun note:

Historical conflict no longer opposes two massive molar heaps, two classes – the exploited and the exploiters, the dominant and the dominated, managers and workers – among which, in every individual case, one could differentiate. The front line no longer cuts through the middle of society; it runs through the middle of each of us. (2011: 12)

The crucial question that follows is thus: how might this commonality be articulated and assigned a shared value as a new universal moment? For when we enter the sphere of discursive exchange, the old divisions invariably appear again, categories and distances that are rightly perceived to be unbridgeable. What words could ever forge a bond between a white corporate banker and a Sudanese nighttime cleaner? Here, we might return one last time to Baudrillard's (2007) essay on the silent majority. The death of the social is marked by the decline of important referents, representations and objectifications. The diffuse, decentred and molecular nature of late capitalism fuels the multitude's silence, and, for Baudrillard, highlights its ultimate impotence. But can we also draw something more positive from this collective non-signification, something like a shared acknowledgement of what work has made us all become? Furthermore, if there are no words to convey this communal predicament without again artificially isolating ourselves from ourselves and others, could the silent majority in fact point to an emergent nonfigurative common? A shared turning away from neoliberal capitalism, a massive evacuation from its predicates and fantasies?

references

- Anonymous, (2008) *How to disappear in America*. New York: Leopard Press.
- Baudrillard, J. (2007) *In the shadow of the silent majority*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Bauman, Z. (2004) *Wasted lives*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1992) 'Postscript on the societies of control', *October*, 59(Winter): 3-7.
- Fleming, P. (2012) 'The birth of "biocracy" and its discontents in the workplace', *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*, 35: 205-228.
- Foucault, M. (1976) *History of sexuality, volume one: An introduction*, trans. R. Hurley. London: Penguin.

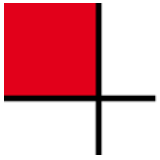
- Foucault, M. (1982/1997) 'Michel Foucault: An interview with Stephen Riggins', in P. Rainbow (ed.) *Michel Foucault. Ethics: Subjectivity and truth. Essential works of Foucault 1954-1984, volume one*. New York: Penguin.
- Foucault, M. (2011) *The courage of truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983-1984*. London: Palgrave.
- Gregg, M. (2011) *Work's intimacy*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Hardt, M. (2010) 'Militant life', *New Left Review*, 64: 151-160.
- Jameson, F. (2011) *Representing capital. A reading of volume one*. London: Verso.
- Jones, B.E. (2012) *Women who opted out*. New York: New York University Press.
- Kolowratnik, N.V. and M. Miessen (2012) *Waking up from the nightmare of participation*. Utrecht: Expodium.
- Lucas, R. (2010) 'Dreaming in code', *New Left Review*, 62: 125-132.
- Lukes, S. (2005) *Power: A radical view*, 2nd edition. London: Macmillan.
- Marx, K. (1867/1972) *Capital, volume one*. London: Penguin.
- McGuigan, J. (2009) *Cool capitalism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Michel, A. (2012) 'Transcending socialization: A nine-year ethnography of the body's role in organizational control and knowledge workers transformation', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 56(3): 325-368.
- Moten, F. and S. Harney (2012) 'Blackness and governance', in P.T. Clough and C. Willse (eds.) *Beyond biopolitics: Essays on the governance of life and death*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (2003) *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books.
- Pasquinelli, M. (2008). *Animal spirits: A bestiary of the commons*. Rotterdam/Amsterdam: NAI Publishers and the Institute of Network Cultures.
- Perelman, M. (2002) *Steal this idea: Intellectual property rights and the corporate confiscation of creativity*. New York: Palgrave.
- Shukiatis, S. (2009) *Imaginal machines: Autonomy & self-organization in the revolutions of everyday life*. New York: Autonomedia.
- The Invisible Committee (2009) *The coming insurrection*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Théorie Communiste (2012) 'Communization in the present tense', in B. Noys (ed.) *Communization and its discontents*. New York: Autonomedia.
- Thompson, E.P. (1963) *The making of the English working class*. London: Penguin Books.
- Tiqun (2011) *This is not a program*, trans. D. Jordan. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Vaneigem, R. (2001) 'Totality for kids', in *Dark Star* (eds.) "Beneath the paving stones": Situationists and the Beach, May 1968. New York: AK Press.
- Whyte, W.F. (1955) *Money and motivation*. New York: Harper and Row.

the author

Peter Fleming is Professor of Business and Society at Cass Business School, City University, London. His research focuses on the changing nature of workplace politics, especially in the context of neoliberalism in crisis. His recent books include *Dead man working* (Zero, 2012) and *The end of corporate social responsibility* (Sage, 2013). His new

book *Why work? The corporatization of life and its discontents* is out in 2014 with Temple University Press.

E-mail: Peter.Fleming.1@city.ac.uk



Recomposing precarity: Notes on the laboured politics of class composition

Stevphen Shukaitis

In *Precarious rhapsody* (2009) Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi argues that autonomous political movements in Italy in 1977 marked an important turning point in moving beyond modernity with its concomitant trends of progressive modernisation and class conflict as the driving motor of social transformation. Putting aside the epochal claims contained in this claim it is interesting to reflect on the role played by the notion of precarity in this description¹. Berardi describes a moment in February 1977 when at the occupation of the University of Rome the head of the Communist Party, while attempting to give a speech, was thrown off campus by the students. Rejecting the party’s politics, in particular its almost exclusive focus on the wage earning industrial working class, the students shouted, ‘we are all precarious’. Berardi concludes that the students did not realise how correct they were. Over the subsequent years precarity has moved from what was then considered a marginal phenomenon, and one which was often held to be quite desirable (as a form of escape from the dictates of permanent wage labour in industry), to a much more central dynamic of neoliberal labour markets. Post-war social welfare programs were rolled back, and the presumed stability of employment has been undercut by massive increases in what used to be referred to as ‘non-standard’ forms of work such as temporary contracts and project based work. Similarly, in more recent years, the question of precarity has moved from one of marginal importance to a much more debated area within political and theoretical debates.

1 The protest movement that Berardi describes in some ways seems quite similar to the tactics and approach of the recent occupation movements (or of the global justice movement) in a rejection of fixed party structures, a focus on joyful convergences in the streets, and a heavy focus on media politics.

While in the English speaking world precarity more or less disappeared from the lexicon during the 1980s, it re-emerged in the late 1990s as sections of the anti-globalisation movement turned to it as a catalyst for developing a new radical politics of everyday life. Since then it has risen in status as an area of academic inquiry and research, from a point only several years ago where a declared interest as an area of research could be met with the objection ‘that’s not a word’ to a slew of new publications as well as seminars and conferences funded by impressively acronym-ed research bodies². Over the past year income inequality has been put back on the political agenda. But if today we are really all precarious, what does that tell us about what it means to be precarious? What conceptual or political clarity is brought to bear by the concept? What I want to argue in this review essay and provocation is that there is an ambivalence located in the core of precarity as a concept. It is a tension between precarity as a strategic, political concept emerging from the autonomist and post-workerist traditions of politics, and a more sociological or empirical focus on precarity as condition to be investigated. This tension sometimes plays out in productive ways, and at other times risks emptying the concept of meaning through being too open, too undetermined. To explore this tension I will look at two recent books that take up and develop the notion of precarity, albeit in somewhat different ways: first the recent work of Guy Standing, who approaches precarity coming out of a background of international NGO politics and advocacy of basic income, and then through the recent writings of Franco Barchiesi, who approaches precarity through of framework of labour historiography and inquiry closer to the concept’s political roots.

Enter the precariat

First let’s turn to *The precariat*, which as a work of social theory has taken the idea of precarity from the pages of anarchist magazines and into the pages of *The Guardian*. Standing works at the University of Bath and for years previously worked at the ILO. His previous research focused on questions of work and the advocacy of basic income, as well as questions of security, welfare and

2 To list just a few of the more notable ones: Ross (2009), Gill and Pratt (2008), Raunig et al. (2011). Previously activist publications dedicated issues to examining precarity including Greenpepper Magazine (2004), Mute Magazine (2005, 2006), and fibreculture (2005). In terms of militant research on precarity it is important to point towards the Precarity Web Ring, which is mostly now defunct (<http://precarity-map.net>) and the activities of the Precarious Workers Brigade (<http://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com>). Funding bodies that have started to fund research on precarity include the ESRC and the Carolina Asia Center. These examples are only some of the more obvious ones I’m aware of, there are surely far more currently existing.

citizenship. For better and worse this colours his approach to precarity. While his long-term experience with international labour organizing and NGO politics reduces the risk of seeing political developments as completely new and unprecedented, he is thus able to connect the areas he investigates with longer standing political questions. But this background also tends to lead Standing to approach precarity from an angle that departs from its political origins, although it is debatable whether that is necessarily a negative condition.

For Standing the precariat is primarily a class in the making. In perhaps more familiar Marxist terms it is a class in-itself but not yet one for-itself. And this is the crux of the political problem for Standing: what if the becoming of this incipient class does take the trajectory hoped for or desired? The word itself, precariat, is formed by combining precarity and the proletariat, but the combination of those words does not necessarily mean that its trajectory will take the same path or direction of the working class (although the development of working class politics frequently veers from outcomes that are expected of it by economists, party theorists, and union organizers alike). Standing's main concern is flagged up in the subtitle as the idea of the precariat as the *new dangerous class*, which is to say precarity as a condition that has more in common with the *Lumpenproletariat* than the traditional working class. The precariat is the global result of several decades of neoliberalism, with its constant calls for increasing the 'flexibility' of labour marks, i.e. outsourcing increased levels of risk and uncertainty on to workers and their families. It is a condition that embeds insecurity across social status levels. For Standing the defining characteristic is its lacks of job-related security, more so than the particular status accorded to the form of labour. This is the prime concern for Standing: precarity not just as a condition of labour today, but how the development of the precariat, which does not correspond to traditional political or class categories, can lead to political energies and developments that are not containable within a pluralist-liberal framework.

Standing orients his project around several key questions about the precariat: What is it? Why should we care about its growth? Why is it growing? Who is entering it? And where is the precariat taking us (2011: vii)? All of these are key questions, and Standing rightly points out that it is the last that is the most pressing. Standing argues that if the becoming-class form is not given a form of political expression and experience of agency it could exhibit a very real tendency to support reactionary, regressive political formations, which he characterises as a 'politics of inferno'. Against this he juxtaposes an argument for forging a new, mildly utopian form of politics, which he calls 'a politics of paradise' (although it sounds a bit like a reworked version of social democracy) to be taken up by politicians and civil society actors. But Standing is too clever, and sensible, to

simply fall back on the idea of reviving a social democratic agenda, or to invoke calls to civil society without appreciating the limitations they contain.

Standing uses a definition and understanding of the precariat roughly similar with how the concept has been developed within autonomous politics and organizing, but also expands upon it. Standing argues that there are two basic ways of defining what is meant by the precariat, namely, either as a distinctive socio-economic group, functioning along the lines of a Weberian ideal type category that can be mobilised for empirical work (and thus stated whether someone is or isn't in the precariat based upon a set of given criteria), and secondly as a political concept that fuses together a conception of precarity today with a class politics³. Throughout the book Standing moves back and forth between these two concepts, very much as such is often done in existing discussions about precarity. Standing expands his understanding of the precariat by defining it not in terms of class standing, but also class characteristics that go beyond an immediate position in the labour process. He argues the precariat is defined by these class characteristics, such as having minimal trust relationships with capital or the state, which makes it quite different from the position of what he refers to as the 'salarariat' (people with higher degrees of job, economic, and social security, typically paid an annual salary rather than more contingent forms of wage-based income). The precariat experiences few trusting human relationships, particularly work-based ones. Standing argues that this is not simply the rolling back of social welfare programs developed within this century, but rather the undermining of the trust that has evolved in long-term communities and their institutional frameworks. Infinite levels of flexibility do not just threaten job security, but 'jeopardise any sense of cooperation or moral consensus' (2011: 22).

Standing identifies how those finding themselves in precarious positions are caught within a situation which is increasingly hard to escape from, a 'precarity trap' that is intensified by erosion of community support: 'being in and out of temporary low-wage jobs does not build up entitlement to state or enterprise benefits, the person exhausts the ability to call on benefits provided by family and friends in times of need' (*ibid.*: 49). When the labour market becomes increasingly precarious, it produces negative effects in terms of time and income

3 For Standing the precariat has a 'truncated status' in the sense that it does not correspond to the previous social position of the proletariat where 'labour securities were provided in exchange for subordination and contingent loyalty, the unwritten deal underpinning welfare states', and does not map neatly on to any craft occupation status (2011: 8). In this sense Standing picks up on the popular discussions of precarity that use it to characterise not just labour conditions, but the growing uncertainty of conditions of life in late neoliberalism.

for those at the margins, including the expectations and demands of those who are the beneficiaries of social support measures that trap them in marginal positions. This provides an important counter argument to the idea that those who are out of work ‘simply need to get a job’ or that there are sufficient forms of social support available for those finding themselves kicked to the increasingly casualised sectors of the economy. A scepticism to taking a job, any available job, far from being the irrational attitude of ‘job snobbery’ appears much more sensible when taking into account that those taking up temporary jobs tend to lower annual incomes and longer-term earning than those who manage to weather unemployment longer for a better suited and better paying position.

For Standing this is especially a problem given that the public sector, which traditionally had been a bastion of stability, or at least higher levels of security or decent standards for labour, ‘is fast being turned into a zone of flexibility in which the precariat can grow’ (*ibid.*: 54). But the answer to this predicament is not simply more forms of job training or skills enhancement, which would traditionally be the fall back of a left liberal politics. Standing points out that for the precariat, finding itself in the thick of developments of technological and communicative labour, there is an ‘acceleration of occupational obsolescence’ where ‘the more trained you are, the more likely you are to become unskilled in your sphere of competence’ (*ibid.*: 124). Thus it is a problem of not just being as good as you were yesterday, but of having to constantly adjust to new standards of performance and expanding or shifting skill sets. This is why, paradoxically, ‘long-term employment can deskill’ (*ibid.*: 17) rather than be a space for the development of employees more highly valued for their experience. This condition can lead to varied reactions, from a frenzy of activity trying to upgrade skills or a feeling of dread because any course of action seems likely to fail eventually. Regardless of the response, Standing very justifiably points out that this creates something of an existential crisis for those who call for more training to address a lack of skills as the cause of economic insecurity, arguing that this ‘is not a social climate conducive to capability development; it is one of constant dissatisfaction and stress’ (*ibid.*: 124).

In this way Standing describes how precarity is not simply a contractual matter of job conditions, but a broader question where the intensification of labour through technological means and communication changes the very nature of the social fabric such that it is increasingly difficult to feel secure in any position. Precarity moves from a marginal concern sitting at the edge of the economy to one of itself defining features. In this way he seems to echo the arguments of Bifo (2009), who suggests that forms of immaterial labour and knowledge work, which have been much celebrated by the business press and autonomist theorists, have pathological side effects that prevent the emergence of a new form

of politics adequate to the current situation. For Bifo it is the lack of a common space of engagement, outside of the overwhelming flows of data and information, which prevents the emergence of new political compositions. Likewise Standing argues that the overwhelming levels of technological permeation tend to encourage a short term approach, which for the precariat 'could evolve into a mass incapacity to think long term, induced by the low probability of personal progress or building a career' (2011: 18). Information overload, along with difficulties of sorting useful information from the useless, is argued to lead to anger, anomie, anxiety, and alienation. All of which shows that that despite the precariat being immersed in the bleeding edge of developments in work and its governance at the same time finds that these dynamics block it from developing a sense of agency in those very dynamics. This is what underlies Standing's argument that the precariat is in the front ranks 'but it has yet to find the Voice to bring its agenda to the fore' (*ibid.*: vii) – and thus the question becomes what are the necessary conditions for the finding of this voice.

Like Bifo also Standing marks the emergence of the precariat in a context of politics after 1968, as defined by a rejection of industrial society and institutionally organized labour politics. He is aware of, and does to some degree engage with, more recent forms of political organizing focused on precarity, in particular Euro May Day. But Standing's engagement with them is somewhat varied and contradictory. At one level he wants to take these forms of formulating new political action seriously despite how they might seem to have little relevance to existing labour politics, noting for instance that their demands around free migration and basic income are far afield from traditional unionism. In this sense Standing's work very much acts as a bridge between worlds, trying to find common ground between different political perspectives that doubt the effectiveness or usefulness of other approaches. Despite this Standing still tends to have a somewhat sceptical attitude to these very movements, arguing that as a left libertarian political current they have 'yet to excite fear, or even interest, from those outside' and that most of the activities have been public displays of 'pride in precarious subjectivities' (*ibid.*: 3) rather than forms of concerted political action. They have been forms of protest which Standing rightly characterizes as 'anarchic and daredevilish' rather than 'strategic or socially threatening' (2011: 3), as if bravado and a daring theatrically oriented political imagination could not be part of a strategic orientation to politics. While this simultaneous desire to embrace these forms of protest politics and keep a distance might not make sense at first, ultimately it is core to Standing's approach. He wants to build upon the energies and importance he sees in a politics of precarity, but in the same way as these movements. This is why he regards a phenomenon such as Euro May Day as a precursor, bringing to light concerns that are quite important, but a precursor that needs to be superseded by being developed into a more mature

form of politics. Somewhat echoing the ideas of Eric Hobsbawm he describes the politics of precarity so far as the ‘activities of primitive rebels preceding the emergence of collective action’ and building upon that argues that ‘now is the time for bodies that represent the precariat on a continuing basis to bargain with employers, with intermediaries such as brokers and with government agencies most of all’ (*ibid.*: 167).

One might wonder why Standing argues there is such a need for developing new institutional or representational forms for the precariat. This argument is supported by his analysis of the dangers of what could happen if they were not to take place. Standing argues that the existing forms of institutional politics do not represent or speak to the interests of the precariat. The danger with this is that the existence of a growing population whose interests are not represented within the existing institutional political arrangements could easily find themselves rejecting those very institutions and seeking more radical alternatives that are not contained within these institutions. The precariat composes a population that Standing describes as ‘floating, rudderless and potentially angry’ and thus is ‘capable of veering to the extreme right or extreme left politically and backing populist demagoguery that plays on their fears or phobias’ (*ibid.*: 4). Standing’s argument, in essence, is that unless a new form of labour politics or unionism is developed to address the concerns of the precariat there is a high likelihood that a sizeable portion of the precariat could embrace a radicalism of a strain, such as a reactionary populism, that would be best avoided⁴. In short, that unless ‘mainstream parties offer the precariat an agenda of economic security and social mobility, a substantial part will continue to drift to the dangerous extreme’ (*ibid.*: 151). While Standing rejects a narrative that frames the precariat as victim, he nonetheless insists that it *cannot resist* demagogic calls to neo-fascist politics and the further destruction of social welfare measures (*ibid.*: 153). That is, unless a new progressive politics formed around renewed social security measures and benefit programs such as basic income, coupled with new forms of flexible institutional politics, are developed.

There is much to be said for Standings’ approach. It is one that is a solidly left liberal form of progressive politics that through taking precarity seriously manages to avoid seeing the precariat purely either as victims or as the new revolutionary subject. He makes some comments about areas that are quite suggestive but could use further elaboration, such as his relatively brief commentary on the shaping of precarity in China and the way that precarity is taking part in a redefining of our basic categories of experience such as time.

4 Strangely enough he doesn’t give nearly as much consideration to the idea that a left wing form of radicalism might be embraced as a result of growing precarity.

When he argues that as a counter-movement, ‘the precariat needs mechanisms to generate deliberative democracy’ (*ibid.*: 180), this seems like a sensible suggestion. It is not so far from what other left commentators have been calling for in different terms.

A ‘politics of the multitude’ or a call for ‘exodus’ likewise involves some consideration of new institutional forms, as well as developing rather the grammar of politics and networks. Standing is clearly not a Leninist, but the core of his project is in wanting to find the organizational and political form to move from an initial outburst of discontent among the precarious populations into something more durable, largely formed around demands for basic income. In short, it is a project of superseding these initial forms to develop this new ‘politics of paradise’ seemingly connected with a renewal of social movement unionism. Standing does not want to fall back on traditional unionism or welfare politics; he seems to know that the sell by date on them has passed. His is an approach that has learned much from anti-systemic movements, but he still wants a progressive strategy, albeit one that takes a new form. While the demand for basic income, and the call for deliberative democracy, might in some ways be quite sensible responses to what his analysis of the current situation suggest, they lack the imaginative flair and radicality to inspire continued struggles against and through precarity.

Precarious labour, precarious liberation

A common critique of the politics of precarity, as well as post-autonomist arguments more generally, is that they focus too much on the US and Europe, taking them as assumed background and framework. While this argument is debatable, in any case it is still a good sign to see such arguments explored outside of Europe. In *Precarious liberation* (2011), Franco Barchiesi examines the postcolonial politics of citizenship and work in South Africa. While discussions of precarity in Europe have tended to take the neoliberal turn in the 1980s as their backdrop, with its destruction of social welfare systems, discussing precarity in South Africa is complicated further by the connection and overlap between anti-apartheid struggles and the imposition of neoliberal austerity measures in their wake. It is the kind of conjuncture that often stymies political analysis, leading to questions of why ‘revolutionary’ governments, or even just left leaning ones, often end up implementing politics even more draconian than those of most ostensibly right wing regimes. Barchiesi is well placed to explore this conjuncture, examining how the tendency toward what the autonomist tradition refers to as ‘real subsumption’ serves to render even ostensibly progressive governance into an assemblage that serves capital accumulation.

The answer Barchiesi provides is more subtle and powerful than arguing that post-apartheid government sold out its deals or capitulated to the demands of the global economy (although both possess some degree of truth)⁵. Instead Barchiesi bases his argument on the importance and role that work has played in the political imagination in South Africa – from multiple angles – and also how the role and importance of work has been emptied out in the post-apartheid era. In short, Barchiesi examines what happens when work, after functioning as a central motif of virtue and national character, is fractured apart by the intensifying nature of precarious conditions. Precarity is examined here not just in the sense of labour, but as applied to the sense of national liberation struggles premised upon certain conceptions of labour as their foundation. This is where work functions as a guarantee of citizenship, national belonging, and forms the basis of the political imagination. But given the central role of work played, what happens when that falls away, or is undercut by growing precarisation?

Barchiesi provides a compelling account of the role that work played in anti-apartheid discourse, where the notion of the dignity of work played a key role. The national liberation struggle promised to restore work's promise of solidarity and self-realisation, as did independent trade unionism. Because of this the position of black waged workers was of greater importance, as they could be seen to embody a dialectical movement toward democratisation, national liberation, and economic modernisation in their struggles. But this emphasis on work in terms of symbolic and political investment, in particular in its connection with citizenship, in turn presents a number of key questions that structure the book:

Has employment fulfilled its promise of emancipation and dignity in democratic South Africa? How did work relate to diverse visions of citizenship in the first post apartheid decades? How did government agencies, trade unions, and rank-and-file workers imagine such relationships? In what ways does the persistent precariousness of employment impact workers' identities, discourse, and collective solidarity? Is it still possible to think of labour as a progressive subject of social transformation? (2011: 4)

Barchiesi's answer is quite nuanced and complex, exploring the ways that an emphasis on work as subject of struggle and moral basis of the political imagination managed to take liberation struggles so far, but likewise managed to hold them back, and perhaps may even hobble their continued importance in the

5 For instance, Barchiesi argues that the democratic transition has largely benefitted business more than the people it was supposed to free, with the ongoing economic crisis amplifying forms of precarity experience by large parts of the population. Given that, the neoliberal measures that are responsible for this seem all the more troubling precisely when framed in revolutionary and Marxist jargon, such as when members of parliament defend their housing policy as 'dialectical unity' of government subsidies and corporate finance (2011: 20).

present. If one's revolutionary politics is based around the value of work, it is perhaps not so surprising that as work itself becomes precarious the bases of those politics are themselves increasingly precarious.

At the most obvious level, basing liberation politics upon works tends to lead to the ignoring of political struggles that are not focused on work, or that occur outside or against it. In this way work becomes the only way to have a political voice. The status of precariousness, existing outside of long term formalised wage work, in this frame becomes a form of political speechlessness or exclusion from politics. During the 1980s the black labour movement was by far the most powerfully organized domestic force against apartheid, and thus it is not surprising that it would have the loudest voice. The problem with this, as Barchiesi suggests, is both that this 'consigned to irrelevance and invisibility workers' expressions not derived from occupational or political dynamics' and tended to lead to an analysis that was sometimes reductively productivist and glorifying of wage labour, not as a target of resistance, but as an 'immanent force of liberation and social empowerment' (*ibid.*: 21).

This becomes more perplexing when Barchiesi investigates the ways that the emphasis on work and its glorification was not found just within the political imagination of the ANC, the national liberation struggle, and trade unions, but also played a similar role in the apartheid racial state. Barchiesi uses this argument, that political perspectives that appear at face value to be diametrically opposed on some values, can nonetheless share common positions in ways that might not be obvious. And these shared positions, in particular the assigned moral and political value of work, can be used to explain how the course of the liberation struggle has played out in ways incomprehensible without taking into account this overlap in the political imagination. Barchiesi suggests that this helps explain why the struggle against apartheid could end in a negotiated transition rather than cathartic break or rupture. Similarly, he suggests that this common valuing of work poses problems for the post-apartheid political order, suggesting that it 'expose[s] a certain hollowness in the post apartheid project' (*ibid.*: 61) through the failure to develop an alternative approach to the relationship between labour, citizenship, and political community. The continued role of work in the political imagination shows just how deeply it is embedded and continues to shape the field of politics in South Africa.

In the period of the post-apartheid transition work has moved to underpinning a notion of citizenship and as the basis of political inclusion. While the abstract universality of the employment contract at face value is quite preferable to previous racialised categories of governance and political inclusion / exclusion, Barchiesi suggests that it is not so clear-cut:

to understand why the postapartheid liberation of labour turned out to be precarious and hollow a focus on employment conditions is of limited use. Rather, the precariousness of black workers' lives needs to be analysed as a social and existential reality... precariousness entails the contrast between the declining "centrality of the labour contract" in a social order where jobs are insecure ("precariousness of work") and the norms that keep work central for individuals and households affected by the retrenchment of public programs and the official praise of work over welfare ("precariousness of subsistence"). (*ibid.*: 9)

The nexus of work-citizenship can thus be understood as a technique of governance, as the normative criteria for producing subjects and marking the bounds of official discourse. Barchiesi suggests that with the 1994 elections 'the spirit of the worker was reborn in the body of the citizen' (*ibid.*: 63). Citizenship, as a de-racialised status, came to function as the most important realm of rights and responsibilities. Notions of democracy, citizenship, work, and production ended up becoming inseparably linked, providing a conceptual cluster that not only served to indicate the possibility of post-apartheid politics, but that could also serve to hold back and place limits on the desires of popular movements. The linking together of work with democracy and citizenship starts to become a problem precisely because of how the lived material experiences of work, marked by increasing levels of precarity, diverge too starkly from work's given glorification. Barchiesi suggests that precarity in South Africa today is not just a question of material insecurity, but also a precarity of the political imagination. This is particularly the case for those having not lived through the social struggles underpinned by this mythology (or theology) of labour, who find it hard to hold back a cynicism to this celebration of work: 'The idea of dignified wage labor sounded increasingly hollow and distant in daily survival struggles haphazardly patching together irregular jobs, social grants, and economies of smuggling and counterfeiting' (*ibid.*: 80).

Barchiesi's approach, similar to Standing's, is to consider precarity not just as a question of the workplace or of particular workplaces, but rather as a fundamental transformation of the wage relationship itself and the way the wage relationship is embedded within a larger social fabric. Precarity then is not just then part of reshaping particular employment contracts but rather is an integral part of transforming the social contract more broadly. The spreading of precarity as a condition is part of a broader intensification of labour, as those whose conditions are rendered more unstable are induced into taking on self-entrepreneurial strategies, constantly trying to upgrade their skills, abilities, contacts, and so forth, while attempting to secure some modicum of existence for themselves. While this may be more readily obvious in the coping strategies of migrant workers and communities who end up juggling expectations (as well as possibly forms of employment) to support themselves, it is a shift that marks the

way we interact more broadly, from education to health care. In this framing all actions become thought of as individual investment decisions, for which one be called to account for, rather than as collective social arrangements. In this sense precarity is not simply a transformation of wage relationship, but nearly the death of the social itself, insofar as the social is something more than what can be subordinated to economic interactions.

Barchiesi suggests that these varied coping skills and ways of living developed by precarious workers are of immense value, and are most often indirectly appropriated by employers who do not have to provide compensation for them, as they occur outside of understood working hours. This is why analyses too narrowly centred on production are questionable in how they run the risk of essentialising and naturalising the primary location where workers express and enact their desires. Barchiesi questions these assumptions, which he sees as being held both by the social sciences and labour organizers, to ask whether the workplace is actually so central to the formation of workers' subjectivities. What if workers' strategies are not oriented to transforming the workplace but rather to escaping from it? This is an important question because Barchiesi does not argue that the previous over-focus on the bounded workplace should lead to disregarding it in favour of another area of analysis (for instance looking at the ways subjectivity is produced through consumer behaviour) as replacement for a labour politics. Rather Barchiesi is arguing for a form of approaching labour politics that is much broader than the workplace, as a politics of living labour more generally and not the bounded forms of work it is embodied in.

This is critical precisely because of the ways that work and its meaning are much more variable for South African workers, never really conforming to the discourse praising its glories and value. This is especially the case for black workers, both before the fall of apartheid and after, who tended to experience work as amplifying precarity rather than as a bulwark against it. While arguably there has long existed a juncture between this stated glorification of work and its lived realities, this disjuncture has become more readily apparent since the fall of apartheid, revealing what Barchiesi describes as 'the spectre of insecurity, the powerlessness of union organizing – that underlie the incommensurability between the official glorification of work and its experienced realities' (*ibid.*: 25). It is this gulf between the proclaimed status of work and its reality that helped to fuel workers' desire to escape from work through ideals of self-employment, or led them into what Barchiesi describes as an emerging 'politics of labour melancholia' where discontent with conditions of work inadvertently feeds into a desire for restoring order secured by authority granted by the status of work.

In this way Barchiesi comes to a position close to Standing's about the political risks posed by precarity in so far as it undermines the role of work in the political imagination. The increasing level of insecurity makes it clear that the ideological role of work can no longer function in the same way. Barchiesi suggests that chauvinist attitudes and a regressive attachment to fixed forms of identity can step in to fill the symbolic space left by the decline of work as the central ideological fulcrum. Or perhaps more accurately not the decline of work in this role, but rather when the disjunction between the ideology of work and its reality are so wide as to not hold together. Barchiesi suggests that the politics of workers' melancholia is formed by a continuing attachment to work where the workers perceive the meaningless of wage labour 'as a bitter betrayal of emancipatory projects once vested in the labour market' (*ibid.*: 255). But this is not used to argue for an abandoning of labour politics, or the drive for emancipation, but rather for ditching the limited view of a labour politics focused solely on the workplace. Barchiesi argues for ditching employment-based notions of liberation, instead placing 'the precariousness of employment, rather than its idealized celebration, at the core of a new grammar of politics' (*ibid.*: 247).

This brings us to what is perhaps the sharpest difference in the positions taken by Barchiesi and Standing, namely their quite divergent perspectives on the question of basic income. Barchiesi is in some ways broadly sympathetic to the arguments for basic income, for instance noting that it would serve to compensate value-creating activities outside the bounds of the wage relation and thus could serve to diminish the compulsion to work for survival. Basic income could thus fill a useful role in reducing the weight of the workplace in peoples' activities and lives, thus opening possibilities for ways of living and political imaginaries not so bound by the necessity of work. But while he might seem sympathetic at that level, Barchiesi is quite critical of the position that basic income could be understood as a political solution to the question of precarity. This is in part because of how he argues that basic income can serve to maintain the centrality of work in the imagination of citizenship. Basic income becomes a way to transform work into a realm of self-actualisation rather than an activity undertaken out of compulsion. While this represents a move away from a development over previous ideas, the problem for Barchiesi is how basic income can serve to 'salvage the connection between wage labour, rights, and human dignity whereas active labour market policies are at risk of merely forcing people into low-wage jobs' (*ibid.*: 124). Barchiesi argues that such a conception of basic income provides not an alternative to precarious labour but rather an inducement to it by providing protection against the more egregious effects of the precarisation of work. Barchiesi rejects this conception of basic income in his displacement of a limited conception of work in the political imagination. Rather than redeeming the value of labour Barchiesi suggests that basic income is

valuable as a critique of wage labour, not as a new form of policy intervention to ameliorate its excesses.

Ultimately what Barchiesi argues is that precarity is important not just for understanding the shaping of particular forms of labour, or of the security of conditions, but as applied to the ongoing stability of the national liberation project. This is South Africa's precarious liberation, marked by the strange situation where political antagonisms were played out by competing forces that 'have often held similar fantasies of order and normality' (*ibid.*: 93) where the official imagination of post-apartheid politics has delegated these fantasies to the nexus of work and citizenship. In one of the interviews Barchiesi conducted for writing the book a waste worker draws on an image that resonates deeply with those used in the autonomist tradition: the waste worker describes democratisation as a liberating exodus, but one that has been halted by the precariousness of work. This worker describes how the 1994 election was a moment when they thought they were leaving Egypt, to find a better life not under tyranny, but that today they are still suffering. For this worker the fall of apartheid was 'like coming from Egypt and now we are going back to Egypt. The old government was Egypt and we thought we were going to Canaan, but instead with this new [waste] utility we are going back to Egypt' (*ibid.*: 190).

The fragility of any institutionalised liberation project is perhaps a bit fragile, and risks that the gains secured in the exodus are turned into the exact opposite of the freedom that was sought. It is perfectly clear that the exodus from apartheid was indeed a liberating process. But the problem is that while rejecting 'going back to Egypt' is clear enough, this leaves undefined what to do. Barchiesi's central argument is that it is impossible to even begin to answer the question of what is to be done as long as the centrality of work, now displaced to the citizen, in the political imagination is maintained, as this is a position that has become untenable today, although it could equally be argued that it has always been untenable and that this has only become more recently apparent. Barchiesi takes the long-standing autonomist theme of the refusal of work and expands it, not just as a practice, but also as a central political motif and perspective, one that puts precarity at the centre of a new grammar of politics.

Ambivalence and/of transversal compositions

The emergence of precarity as an object of academic analysis corresponds with its decline as a political concept motivating social movement activity. (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008: 53)

The two versions of approaching precarity discussed here are in many ways quite similar, although also having important points of contrast. They agree that a focus on only the wage workplace leaves large populations out of the frame, and that this has quite negative political effects. They both share a concern with the rise of political currents who step in to fill the void left by the decline of a certain conception of labour in the political imagination, and that this could risk a sharp turn to the right and to forms of neo-fascism. Despite this level of agreement there are profound levels of disagreement, for instance on the question of basic income, and more fundamentally whether precarity is a political category to be incorporated into a renewed form of institutional politics, or one that requires a drastic critiquing and rethinking of the concepts used for thinking about politics and the position of work.

Perhaps rather than asking the question of what precarity is it is more useful to ask what precarity does, which is to say, what does precarity add to political analysis and strategy? This is a useful perspective precisely because it points to the reality that precarity is not one thing, but rather a versatile concept that has been deployed differently in varying situations and contexts. To compare the few examples discussed thus far, first we looked at precarity as a way to frame the desires of young workers in 1970s Italy to escape the factory and the constraints of regular wage labour: precarity as something beautiful and worth celebrating. In this framing precarity is the common ground of those who reject the Fordist compromise for a different conception of politics, life, and labour. By the time the concept reappears in the discourse of movements arising in the wake of the anti-globalisation movement, precarity is understood far differently, not as something to be celebrated but as a conceptual framework for theorising the shared ravages of neoliberalism across varying position of status, and income. Precarity is used to find a common ground for the positions of migrant workers and freelancers, with all problems that go along with such a proposition. Standing takes up precarity as a way to refocus labour politics upon populations ignored by only focusing on wage labour and unions, and to bring those stuck in more precarious positions into a common political project. Standing seeks to draw upon the energies of 'primitive rebellion' to rebuild a new institutional context for politics. Finally, Barchiesi rethinks the question of precarity within the context and complexity of the politics of national liberation in South Africa, in particular how they are rooted in a conception of work undercut by the growing precarisation of work. While each of these perspectives has its value, I'd suggest that Barchiesi's work is the most profound, precisely because it tries to employ precarity not as a category to be applied, but rather as a moment of instability within the radical political imagination that is as much promise as threat. The precariat might indeed be the new dangerous class, but that could very well be part of its political potential rather being a danger. In each of these cases what we

see is the tension between precarity as a sociological and as a strategic and political concept.

Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter in their (2008) analysis provide a very useful insight into the politics of precarity and the ambivalence existing within precarity as political focus and analytic category. They declare the last thing they want to do is to 'sociologise precarity', to render into a concept that can be applied to map out the changing nature of class. In short, they are arguing against the use of precarity as a concept in the way that Standing seeks to develop it as concept, one that assess the current shape of labour and develop a new politics around this class formation. That is not to totally reject empirical approaches, which Neilson and Rossiter agree can be of assistance in identifying different types and experiences of precarity. But they argue that while this work can be a prelude to political organization, it is in itself not enough to generate a political intervention adequate to the challenges of the current situation. Rather than precarity as a concept to be applied, Neilson and Rossiter argue for a conception of precarity that cannot be grounded. For them precarity is not an empirical object but rather an experience, one that is best investigated through a 'transpositional movement between the theoretical and the practical' – a transversal movement that is never stable (2008: 63).

This in part explains why Neilson and Rossiter comment that the decline of precarity as a political focus connects to its rise as an academic area of investigation. It is not simply a comment on how academic work lags woefully years behind the pace of political developments and thus can only serve to pick up the pieces of social movement developments after they have subsided (although there is something to be said for that). Rather it is that the approaches employed in investigating precarity have entirely different ways of working. Or to express it in their framing, the investigation of precarity as a sociological phenomenon wants to fix it as a category that can be used for empirical work. While this fixing of the category, the agreement over what the concept is, can seem entirely reasonable on a certain level, this represents a kind of blocking of the transversal and transpositional moment that they argue is what was valuable in precarity as a political concept. Neilson and Rossiter suggest that precarity still has a critical potential, albeit one that is limited, but a potential that can be realised more by rejecting sociological framings and expectations of analytical and descriptive consistency.

It is in this sense that it is most useful to rethink precarity by connecting it back more closely to the autonomist tradition. That's not to say that there is some 'purer essence' of the concept that is employed by political actors and not by academic writers. That would be to re-install a kind of essentialist theory-praxis

divide in political analysis. Rather, what can be seen in the concept of precarity is a kind of tension between analysis and politics that has long existed in the middle of autonomist politics. One can see this in the tradition's key concepts, such as the paired notions of technical and political composition. The former is used to understand the current composition of capital and workings of the economy including technical skills, knowledge, level of scientific development, and so forth. The latter is the existing political energies and capacities of the working class, or as the notion has been expanded even more broadly, the capacities of political actors in revolt, to transform the world around them. The autonomist tradition is marked heavily by a radical subjectivism that rejects narratives privileging capital's perspective in explaining and understanding social and economic crisis and transformation⁶. Perhaps the most important element of the autonomist tradition is to emphasise this radical subjective becoming of political composition over the more traditionally political economic analysis of technical composition – and to privilege it as the basis of analysis and political strategy. But this very privileging of political composition and subjectivity brings along its own difficulties. If applied in a dogmatic and extreme fashion such an approach can lead to grand declarations about new forms of emerging subjectivities and political energies that lack a sufficient connection to the conditions around them. It can become almost a form of prophecy and declaration, unmoored from the composition of the social.

It is this ongoing tension between technical and political composition that is perhaps one of the greatest strengths of the autonomist concepts, but also their weakness. This is why the multiple meanings and roles of precarity, what it does as a concept, is not a problem of its lack of coherence, but rather an expression of its value. The meaning of precarity is not determined by a set of criteria that define it, and thus can be operationalised as tools of research (or at least solely as them). Rather it is a political tool whose meaning is shaped by the context from

6 A recent article by Bar-Yuchnei (2011) in the journal *Endnotes* makes a critique of this core autonomist notion, suggesting that in current 'conditions of austerity' the capacity of class antagonism to act as a motor of social and economic transformation has reached its end. This, however, is not framed as an argument to return to an analysis based upon analyzing 'tendencies to crisis' or other more economic frames. Rather it seems to indicate that this emphasis on political composition as subjective becoming has reached something of a dead end. Bifo has made similar arguments. Perhaps it is the further incorporation of subjectivation as factor of production in flexible, creativity oriented economy that precludes it operating in the same role it did before. But it would seem that if subjectivity is more essential to the workings of the economy and class structure that its incorporation, its dynamic of decomposition, would serve as a basis for a new form of political recomposition. This remains to be seen.

which it emerges, the composition of labour and politics in which it is utilised. Precarity is thus beautiful, an escape from the factory, and horrible, in the conditions of intensifying neoliberal globalisation and destruction of social welfare programs. It is like Walt Whitman, large, containing multitudes, and possibly contained by multitudes. Precarity is most useful not as a concept for mapping out new class categories for integrating them into a new institutional politics, but as a tool for intervening in the shaping of new struggles. Precarity is not just a question of the changing composition of labour, but of experimenting with modes of being and community that are not determined by labour. The task then for the politics of precarity today is not to refine it as a sociological concept to be applied in research but to renew it as a compositional project for the development of new forms of autonomy.

references

- Bar-Yuchnei (2011) 'Two aspects of austerity', *Endnotes* [<http://endnotes.org.uk/articles/16.9/22/11>].
- Barchiesi, F. (2011) *Precarious liberation: Workers, the state, and contested social citizenship in postapartheid South Africa*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Berardi, F. (2009) *Precarious rhapsody: Semicapitalism and the pathologies of the post-alpha generation*. London: Minor Compositions.
- Gill, R. and A. Pratt (2008) 'In the social factory? Immaterial labour, precariousness and cultural work', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25(7-8): 1-30.
- Neilson, B. and N. Rossiter (2005) 'Multitudes, creative organisation and the precarious condition of new media labour', *fibreculture*, 5. [<http://five.fibreculturejournal.org>].
- Neilson, B. and N. Rossiter (2008) 'Precarity as a political concept, or, Fordism as exception', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25(7-8): 51-72.
- Raunig, G., G. Ray and U. Wuggenig (eds.) (2011) *Critique of creativity: Precarity, subjectivity and resistance in the 'creative industries'*. London: MayFly Books.
- Ross, A. (2009) *Nice work if you can get it: Life and labor in precarious times*. New York: New York University Press.
- Standing, G. (2011) *The precariat: The new dangerous class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

the author

Stephen is a member of the *ephemera* editorial collective.
E-mail: sshuka@essex.ac.uk



Theorizing debt for social change*

Miranda Joseph

review of

Graeber, D. (2011) *Debt: The first 5000 years*. Melville House Publishing: New York. (HB, pp.534, US\$22.00, ISBN 9781933633862)

David Graeber's 2011 book, *Debt: The first 5000 years*, has received a great deal of attention in academic, activist, and popular media venues (see Hann, 2012; Kear, 2011; Luban, 2012; Meaney, 2011). Graeber himself has been credited as instigator and theorist of the Occupy movement (Meaney, 2011); and one of the central goals of Graeber's book – a crossover book intended for a broad readership – is clearly to support detachment from the sense of moral obligation too many people feel to pay financial debts to financial institutions that feel no reciprocal obligation. As debt now plays a leading role among the strategies of capital accumulation (deployed to strip assets from variously targeted populations) and as our sense of moral obligation can only be accounted as an instance of what Lauren Berlant calls 'cruel optimism', that is, an attachment that will be self-undermining, Graeber's effort is commendable.

Graeber's intervention in our attachment to our debts entails debunking the 'myths' (of barter and primordial debt) that subtend our sense of moral duty. Like Marx (but not in explicit conversation with Marx), Graeber argues against the

* Many thanks to Angela Stoutenburgh, PhD Candidate in Gender & Women's Studies at the University of Arizona, for reading and discussing *Debt* with me. And many thanks to Marcia Klotz, Anna-Maria Murtola and Kate Kenny for their feedback on various drafts of this review.

projection of exchange (Adam Smith's trucking and bartering) into a mythical past that secures its place in human nature, and thus naturalizes and legitimates contemporary relations that have been produced through a history of violence. And like Nietzsche (whose work Graeber does directly engage), Graeber points out that conceptualizations of the social bond as essentially a relation of permanent indebtedness – in which we are always already in debt to the existing social order and/or its representatives – can serve to legitimate established power dynamics and social hierarchies. These are crucial points.

His analysis is, however, limited by his reaffirmation of yet another 'myth'. In this myth, again and again, across the globe in different times and at different speeds, communal relations based on interpersonal trust are displaced by depersonalized calculation and the particular is disrupted or destroyed by being *abstracted*. That is, he joins many others who have written credit and debt into the romantic discourse of community, a discourse pervasive in the social science literature as well as in the popular imagination that situates community as the 'other' of modernity and especially of capitalism, which is generally understood to destroy community (Joseph, forthcoming; Joseph, 2006; Joseph, 2002). The development and expansion of credit is articulated as participating in or at least symptomatic of the destruction of community, and community is often posited as a bulwark against the evils of indebtedness (see, for instance, Mann, 2002; McDonald and Gastman, 2001; Taylor, 2002; and Lauer, 2008; and critical discussions in Muldrew, 1998; Poovey, 1998; and Joseph 2006 and forthcoming)¹. This myth too has some unfortunate implications, concealing rather than revealing the dialectical processes of abstraction and particularization (that I've previously theorized as 'the supplementary relation of community with capital' (Joseph, 2002: 3)), and thus the crucial social processes in need of intervention. In reiterating this myth, I argue, he potentially undermines the efforts to mobilize/galvanize a movement of the 99%. Thus, despite my

1 Avram Taylor is helpfully explicit in naming the sociological tradition that elaborates the Romantic narrative of community: he states that his theoretical perspective is based on 'Weber's ideas about the rationalization of social life, Ferdinand Tönnies' notion of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, as well as the more recent work of Anthony Giddens on the nature of modernity' (2002: 10). Taylor connects the history of credit with this discourse of community in his assessment of 'the effect of credit on working class communities' and his attempt 'to relate this to the debate about the decline of the working class community' in the post-World War II period in Britain (2002: 2). He argues that forms of credit characteristic of prewar working-class communities, such as neighborly mutuality, corner store credit, and street lenders, which evidenced an 'interpenetration of instrumental and affectual rationalities' (2002: 35), declined in the postwar period, replaced either by more impersonal forms of credit demonstrating, he says, a decline in trust, or by forms of credit that instrumentalize affectual bonds.

admiration for Graeber's accomplishments and precisely in response to the unusually broad impact of his work, I believe it is necessary to undertake critical engagement with the substance of his social theory (and thus, with his analysis of the problem and solution).

A prophetic vision: Graeber and the post-workerists

Graeber makes his argument in leisurely fashion, over the course of 500 pages that play out like a semester-long lecture course, extensively illustrated with narrative examples drawn at will from the vast expanses of historical and anthropological record. The book falls into two parts: the first half of the book provides a theorization of debt, while the second provides the 5000 year narrative referenced in his title. With regard to that latter half, as Chris Hann (2012: 447-448) says, 'experts are likely to chafe...' at the sweeping claims that 5000 years can be divided into 4 periods, in each of which parallel trends and processes occurred across the globe and in which grand cycles between the dominance of bullion or coin and the dominance of credit can be perceived and linked to military violence (in the case of hard currency) and to peace and stability (in the case of credit). I am not an expert in the history or anthropology of most of those 5000 years, so I'll leave it to those who are to evaluate his evidence. The point of this grand narrative is to suggest, as Luban (2012: 105) puts it, that

Insofar as we are shifting from a period of bullion to one of credit [since our departure from the gold standard in 1971],... the era of great state-based military empires – above all, the current American imperium – is coming to an end', and, further, this should open the opportunity for a shift to 'localized communities of trust and mutual aid, coupled perhaps with new global institutions to protect debtors.

One might understand this as a kind of 'prophetic' vision, in the sense in which Graeber himself uses the term in his assessment of post-workerist theory.

In 2008, Graeber reviewed a panel at the Tate Britain featuring 'several of the heavyweights of Italian post-workerist theory – Toni Negri, Bifo Berardi, Maurizio Lazzarato, and Judith Revel' (1). He describes their efforts to recapitulate their major positions by way of an engagement with art, and then goes on to offer what he himself terms a 'harsh' (2008: 16) critique of some of the central tenets of post-workerist theory. He notes (as many others have done as well) that the concept of 'immaterial labor', which recognizes on the one hand the labor of meaning-making associated with informational commodities and also the labor of social reproduction beyond the factory, is a belated retread of earlier feminist arguments recognizing 'the labor of creating people and social

relations' (2008: 7)². And, in so far as these theorists claim that immaterial production is something new, he rightly points out that they reify a problematic mental/manual division. (And, I would add, they fail to recognize the integral contribution of consumption to the production of the value of commodities (noted by Marx in the '1857 Introduction' to the *Grundrisse*) as well as the key role of advertising during the twentieth century.) He goes on to question the isolation of their analysis of art from any meaningful analysis of cultural production as an industry. This is a crucial point as it would seem to call into question in a fundamental way the notion that immaterial labor or immaterial commodities could thereby escape regimes of measurement, as the post-workerists suggest. Once understood in the context of their production and consumption, the ability of even the most ephemeral works of performance art – or other commodities consisting of ephemeral actions, such as services that are consumed in their very production – to serve as bearers of capital, of value in specific quantities, becomes obvious (Joseph, 2002: 60-67). One lesson to be learned from Marx's analysis of the commodity as a technology that joins particular use values and abstract value is that despite the immeasurability and incommensurability of their physical qualities as use values, commodities (including labor power) can and must be viewed simultaneously as exchange values that represent a measurable and measured quantity of value.

But then Graeber interrupts his critical flow: 'in another sense this criticism is unfair. It assumes that Negri and Lazzarato are to be judged as social theorists... But I don't think this was ever their primary aim. They are first and foremost prophets' (2008: 12). As prophets, they are 'less interested in describing realities than in bringing them into being' (2008: 13). He points out that:

For its most ardent proponents, immaterial labor is really important because it's seen to represent a new form of communism: ways of creating value by forms of social cooperation so dispersed that just about everyone could be said to take part, much as they do in the collective creation of language, and in a way that makes it impossible to calculate inputs and outputs, where there is no possibility of accounting. (Graeber, 2008: 13)

It is here that he finds an opening for his own work; he says, 'the idea of a revolutionary future that is already with us, the notion that in a sense we already live in communism, [is] quite compelling' (2008:16). And, having pointed out that Negri's treatment of art as 'immaterial' ignores the implication of art in capitalist processes, an art *industry*, Graeber rejects the idea that such an account

2 *ephemera* has been an important venue for critiques of the concept of immaterial labor. Issue 7.1 is a theme issue on the topic and features three contributions – Dowling, Weeks and Fortunati – that highlight the too-often unacknowledged feminist genealogy of the concept.

should be understood as totalizing – ‘mak[ing] such spaces ‘ultimately’ a product of capitalism’ (2008: 12) – and he too offers a sweeping opposition of the calculable and incalculable in order to conjure that revolutionary future.

Theorizing debt: Graeber’s repressive hypothesis

Graeber’s prophetic vision depends on the theory of debt laid out in the first half of the book. That first half, Graeber states, is intended to answer ‘the central question... What does it mean when we reduce moral obligations to debts? What changes when the one turns into the other?’ (13). Or as he puts it later: ‘How is it that moral obligations between people come to be thought of as debts, and as a result, end up justifying behavior that would otherwise seem utterly immoral?’ (158). This question incorporates his answer in that it presumes/establishes a dichotomy between interpersonal obligation and ‘impersonal’ accountable debt, between what he calls ‘human economies’ and ‘commercial economies’. And in the use of the term ‘reduce’ he indicates from the beginning that he understands quantification and depersonalization – the movement away from face-to-face relations – to be a loss, a reduction. But, as I will argue below, these processes are productive as well as destructive (as Foucault suggests that power is productive and not simply repressive vis-à-vis sexuality).

Graeber claims that there are three principles of economic interaction or ‘systems of moral accounting’ (114):

- Communism, which he defines as a relation of distribution rather than ownership, “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs” (Graeber, 2011: 94, quoting Marx), is for him the ‘foundation of all societies’ (96). Communism is the domain of the unmeasured: ‘The surest way to know that one is in the presence of communistic relations is that not only are no accounts taken, but it would be considered offensive’ (99);
- Hierarchy, which regulates distribution by custom and habit (109-113); and
- Exchange, which distributes goods through reciprocal trade of equivalent values by people who are therefore likewise equivalent, and who can end their relationship by settling their debts (102-108). ‘What marks commercial exchange is that it’s “impersonal”: who it is that is selling..., or buying..., should in principle be entirely irrelevant. We are simply comparing the value of two objects’ (103).

Although Graeber spends much of the chapter in which he lays out this schema demonstrating the intertwinedness of these three modes, and thus that humans cannot be reduced to *homo economicus*, over the following chapters, he reduces

this synchronic complexity to a linear diachronic trajectory in which violence brings exchange to dominance over the other two dynamics, and ‘human economies’ are destroyed/perverted by commercial economies.

Human economies, he explains, are those in which ‘social currencies’ serve primarily ‘to create, maintain, or sever relations between people rather than to purchase things’; in human economies ‘each person is unique and of incomparable value, because each is a unique nexus of relations with others’ (Graeber, 2011: 158). By contrast, in commercial economies, in which money is used for profit, ‘qualities are reduced to quantities, allowing calculations of gain and loss’ (159). When commercial economies come into contact with human economies, he argues, those unique human relations are destroyed.

Initially, then, it seems that for him, as for the post-workerists, *quantification* is the crucial problem. It is the technology of depersonalization and thus provides immunity for or blindness to immoral or harmful behavior:

a debt, unlike any other form of obligation, can be precisely *quantified*. This allows debt to become simple, cold, and *impersonal*... it doesn’t really matter who the creditor is; neither [] of the two parties ha[s] to think much about what the other party needs, wants, is capable of doing.... One does not need to calculate the human effects; one need only calculate principal, balances, penalties, and rates of interest. (2011: 13, emphasis added)

Sounding a bit like the early romantic anti-capitalist Marx, figuring money as the root of all evil, Graeber continues, ‘The crucial factor . . . is money’s capacity to turn morality into a matter of impersonal arithmetic – and by doing so, to justify things that would otherwise seem outrageous or obscene’ (14).

The emotional appeal of this argument in our current historical moment is clear, as mortgage holders faced with foreclosure bang their heads against impenetrable loan servicing companies. And Graeber’s scenario likewise resonates with one of the (many) persistent explanatory tropes for the recent subprime crisis turned financial crisis turned economic crisis: the depersonalization of mortgage lending. According to this story, in some imagined ‘once upon a time’, often evoked by referencing Frank Capra’s classic 1946 film *It’s a Wonderful Life*³, loans were made and held by the neighborhood savings and loan to customers the bankers knew personally. Indeed, Floyd Norris begins a December 2007 *New York Times* column with a quote from Capra’s film is meant to illuminate a contemporary set of rules proposed by the United States Federal Reserve Bank ‘to keep bankers from doing mean and stupid things’

3 <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0038650/>

(Norris, 2007). Norris quotes the scene in which the odious banker Mr. Potter challenges George Bailey's father, a kind and compassionate agent at a small-town building and loan society, demanding mortgage payments from their customers at any cost:

"Have you put any real pressure on these people of yours to pay those mortgages?"
 "Times are bad, Mr. Potter. A lot of these people are out of work."
 "Then foreclose!"
 "I can't do that. These families have children."
 "They're not my children." (Norris, 2007)

Norris asserts the impossibility of Potter, Pa Bailey, or even George Bailey imagining how our contemporary, twenty-first century mortgage market functions. He notes that 'the Fed' (as it is familiarly referred to) acknowledges, 'When borrowers cannot afford to meet their payment obligations, they and their communities suffer significant injury'. And he concludes, 'Pa Bailey understood that, which is one reason he was unwilling to foreclose during the Depression. He knew his borrowers and they knew him. This generation's lenders did not know their borrowers, but figured that did not matter' (Norris, 2007).

In the run up to the current debacle, brokers used computer programs to determine loan eligibility and generate mortgages that they aimed to sell off to financial firms that turned them into globally tradable securities. As one *New York Times* article reported:

The old way of processing mortgages involved a loan officer or broker collecting reams of income statements and ordering credit histories, typically over several weeks. But by retrieving real-time credit reports online, then using algorithms to gauge the risks of default, Mr. Jones's software allowed subprime lenders like First Franklin to grow at warp speed. (Browning, 2007)

Presumably, this new depersonalized and globalized mortgage market harmed bankers' ability and even willingness to make appropriate assessments of creditworthiness: they could feel no sense of responsibility toward borrowers they didn't know, nor for the quality of loans they weren't going to keep on their books. Of course, this explanation runs headlong into the now vast evidence of predatory lending in the US, which specifically targeted women and people of color for exploitative 'subprime' (high cost) loans (Dymski, 2009; Fishbein and Woodall, 2006; Kochhar, Gonzalez-Barrera and Dockterman, 2009). Such targeting suggests that the characteristics, capacities, and desires of the borrowers were crucial, though not in the way they are imagined to have operated in the 'once upon a time' fairy tale.

Despite its emotional appeal and resonance with some of the discussions of alienation to be found in the early Marx, Graeber's articulation of the problem as depersonalization by way of quantification, or *abstraction* more broadly, likewise reaches its limit precisely at this point. As that story does not account for the predatory attention to the particulars of borrowers that was *enabled* by the apparently depersonalized technologies of mortgage lending, Graeber's inscription of debt into a story of the destruction of community by quantification and abstraction fails to account for the generative role of abstraction in social formation.

For the post-workerists, measurability is a measure of subsumption into/by capital; for Graeber, the emergence of capitalism is but one among many moments in which warring states create markets that 'turn[] human relations into mathematics' (14). Like Marx, Graeber historicizes, but he offers a different history. Marx is concerned with the diverse violences (including, certainly, those undertaken by warring and colonizing states) that produce the specific preconditions for capitalism: on one hand, accumulation of wealth by a minority that can be used as capital and, on the other, dispossession of the majority, who become 'free' labor. By contrast, for Graeber state violence takes a decisive role and what it does is bring exchange to dominance over the other economic dynamics⁴. While for Marx and Marxists such as David Harvey, violent accumulations of wealth, 'so-called primitive accumulation' or 'accumulation by dispossession', are ongoing supplements to *exploitation*, for Graeber it is the intimate relation of violence and *exchange* that is at issue⁵.

In discussing the processes by which state-driven commercial economies destroy human economies, Graeber uses 'abstraction' as a noun: 'there is every reason to believe that slavery, with its unique ability to rip human beings from their contexts, to turn them into *abstractions*, played a key role in the rise of markets everywhere' (165, emphasis added). He thus reifies the activity of 'abstraction' that Marx describes in explaining the relation of value to use value in the commodity.

4 Although I wouldn't want labels to stand in for substantive argument, it is probably worth noting that Graeber is the author of *Fragments of an anarchist anthropology* (2004), a pamphlet intended to call forth anarchist scholarship.

5 His 5000-year time frame makes sense when one realizes that he is rejecting both Marx and, implicitly, Foucault. Like advocates of restorative justice such as Howard Zehr, who call for a shift from a regime of justice extracting payment of 'debts to society' to one requiring compensation to community, he is not so much interested in the emergence of disciplinary strategies but rather in the capture of social processes by state apparatuses; he notes in particular the 'devastating' impact on 'communal solidarity' of the capture of the management of debts by the courts (333-335).

For Marx, ‘abstraction’ involves *disregarding* the particular usefulness of the commodity in order to perceive its commensurability with others, a commensurability based on the common denominator of temporally quantifiable abstract labor-power (again, abstract in the sense that its concrete particularity is disregarded in favor of a perception of it as expenditure of human effort in general):

If then we disregard the use-value of commodities, only one property remains, that of being products of labour.... Nor is it any longer the product of the labour of the joiner, the mason or the spinner or any other particular kind of productive labor... [but] human labour in the abstract.... This quantity is measured by its duration. (Marx, 1977: 128-129)

Abstraction does not destroy particular relations, but rather emerges from, depends on and constitutes particular relations.

Abstraction, for Marx, is both a social process that really happens as a component of the capitalist mode of production, implied in the exchange of commodities *and* it is the necessary mental exercise for the social critic who would perceive that social process (Hall, 2003; Toscano, 2008). Both the process and the ability to perceive it are for Marx the products of history:

As a rule, the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears as common to many, to all.... Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence indifference. (Marx, 1973: 104)

This example of labour shows strikingly how even the most abstract categories, despite their validity – precisely because of their abstractness – for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of the abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations. (105)

For Graeber, abstraction is not *disregard*, it is not seeing beyond the empirically visible concrete materiality of the commodity to the invisible but constitutive social processes that allow equivalencies to be determined and thus exchange to occur. Nor is it the historical process that transforms particulars in their particular substance so as to be more interchangeable (or, to put it more generally, so as to be more adequate as bearers of abstract capital, whatever that might mean in a particular historical conjuncture). Rather, for Graeber, one is turned into an abstraction by a process of physically violent removal from embeddedness in social relations:

To make a human being an object of exchange, one woman equivalent to another for example, requires first of all ripping her from her context; that is, tearing her

away from that web of relations that makes her the unique conflux of relations that she is, and thus, into a generic value capable of being added and subtracted and used as a means to measure debt. This requires a certain violence. To make her equivalent to a bar of camwood takes even more violence, and it takes an enormous amount of sustained and systematic violence to rip her so completely from her context that she becomes a slave. (159)

Where Marx, in the opening pages of *Capital*, articulates the commodity as simultaneously a use-value and a value, concrete and abstract, particular and equivalent, Graeber suggests here that these modes are mutually exclusive, that particularity must be destroyed to constitute abstract value. While Graeber is quite right to recognize the material reality of abstraction, in rendering it a noun (or sometimes adjective) rather than verb, he positions *abstraction* (or the *abstract* thing) as the result of a process, not the process itself, as evidence only of the destruction of social relations, not the construction of such relations.

By articulating ‘abstractions’ *only* as the reified consequence of violence, Graeber misses the dialectical and generative dimensions of the processes in which abstraction participates. And conversely, such a rendering idealizes the uniqueness of the interpersonal relations he posits as prior to such abstraction, ignoring the social processes generating those relations. This ‘repressive hypothesis’ (as Foucault might put it) regarding abstraction has important political implications. A review of two alternative interpretations of his key case studies is revealing.

The dialectic of particularization and abstraction

Graeber notices that the exchange of women depends on a hierarchy in which women are lower than men (the objects exchanged rather than the subjects of the exchange). Graeber’s anthropological example here is the Lele, ‘an African people who had, at the time Mary Douglas studied them in the 1950s, managed to turn the principle of blood debts into the organizing principle of their entire society’ (2011: 137). For Graeber, however, as the scaling up from exchange of women, to exchange of women for soap, to systematic enslavement suggests, the real problem is the transition from human economies to commercial ones. And in fact, he moves right along to the Atlantic slave trade as his primary example: slaves are ‘people stolen from the community that made them what they are. As strangers to their new communities, slaves no longer had mothers, fathers, kin of any sort’ (146). But it seems to me that his readings of both the exchange of women and enslavement are revealing of the limits of his theoretical framework.

Gayle Rubin argues that ‘the exchange of women’ is a highly problematic concept both theoretically, insofar as Claude Lévi-Strauss locates it as a prerequisite of

culture, and empirically. She argues that the Lele people are actually quite unusual in *explicitly* exchanging women; and, while such exchange might be plausibly interpreted as occurring in some cultures where it is not explicit, in others, according to Rubin (1975: 176), ‘the efficacy of the concept becomes altogether questionable’. She suggests that the concept of ‘exchange of women’ is useful only insofar as it indicates a ‘sex/gender’ system, in which women ‘do not have full rights to themselves’ (176-7). As Rubin theorizes it, a sex/gender system generates social relations and the subjects of those relations. The exchange of women enables men to enact and sustain relations, ‘the flow of debts and promises’ (182), amongst themselves and their kinship groups. But this exchange also depends on prior constructions of gendered divisions of labor and norms of heterosexuality that constitute gendered divisions of people, to whom different characteristics are attributed and of whom those different characteristics are required (178-180). While women may be treated as objects of exchange, this does not mean that they actually lose all qualities or, for that matter, all subjectivity. Rather, Rubin assumes that there is a subjectivity; it may manifest as submission, as a ‘sexuality [which] responded to the desire of others’, or as resistance, ‘female attempts to evade the sexual control of their kinsmen’ (182). For Rubin, the issue is *how* – by what interaction of psychic and social regulation – that subjectivity is constituted.

Precisely because of its socially constitutive function, Graeber wants to understand the exchange of women as illustrative of so-called *human economies*. But this requires under-reading the systemic production of the category or class or subject position of ‘women’ as social currency; while particular women may be exchanged in particular exchanges due to their unique interpersonal relations, their exchangeability is constituted by and constitutive of their subjection as *women*. Women are not ripped from their context but rather exchanged in context. Meanwhile, Graeber wants to mark, as catastrophically different, the exchange of women from the moment it involves violence or money (and again he argues (2011: 144), ‘the equation [of human life with money] was established at the point of a spear’). In this moment, despite his recognition that wives created through enslavement ‘quickly develop new ties’ (145), human economies are perverted and become dehumanizing economies, in which, as far as he can see, particular relations no longer play a meaningful role.

Graeber’s description of the violence of turning people into commodities through enslavement both resonates with and differs importantly from Saidiya Hartman’s (2007) examination of that process in *Lose your mother*. In that book, she too emphasizes the estrangement of enslavement, the violent separation of those enslaved from their kin. And she claims as her own perspective, as a living legacy of slavery, a constitutive lack of and yearning for belonging that is not to be

satisfied by her return to Africa to explore the history of enslavement. But where Graeber insists that the violence occurred through ‘the very mechanisms of the human economy’ (155), perverted as they were by the slave trade, Hartman does not romanticize prior communal relations in Africa; she argues (2007: 4) that Africans enslaved other Africans who were already perceived as others and outsiders. Like Graeber, Hartman marks the destructive role of money; but in her account, though Africans accumulated money – the ‘Negro money’ (207) of cowrie shells – primarily for prestige rather than as capital, that didn’t stop the accumulative effort from driving extraordinary depredation. Further, the destruction of that currency by Europeans, far from re-humanizing social relations actually served to consolidate European domination. Meanwhile, Hartman argues that for Europeans, the color line was constituted through the slave trade, establishing a ‘hierarchy of human life’ that ‘determined which persons were expendable, and selected the bodies that could be transformed into commodities’ (6). Her emphasis, it seems to me, is on the production of social relations as much as their destruction. Relations of hierarchy, of disrespect, of disregard within and between races are constituted in the process and wake of extracting people from their prior relations. And then also, but only through extraordinary effort, a community among the fugitive (225) and the enslaved (as she discusses in *Scenes of subjection* (1997: 59-61) may also be constituted.

As Hartman describes them, these social relations entail a particular slave subjectivity, a subjectivity of limited agency, ‘legally recognized as human only to the degree that he is criminally culpable’ (2007: 24) and socially recognized as joyful and seductive in order to ‘deny, displace, and minimize the violence’ of ‘white enjoyment’ of ‘wanton uses of slave property’ (25). And then, she argues, in the wake of formal emancipation, freed slaves were re-subjected as morally and economically ‘indebted’ subjects. Under slavery, economic abstraction (the treatment of racialized persons as commodities) constituted the particularity of slave subjectivity; after emancipation, the political abstraction of liberal citizenship – liberal freedom – constitutes racialized economic subjects, always already indebted for their very freedom as well as for their economic survival, through an intertwined regime of labor contracts and criminal codes (125-127).

My point here is not to set up a debate over ‘the facts’ between Rubin and Graeber or Hartman and Graeber, but rather to notice that their different theoretical orientations generate different apprehensions of the problem. Graeber dichotomizes particularity and abstraction, demonizing only abstraction, as if it could be disentangled from processes of particularization, and offers particularization as a cure.

Graeber's approach directs our attention to the evil 1% and helps us to disidentify with the masters of the universe. Whereas Brent White (2009) has gained some popular infamy for encouraging individuals to throw off their moral bonds to their debts and join the rationality of the financial institutions by 'walking away' from mortgages that it would be financially irrational to repay, Graeber sees the real cure in a re-personalization of credit relations. Rather than individual rational financial evaluation, Graeber's approach calls for a collective debt strike and thus a more fundamental rejection of financial rationalities.

But Graeber can't give an account of the process that produces not only the radically unequal distributions of wealth and power between the 99% and the 1% but also the differences *within* the 99% on which the abstract circulation and calculation of capital, for the benefit of the 1%, also depends. Rubin and Hartman's approaches (which I would suggest are in alignment with a Marxist analysis) do enable an understanding of the generation of the particular differences on which the abstractions depend. As Angela Davis noted in her speech for the Occupy protestors in New York, 'There are major responsibilities linked' to the decision 'to come together as the 99 Percent . . . How can we be together, in a unity, that is not simplistic, and oppressive? How can we be together in a unity that is complex, and emancipatory?' (Davis, 2011). While the socially destructive power of capital's processes of abstraction certainly needs to be addressed, we can't answer Davis's question unless we recognize the socially constructive particularizing power of capital as well.

references

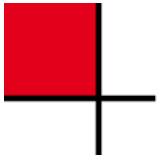
- Berlant, L. G. (2011) *Cruel optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Browning, L. (2007) 'The subprime loan machine', *The New York Times*, 27 March, [http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D06E2DD1530F930A15750CoA9619C8B63&smid=pl-share].
- Davis, A. (2011) 'Speech at Washington Square Park, New York', transcribed by R. K. Chin. 31 October. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HlvfPizooI].
- Dowling, E. (2007) 'Producing the dining experience: Measure, subjectivity and the affective worker', *ephemera: theory & politics in organization*, 7(1): 117-132.
- Dowling, E., R. Nunes and B. Trott (2007) 'Immaterial and affective labour: Explored', *ephemera: theory & politics in organization*, 7(1): 1-7.
- Dymski, G. A. (2009) 'Racial exclusion and the political economy of the subprime crisis'. *Historical Materialism*, 17(2): 149-179.
- Ebert, T. L. (2009) *The task of cultural critique*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Fortunati, L. (2007) 'Immaterial Labor and Its Machinization', *ephemera: theory & politics in organization*, 7(1): 139-157.

- Fishbein, A J., and P. Woodall. (2006) 'Women are prime targets for subprime lending: Women are disproportionately represented in high-cost mortgage market', Washington, D.C.: Consumer Federation of America.
- Graeber, D. (2004) *Fragments of an anarchist anthropology*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, LLC.
- Graeber, D. (2008) 'The sadness of post-workerism or 'art and immaterial labour' conference: A sort of review', *The Commoner* [<http://www.commoner.org.uk/?p=33>].
- Graeber, D. (2011) *Debt: The first 5000 years*. New York: Melville House Publishing.
- Hall, S. (2003) 'Marx's Notes on Method: A 'Reading' of the '1857 Introduction.' *Cultural studies*, 17(2): 113-149.
- Hann, C. (2012) CSSH Notes, 'Review Of Graeber', *Comparative studies in society and history*, 54(2): 447-461.
- Hartman, S. V. (2007) *Lose your mother: A journey along the Atlantic slave route*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Hartman, S. V. (1997) *Scenes of subjection: Terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Joseph, M. (1998) 'The performance of production and consumption', *Social Text*, 54: 25-61.
- Joseph, M. (2002) *Against the romance of community*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Joseph, M. (2006) 'A debt to society', in G. W. Creed (ed.) *The seductions of community: emancipations, oppressions, quandaries*. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.
- Joseph, M. (forthcoming) *A debt to society*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kear, M. [No title.]. [<http://societyandspace.com/reviews/reviews-archive/dienst-richard-2011-the-bonds-of-debt/>].
- Kochhar, R., A. Gonzalez-Barrera and D. Dockterman, (2009) 'Through boom and bust: Minorities, immigrants and homeownership', Pew Hispanic Center, Washington, D.C.
- Lauer, J. (2008) 'From rumor to written record: Credit reporting and the invention of financial identity in nineteenth-century america'. *Technology and Culture*, (49)2: 301-324.
- Luban, D. (2012) 'Indebted', *Dissent*, (Spring): 102-106.
- Luhmann, N. (1979) *Trust and power*. Chichester, UK: Wiley.
- MacDonald, S. B., and Gastmann, A. L. (2001). *A history of credit and power in the Western world*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Marx, K. (1973) *Grundrisse. Foundations of the critique of political economy*. New York: Random House.
- Marx, K. (1977) *Capital: a critique of political economy*, trans. B. Fowkes. New York: Vintage Books.
- Mann, B. H. (2002) *A republic of debtors: Bankruptcy in the age of American independence*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Meaney, T. (2011) 'Anarchist anthropology', *The New York Times* 8 December. [<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/11/books/review/anarchist-anthropology.html>].
- Muldrew, C. (1998) *The economy of obligation: The culture of credit and social relations in early modern England*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

- Norris, F. (2007) 'Solving the Mortgage Crisis May Require a Guardian Angel', *New York Times* 21 December. [<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/21/business/21norris.html>].
- Poovey, M. (1998) *A history of the modern fact: Problems of knowledge in the sciences of wealth and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Taylor, A. (2002) *Working class credit and community since 1918*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan
- Toscano A. (2008) 'The open secret of real abstraction', *Rethinking Marxism*, 20(2): 273-287.
- Weeks, K. (2007) 'Life within and against work: Affective labor, feminist critique, and post-fordist politics', *ephemera*, 7(1): 233-249.
- White, B. (2009) 'Underwater and not walking away: Shame, fear and the social management of the housing crisis', *Arizona legal studies*, Discussion Paper No. 09-35.
- Zehr, H. (1990) *Changing lenses*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press.

the author

Miranda Joseph is Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in Gender & Women's Studies at the University of Arizona. Her second monograph, *A debt to society*, is forthcoming from University of Minnesota Press. She is the author of *Against the romance of community* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002). She received her PhD in Modern Thought and Literature from Stanford University in 1995.
Email: mirandaj@email.arizona.edu



The spectre of anarchism

Thomas Swann

review of

Eden, D. (2012) *Autonomy: Capitalism, class and politics*. Ashgate: Surrey. (HB, pp.283, £54.00, ISBN 9781409411741)

David Eden's *Autonomy: Capitalism, class and politics* is the first book-length general study of autonomist Marxism, or what he calls 'the perspective of autonomy' (11). A large and detailed analysis, Eden's book covers the work of three sub-traditions within autonomist thought, which he organizes geographically (across Italy, the US and the UK). He begins by discussing the ideas of Paolo Virno and Antonio Negri, before moving onto the authors grouped within the Midnight Notes Collective (MNC) and finishing with an appraisal of the work of John Holloway. Each section is divided into three chapters: two outlining the theories of the respective authors and a third offering several points of critique. Before moving on to discuss Eden's project as a whole and to comment on it, it should be noted that these three sections, in so far as they hone in on specific lacunae or theoretical and practical problems Eden has with the authors he discusses, offers valuable critique of, and insights into, autonomist thought. As such, his book is an invaluable and timely intervention in debates around autonomist Marxism. One thing that stands out about the book, however, is that these three sections at times read like three unconnected studies. While the conclusion and the themes Eden focuses on do bring them together, there is a sense, and I'll return to this below, that the three sections don't engage with one another as much as they perhaps could; i.e. the themes and discussions Eden talks about and critiques in one section don't always link up with or comment on

similar themes or discussions in the other sections. I want to proceed here by partially reviewing the critical approaches he takes towards each author or set of authors. Before doing so, it is worth noting the issues that link the authors under discussion in Eden's book. In his conclusion he identifies four common principles held by Negri and Virno, the MNC and Holloway: 1) anti-statism, 2) heterogeneous ideas of class and multiplicity, 3) unifying aspects bringing different struggles together, and 4) prefiguration (258-9). The last of these I will return to below. To begin with, I will provide a partial summary of each of Eden's three sections, discussing in turn his accounts and critiques of Negri and Virno, the MNC and finally Holloway. Following this, I will comment on the potential relationship between autonomist Marxism and anarchism, focussing in particular on the ideas of negation and prefiguration.

Eden's critique of Negri and Virno focuses on the lack of an appreciation of the role of exchange in capitalism. 'This leads', he writes, to 'an absence of the commodity, and thus fetishism, as serious categories in their work. Thus their topography of capitalism contains large dark and obscure zones' (95). This is perhaps the most theoretically technical section of the book. Eden's argument is that a lack of appreciation of exchange and commodity fetishism results in a failure to include alienation within their theories, and that following from this, neither Negri nor Virno understand the importance of the struggle against being labour by labour; in other words, they fail to recognise that part of the struggle of workers is a negation of the role or identity of being a worker, an identity defined by capitalist relations. Eden argues that a fundamental challenge for the multitude is, therefore, to fight against its own role in these capitalist social relations. Rather than simply wrestle labour from capitalist control, given labour's role as a product of capitalist relations, it too must be overcome for a struggle to be truly emancipatory. Fundamentally, he argues, the importance Negri and Virno place on labour and production, and in particular immaterial labour (a concept that also comes under criticism), only represents half of the story of capitalism. A recognition of exchange, the other half, allows one to take into account not only the creation of new alternatives to capitalism (reclaiming labour from capitalist relations) but also that which needs to be abolished: 'This means the negation of those parts of us and our life-world which *cannot* be freed from capital, parts that we ourselves have built' (113).

Turning to the MNC, Eden highlights their work on the notion of the commons, but is critical of the extent to which their definition thereof becomes over-stretched and, importantly, fails to 'adequately and convincingly identify the commons in the [global] North' (257). Taking the example of a strike in the town of Jay, Maine in the US, used by MNC participant David Riker, Eden shows that the idea of the commons as 'the ensemble of relations of the life of the people in

the town' (175) is problematic. Crucially, this commons is something that is described as arising out of struggle and not something that precedes capitalism and that is then enclosed by it (one of the key theoretical positions of the MNC being about enclosure and the development of capitalism, a position Eden is generally very supportive of). Eden contends that this is symptomatic of an attempt to create the commons as a 'theory of everything', which inevitably reduces the distinctions and diversity within class struggle. He is sceptical that such a reduction can bring under one conceptualisation the struggles in the global North and global South, suggesting that there are fundamental differences between the struggle of those in Jay, Maine and the Zapatistas (another favourite example of the MNC), especially when these are viewed through the lens of the commons. One result of this, Eden argues, is that the MNC 'begin to slide into defences of previous reforms of capitalism and sometimes put forwards reformist and social-democratic positions' (257). This is evidenced by their support of populist social-democratic governments in Latin America, something that doesn't exactly cohere with the general autonomist rejection of the state (184-6).

Of his critique of Holloway, the most pertinent and developed line is perhaps that which deals with identity. According to Eden, Holloway's work involves a complete rejection of identity as a product of capitalist relations: 'capitalism affects daily life and creates certain forms of subjectivity, consciousness and intimate patterns of existence' (203). As a result, the struggle against capitalism is a struggle against all fixed identities (this is related to his conception of negation which I will discuss below). This position, Eden argues, means that Holloway is unable to see the politically radical potential for some forms of identity. As Eden notes, 'so many struggles of the last 40 years have taken the shape of struggles *of* and *for* identity: anti-racisms, national liberation, feminism, struggles around sexuality, etc.' (244, italics in original). Interestingly, the critique of Holloway's position on identity presented in the book makes use of the very same example that Holloway does: the Zapatistas. While Holloway asserts that the balaclavas and masks of the Zapatistas represent the non- or anti- identity of the movement, Eden is quick to point out that covering the face in that manner stands in fact for a common humanity, and also that the specific types of masks worn actually help to identify the movement as indigenous, as they reference Mayan culture and religion (247-8). Based on this, and other criticisms of Holloway, Eden concludes that Holloway is unable to '*really suggest an effective, emancipatory communist politics*' (249, italics in original). Instead, he proposes to take the Zapatista example further than Holloway has taken it, both on the question of identity and on a radical political praxis in general.

What struck me most reading Eden's book, as someone with an academic background more in anarchist than Marxist theory, was the strong parallels between autonomism and anarchism, especially in terms of political action. Indeed, Eden writes in his introduction that 'in the English speaking (sic) global North outside of the university it is most often only among anarchist circles that you will find any ongoing discussion of the perspective of autonomy' (9). He moves on from this discussion in the space of two paragraphs, which is rather unfair given the connections, but of course his is not a study of the relationship between autonomism and other left-wing currents. Beyond his brief tangent, one can identify a number of links between autonomist and anarchist thought, the starkest of which is the idea of prefiguration: 'the creation of the future in the present... of alternative social relations todayn (sic)' (259). In the cases of Virno and Holloway, for example, Eden notes how they rearticulate the temporality of anti-capitalist struggle: 'rather than exercising our counter-power only in the future, we bring it into being now'. He also compares Negri's approach with the Industrial Workers of the World's idea of building a new world in the shell of the old. Similarly, for members of the MNC and Holloway, the Zapatistas stand out as a prime example of anti-capitalist activity as they 'directly create alternative post-capitalist social relations *as a fundamental part* of their resistance to capitalism' (158, italics in original). While anarchists can't claim to have coined the notion of prefiguration, it is a central part of contemporary anarchist theory, informing activist as well as academic discussions.

In the field of ethics, for example, Benjamin Franks' recent work has drawn on prefiguration as a core anarchist principle and on this foundation he develops an anarchist virtue ethics. This is in fact very similar in form to Virno's performative ethics outlined in *A Grammar of the Multitude*. There, Virno (2004: 52) draws on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and the distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*, the latter being defined as an activity which has its end within the doing of the activity and not in an external product. *Praxis*, for Virno, is the foundation for autonomist ethics (to the extent that there is such a thing). Compare this to Franks' practical anarchism, which builds on Alasdair MacIntyre's (1985) virtue ethics (Franks, 2008: 147): '(practical anarchism) identifies goods as being inherent to social practices.... It stresses the immanent values of particular practices rather than the externally decided (consequentialist) values that will accrue'. In so far as prefiguration has to do with the bringing together of means and ends within action, anarchists and autonomists accord with one another. A related linkage between autonomism and anarchism on the question of political action concerns the rejection of the temporality of traditional communist ideology: that the revolution will come at a point in the future, after which there will be either communism or socialism as a transitional phase. While of course every anarchist in history hasn't rejected the idea of the revolution to come, in

general a more prefigurative approach, which calls for revolution in the here and now as an on-going practice, or *praxis*, has been dominant. Discussions on prefiguration within autonomist thought would perhaps do well to take anarchism more seriously. This is particularly true when it comes to the concept of negation, an aspect of prefigurative politics that is common to both autonomism and anarchism.

As noted above, negation comes up in Eden's discussions of Holloway and the MNC and he is especially critical of the way in which Holloway focuses too much on a politics of negation (at least in his earlier work), of destroying capitalist social relations, and not enough on the positive building of alternatives. While Holloway is described as shifting from a purely negative position to one in which negation is defined as 'the direct appearance of an alternative' (241), the relationship between his latter conceptualisation and the MNC's idea of 'substruction' is not explored. 'Substruction' is defined by p.m. such that '[c]onstruction has to be combined with subversion into one process' (p.m., quoted at 165), uniting similar trajectories as appear in Holloway's later and earlier work respectively. In a similar fashion, Eden's critique of Negri and Virno, in which, as I mentioned above, he argues that they ought to take into account not only creating new alternatives but also abolishing or negating that which ties labour to capitalist relations, also stands alone and is not brought into conversation with the MNC or Holloway on this theme. Since all three sub-traditions discussed in the book clearly have something to say about negation and prefiguration, it is a shame that their respective thought on the issue is not compared and/or contrasted. This is the first major criticism I have of Eden's study: the three sections are just that, three distinct parts that while making up the whole aren't made to explicitly relate or refer to one another.

The general autonomist position on negation presented across the three sections, however, chimes very well with nineteenth-century anarchist author and activist Mikhail Bakunin's notion of creative destruction. He famously wrote, at the end of 'The Reaction in Germany' (1842), a text which applies his version of Hegelian dialectics to politics, 'Let us therefore trust the eternal Spirit which destroys and annihilates only because it is the unfathomable and eternal source of all life. The passion for destruction is a creative passion, too!' The use of the term 'Spirit' here has to be understood in the context of mid-nineteenth-century Hegelian thought and shouldn't be taken to refer necessarily to anything supernatural or God-like. This is perhaps another aspect lacking in Eden's study: an appreciation of or reference to Hegel when examining the theory and practice of autonomist Marxism. While autonomists would no doubt reject any idea of an objective dynamic in history, such as the thesis-antithesis-synthesis model of orthodox Marxism or the thesis-antithesis alternative of Bakunin's idea of negation, given

that negation seems to figure heavily in the work of many autonomist authors, a discussion of Hegelian logic would be appropriate and might help to better understand the theories at hand. This, it must be noted, is perhaps symptomatic of a tendency within autonomist thought towards a kind of theoretical incest: a lack of engagement with sources coming from outside the tradition. Eden's book functions well as an internal critique of the validity of much of what Negri and Virno, the MNC and Holloway say, but it doesn't engage these authors in wider political debates or bring in lines of criticism from elsewhere.

As a relative newcomer to autonomist Marxism, I may not be particularly well-placed to comment on much of Eden's text, and of course I cannot in any way vouch for the soundness or otherwise of his exposition of the ideas of his three subjects. However, as the first general study of autonomism to be published in English that deals with more than one author, I would suggest that his book is essential reading for those engaged in academic debates around autonomism or indeed those using particular autonomist ideas or authors in their work. While it is not intended as one, the book does work very well as a partial introduction to the tradition and to the ideas of Negri and Virno, the MNC and Holloway in particular. A proper introduction would perhaps do better to work along thematic lines rather than advancing from author to author. Autonomism is of course a much larger field than that which Eden is able to include in his study, but despite the criticisms I've mentioned here, that the three sections don't engage with one another well enough and that an appreciation of discussions and ideas from outside autonomist thought is lacking, his is a valuable account that is perhaps indispensable for academics interested in gaining more knowledge about autonomism as well as those already engaged in its debates.

references

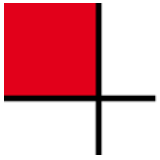
- Bakunin, M. (1842) 'The Reaction in Germany from the Notebooks of a Frenchman'. [<http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/michail-bakunin-the-reaction-in-germany-from-the-notebooks-of-a-frenchman>].
- Franks, B. (2008) 'Postanarchism and meta-ethics', *Anarchist Studies*, 16(2): 135-53.
- MacIntyre, A. (1985) *After virtue. A study in moral theory (second edition)*. London: Duckworth.
- Virno, P. (2004) *A grammar of the multitude. For an analysis of contemporary forms of life*. Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e).

the author

Thomas Swann is a PhD student and graduate teaching assistant at the University of Leicester and a member of the Centre for Philosophy and Political Economy. His

interests include anarchist and autonomist political theory, organisational cybernetics and the political use of social media and technology. His PhD thesis takes the role of social media in the uprisings of 2011 as a springboard for a discussion around non-hierarchical political practice and the potential assistance social technology can afford to such projects. This involves developing a framework that uses organisational cybernetics to help explain what exactly happens when activists use social media to communicate and organise, both strategically and tactically. Thomas has written on classical anarchist thought and anarchist ethics and is currently teaching on a course in International Business Ethics at Radboud University Nijmegen.

Email: trs6@leicester.ac.uk



Friendship and counter-conduct in the neoliberal regime of truth

Richard Weiskopf

review of

May, T. (2012) *Friendship in an age of economics. Resisting the forces of neoliberalism*. Lexington Books: Lenham. (HB, pp. 164, £36.41, ISBN 9780739175811)

Introduction and context

Today we live in an era of social and economic crises. As neoliberalism has established itself as a hegemonic regime, the dark side of neoliberalism has come into sharp relief. Empirical data show that in all examples of implementing neoliberal policies, we can observe that it is only a small minority who benefits, while the majority is worse off (Harvey, 2005). Defenders and proponents of neoliberal thought believe that the solution to problems in the social world is to be found in 'enterprising up' (du Gay, 2004) individuals, public and private organizations, and countries. They should be made 'fit for the market' by increasing competitiveness and flexibility, instilling economic orientation, cutting benefits and welfare, selectively investing in 'human capital', etc. There seems to be no alternative. On the other hand, paradoxically, many of those who argue heatedly against neoliberalism as an evil system actively participate in its practices and follow the rules of the game. Academia is no exception. There is a whole 'regime of truth' that is made up of individualising rankings, ratings, success points, procedures, and performance measurements, and it works every day to convince us that there is no alternative. After all, how else could one be

recognised as a 'valuable human resource' within our 'enterprised-up' universities (Willmott, 1995)?

Todd May, a philosopher from Clemson University (USA) who has written extensively on continental (poststructuralist) philosophy, in particular on the philosophy of Michel Foucault (May, 2006), Gilles Deleuze (May, 2005), and, more recently, on Jacques Rancière (May, 2010), rejects such deterministic thinking. Influenced by Foucault, he insists on the contingency of history (May, 2006) and on the constitutive role of *practices* in forming and defining 'who we are' (May, 2001).

In his new book, May is particularly concerned with how neoliberalism as an 'emerging and intersecting set of practices embedded in a particular economic orientation' (4) influences and shapes us. In a broad sense, the book is about how our relations to ourselves and to others are organized in the current (neoliberal) regime of truth and how they can be organized differently. May deals with the question of how *certain forms* of friendship can provide an alternative to the neoliberal structuring of social relations, and in a more active and political sense, can provide the foundations for resistance to practices and institutions of neoliberalism.

Structure and content

Neoliberalism has arisen as a specific regime in which it is argued that the function of the state is to ensure the competitiveness of states, organizations, and individuals. In contrast to classical liberalism, neoliberalism does not simply trust in the natural emergence of the market. Instead, it requires state intervention in order to provide and *create* the conditions for markets. Neoliberalism is much more than simply the name for a specific economic policy. It is a programme for transforming society as a whole by changing the orientations and ethics of the actors. It does this by altering 'rules of the game' (Foucault, 2008: 260) and the environment in which they operate. It is in particular the economists of the Chicago School who have provided the basis for such a far-reaching programme, firstly by interpreting and analysing human behaviour in general – from child-rearing to learning and education, etc. – as economic behaviour, and secondly by informing policies and interventions that shape the world according to this image.

The second chapter introduces the theoretical concept of the *figure*, which is derived from Foucault's work. Figures are normative constructions that imply specific modes of being. They differ from Weberian 'ideal types' in that they

emerge from within a specific historical field of practices and are not created by someone analysing these practices from outside. In contrast to ideal types, figures are normative. They categorise and judge empirically. Foucault (1981: 105) himself briefly introduces the term in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, where he discusses the perverse adult, the Malthusian couple, the masturbating child, and the hysterical woman as ‘figures’ associated with the ‘dispositive of sexuality’. Crucially, the figures that Foucault discusses there are linked to the larger project of *normalisation*, providing the basis for interventions to bring individuals back to the norm.

May discusses the ‘consumer’ and the ‘entrepreneur’ as two dominant ‘figures’ of neoliberalism which are distinct from the project of (disciplinary) normalisation. They are linked to the dynamic dictates of the market – what Bröckling (2007) called the ‘comparative imperative of the market’ – rather than to a posited norm. The central issue for individuals is no longer whether they are ‘normal’ but rather whether they participate in the market; whether they are ‘in’ or ‘out’ (30). To be clear, neither the existence of entrepreneurial activity nor the act of buying or consuming of things is new or particularly ‘neoliberal’. People have bought and consumed things right from the beginning of trade economies. What is new is the dominance and sedimentation of these activities into *figures* that imply and promote specific relations to self and others. According to May the figure of the consumer embodies several themes: People identify less with what they produce and more with what they consume. The specific time orientation is ‘pointillist’ (38). The consumer is not concerned with the past or future but with what is happening at moment. An orientation towards immediate enjoyment and pleasure is coupled with a discouragement of reflection on the effects of one’s current activity on others.

In contrast to the consumer, the figure of the entrepreneur has a broader theoretical history that lies at the heart of the neoliberal economic theory of the Chicago School. It is particularly associated with the thought of Theodore Schultz and the Nobel Prize winner Gary Becker. According to them, we need to recognise the ‘capital’ embodied in human beings and think of them and the social relations in terms of capital investment and return. Especially in the work of Gary Becker, the entrepreneur emerges as a new version of the ‘*homo oeconomicus*’, as a ‘correlate of a governmentality which will act on the environment and systematically modify its variables’ (Foucault, 2008: 271). He is no longer a partner in exchange, but an ‘entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital’ (*ibid.*: 226). For these thinkers, not only economic relations in the narrow sense but the entirety of human behaviour can – and should – be understood in terms capital and investment. In contrast to the consumer, the entrepreneur does not passively await entertainment in the

present, but actively seeks opportunities and is oriented towards the *future*. S/he expects a return on investment. What unites both figures is the highly individualistic orientations that they imply.

The next chapter is more philosophical in orientation and opens up a space for thinking beyond these individualising figures by discussing ‘varieties of friendship’. May, like many others (see for example French, 2007), develops the notion of friendship starting with Aristotle’s (2002) distinctions in *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Books 8 and 9) where he distinguishes between ‘friendships of pleasure’, ‘friendships of utility’, and ‘true friendships’. It is easy to see how these notions of friendship relate to the figures of the ‘consumer’ and the ‘entrepreneur’. May argues that the figures of neoliberalism enable and strongly encourage the first two types of friendship. They allow friendship for the sake of gaining pleasurable experiences or for the sake of usefulness. What is discouraged is friendship for its own sake and those aspects of friendship that go beyond economic orientations. While May retains Aristotle’s central idea that there are relations concerned with the other for the sake of the other, he differs from Aristotle in that he does not limit such friendship to particularly ‘virtuous’ people.

May’s central concern is not with ‘true’ or ‘pure’ friendships, but with what he calls ‘deep’ or ‘close’ friendships. He characterises them by four traits: they are ‘*other-regarding*’ (they seek the good of the other for the sake of the other); they involve *passion or affection* for the other as a central characteristic, not just as a supplement; and they are *historical* in character, since the shared past plays a central role. Linked to this is the irreplaceability of close friendships and relationships of trust which they entail. The fourth characteristic is the *meaning* that these relationships provide to the lives of friends.

The most interesting and challenging questions emerge in chapters VI and VII, where May discusses (close) friendships first as an alternative to (and within) neoliberalism and then as a potential space that allows the grounding and formation of active forms of resistance to neoliberalism. The first question hinges on the economic or non-economic character of friendship. Can we say that (close) friendships are non-economic relations? Can we say that they are essentially different from the forms of relations that neoliberalism encourages? May’s answer to these questions is: yes. Relations of (close) friendship, he argues, are *non-economic* in character and closer to gift-giving than to any other form of economy. They ‘*largely*’ – an important qualifier – ignore accounting and the calculating of gains and losses, and thinking in terms of investment and return is foreign to them.

There are, of course objections to this view. Most prominently, Derrida (1992) argued that as soon as the gift appears as a gift either to the donor or the donee, a circle of economic exchange is established. Seen in this way, relations of friendship cannot provide an alternative to neoliberal structuring of relations; rather, they are themselves caught up in the economy of investment and return. While Derrida's positioning of the gift as the 'figure of the impossible' (7) reminds us that not all practices have a rationality and an expectation of return and opens a way of thinking outside the economic circle (Jones and Spicer, 2006: 195-7) it casts doubt on the potential to escape the economic circle that May attributes to close friendships.

May disagrees, saying that Derrida's view is itself guilty of neglecting the specific context of friendship in which the gift emerges. In close friendships, he argues, 'the emergence of a balance sheet into reflexive awareness... is not the indicator of an ongoing underlying economic quality to the friendship, but instead of a problem or at least a perceived problem with its current state' (112). In May's view, Derrida's discussion of the inescapable economic character of the gift exchange is itself an historically situated view that needs to be questioned. It can certainly not be said that Derrida embraces the neoliberal structuring of social relations (see e.g. Derrida, 1994, particularly p. 81-85 on the 'plagues of the new world order' (81)), and May does not say that. Instead, May's argument is that by neglecting the specific historical and social context of gift-giving in relations of (close) friendship, Derrida overlooks an important alternative to the neoliberal structuring of social relations and thus indirectly plays into the hands of neoliberalism.

So what grounds the non-economic character of (close) friendships? For May it is *trust*, the mutual dependency of close friends, the sharing of experiences, and the developing of bonds rooted in past experiences or shared in the present. Within such contexts, gift-giving emerges without much awareness that it is happening. In friendship, trust is not a calculation that the friend will act in specific, predictable ways; it is in May's view a 'placing oneself in the hands of the friend' (114). In May's view, it is the absorption in what is happening that precludes accounting. It is only when the flow of friendship and the immersion in mutual becoming (Webb, 2003) is interrupted that the calculating logic emerges within relations of friendship. May provides an interesting analogy: If we watch a movie that engages us, the fact that it lasts 90 minutes or so does not really matter. It is irrelevant to our experience. It is only when the movie does *not* engage us that we begin to count the minutes, and it is then that we might reflect – like the entrepreneur – on whether the time we have 'invested' is worth the return on investment.

Extending the analogy, one might say that watching a good movie is not simply or not only consuming images for immediate pleasure. It might include being challenged and questioned, thus opening one's evaluative outlooks. This of course is not necessarily a comfortable experience. Similarly, the 'critical friend' intervenes and might challenge our views of ourselves and the world (see also Foucault, 2001). Such interventions require an abandoning of calculation; the 'critical friend' makes him/herself vulnerable and dependent. S/he must *trust* in the bonds of friendship rather than calculate the effects of the intervention. Close friendships are *in this sense* an alternative to the individualising and calculating logic/rationality of neoliberalism that does not lie outside or beyond the boundaries of its influence. Rather, they provide an alternative in which the pervasive logic of neoliberalism is questioned or even evaded. Friendships 'provide a space where an alternative to consumerism and investment can be nourished. [... T]o be immersed in a deep friendship is already to refuse to be overtaken by the values fostered in a neoliberal society' (121).

Is friendship more than organising private relations? How is friendship related to politics? Can it provide the basis for a 'progressive politics of solidarity' (124) that resists the individualising logic of neoliberalism? Can it be considered as a model for political organizing? These are the questions that May discusses in chapter VII. On the one hand, it can be argued that friendship tends to close itself off from wider social relations. Given the particular character of friendships, they might be seen as turning away from political involvement and ignoring the wider concerns of society. It can be argued that friendship is detrimental to political engagement, and in this respect, there is a deep ambivalence to it. In *The politics of friendship*, Derrida (1997) has argued that the (classical) models of friendship reproduce the friend/enemy distinction. For Derrida, a 'democracy-to-come' relies on the *deconstruction* of this dualism. In keeping with this view, an active resistance to the dominant form of structuring social relations cannot be built on the model of friendship (and associated models like 'community'), since friendship is based on the exclusion of the other. Derrida's concern is with opening of closed and closing models of organising social relations and creating a space for increasing responsibility to and recognition of the other. From this perspective, what allows solidarity to emerge is not the cultivation of friendship, but the deconstruction of the borders between the same (of friendship) and the other (of enmity).

An alternative perspective emerges from the work of Jacques Rancière, which is more directly addressed to those 'outside' the dominant regime – to that 'part that has no part' (Rancière, 1999: 8-9) in the direction of society. For Rancière, democratic politics relies on the questioning of institutionalised distinctions and classifications and on the possibility of articulating alternatives by those who

‘have no part’; it relies on equality and collective trust. May accepts the fundamental ambivalence in friendship. His position, however, is closer to that of Rancière than of Derrida. He argues that *certain aspects* of friendship are fundamental for the development of alternative modes of organising social relations that can actively challenge the politics of neoliberalism because they can provide both the themes and the training and motivation for movements of political resistance. Close friendships provide safe spaces for self-invention; they open up spaces for reflecting on one’s evaluative outlooks on social, political and economic arrangements (128). In sum, May suggests that ‘friendship, because it is a relationship among equals, one defined by mutual trust, embodies equality in a way that can be translated to movements of solidarity and against encroachments of neoliberalism’ (131).

Evaluation and conclusion

May not only writes *about* friendship; his book is itself a fine example of ‘writing *in* friendship’ (Townley, 1994). He critically engages in various literatures without being judgemental. He is more interested in how these various literatures might help us to think differently about how life is organised. May’s book does not provide alternatives in a prescriptive tone; instead, it opens a space for reflecting on how we relate to self and others and how such relating might be transformed. It avoids both conspiracy theory and the anthropomorphising of neoliberalism: there is no single person or institution called ‘neoliberalism’. Rather, neoliberalism is *a set of practices* that is structured by an economic rationality that invades and (increasingly) pervades all spheres of life. To resist neoliberalism is not simply to point to a ‘system out there’; it is, first of all, recognising how this pervasive logic (trans)forms us, and how, by participating in its specific practices, we more or less *become* what neoliberal theory takes as given: calculating subjects.

May’s book complements studies of neoliberal governmentality and the emergence of the ‘enterprising self’ (e.g. Bröckling, 2007; du Gay, 2004; Rose, 1998). These studies focussed on the analysis of programmes and examined in detail the technologies and practices of (neoliberal) self-formation. Many of them (while frequently criticised for being ‘deterministic’) end on the note that ‘government is a congenitally failing operation’ (Miller and Rose, 1990: 10). Similarly, May stresses that while figures (of neoliberalism) may be pervasive, they are not exhaustive and cannot determine or ultimately enforce its norms. Going one step beyond studies of governmentality, May’s book provides a way to consider alternative modes of organising social relations that can be broadly subsumed under the category of ‘counter-conduct’ (Davidson, 2011). Friendship

is not transformed into a programme that can be followed and executed; it is presented as a mode of being that can be experienced and with which one can experiment. It is not an (abstract) utopia but a concrete possibility. As such, it will always be a precarious space of possibility – always in danger of being captured by the pervasive logic of practices in which we are embedded – but also a space that can be folded in various ways into social practices for creating alternative modes of being – modes of being that move us beyond the narrow, calculating logic that is often (mis)taken as the whole reality (Stivale, 2008). It is only to the degree that this experience is forgotten and devalued that neoliberalism succeeds. As May says, '[i]nasmuch as we think of ourselves as consumers and entrepreneurs, and act in accordance with these self-conceptions, we are unlikely to open ourselves to close friendships. They will not appear to us as possibilities on our interpersonal horizon' (141).

In his analysis of the figures of neoliberalism, May draws heavily on Foucault's (2008) lectures on biopolitics and on Foucault's reading of the economists of the Chicago School. In his own trajectory, Foucault turned to Greek antiquity to reveal alternative modes of structuring relations to self and others. He was particularly attracted to the practice of *Parrhesia* (truth-telling) as a practice that both challenges the dominant regime of truth and provides an alternative mode of self-formation (Luxon, 2008). Particularly in the Socratic tradition, the friendship relation was at the heart of the 'parrhesiastic game', as a necessary component for helping the other to get rid of his/her self-delusion (see Foucault, 2001: 133-42). Foucault's (1997a) brief remarks on 'friendship as a way of life' indicate one line of developing an ethics and politics of 'counter-conduct' that potentially changes force relations between individuals and modifies one's relations to oneself (Davidson, 2011). In developing this line and linking it to our presence, May contributes to the development of an ethico-politics that both resists the individualising power neoliberalism and encourages us 'to fight against the impoverishment of the relational fabric' (Foucault, 1997b: 158) of the social – including the organisational – world we inhabit.

Grey and Sturdy (2007: 169) have noticed that '(o)rganizational analysis has been shy of speaking about friendship, and where it has done so at all, it has adopted a language of social capital, network ties, and similar terms'. To speak about friendship (solely) in these terms is already to be incorporated into neoliberal newspeak that forecloses the possibility of thinking differently about how relations are organized. On the other hand, there are also good reasons for being sceptical when the language of friendship is evoked in the context of work organizations and embraced and appropriated by culture management programmes. If (discursively) 'we are all friends here' (Costas, 2012), normative pressures and forms of normative control are created that strengthen rather than

undermine the neoliberal logic and conceal rather than transform the relations of power that support it.

May's book provides an alternative language in which organisational analysts could explore 'friendship' both as an 'organizing principle' (Grey and Sturdy, 2007: 164) – that is in tension, but not necessarily incompatible with work-organizations – and as an 'organizing element' that is 'enmeshed within and sometimes cuts across (formal) structures' (165). As such, it (potentially) creates a space of 'counter-conduct' or solidarity that resists individualising pressures but may also be productive of exclusions. It is this darker side of even 'close friendships' that May recognises but somehow downplays in his work. Vice versa, empirical studies of 'enterprising selves' may also shed light on how the discourse of enterprise may also be productive of 'transgressive desires' (Fenwick, 2002) that value mutually supportive relations over individualising competition. That said, May's book might also provide a starting point for exploring alternative organizations (such as solidarity movements, etc.) and their modes of structuring relations. A genealogy of such modes of organising coupled with an experimental attitude might open up a space for reinventing ourselves and the ways we organise our relations. May's book is an example of thought that recognises the historically contingent limitations and encourages us to move beyond them. It reminds us that there *are* alternatives; not one, but many. Friendship in its non-economic mode is one of them. Whether this is strong enough to breed and nourish solidarity movements that can effectively resist the individualising pressure of neoliberalism and its practices is a still-unanswered question.

Even though there are good reasons for being pessimistic about the possibilities of change in such a pervasive system, there are also reasons to be optimistic in Foucault's sense. This is an optimism that does not 'consist in saying that things couldn't be better [but rather]... in saying that so many things can be changed, fragile as they are, bound up more with circumstances than with necessities, more arbitrary than self-evident, more a matter of complex, but temporary, historical circumstances than with inevitable anthropological constraints' (Foucault, 1990: 156). It is in this sense that May's book provides an optimistic perspective. This optimism is not to be confused with an idealization or romanticizing of 'friendship'; instead it consists of remembering alternatives to a 'regime of truth' that denies the very possibility of conducting our lives – both inside and outside of organizations – differently.

references

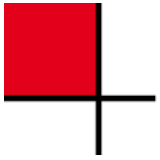
- Aristotle (2002) (350 BC) *Nicomachean ethics*, trans. S. Broadie and C. Rowe. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bröckling, U. (2007) *Das unternehmerische Selbst: Soziologie einer Subjektivierungsform*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- Costas, J. (2012) 'We are all friends here: Reinforcing paradoxes of normative control in a culture of friendship', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 21(4): 377-395.
- Davidson, A. (2011) 'In praise of counter-conduct', *History of the Human Sciences*, 24(4): 25-41.
- Derrida, J. (1992) *Given time: 1. Counterfeit money*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, J. (1994) *Specters of Marx. The state of the debt, the work of mourning, & the new international*, trans. P. Kamuf. New York and London: Routledge.
- Derrida, J. (1997) *Politics of friendship*. London: Verso.
- du Gay, P. (2004) 'Against "Enterprise" (but not against "enterprise", for that would make no sense)', *Organization*, 11(1): 37-57.
- Fenwick, T. (2002) 'Transgressive desires: new enterprising selves in the new capitalism', *Work, employment and society*, 16(4): 703-723.
- Foucault, M. (1981) *The history of sexuality*. Vol 1. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Foucault, M. (1990) 'Practicing criticism', in L.D. Kritzman (ed.) *Michel Foucault. Politics, philosophy culture: interviews and other writings of Michel Foucault*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1997a) 'Friendship as a way of life', in P. Rabinow (ed.) *Michel Foucault. Ethics, subjectivity and truth*, trans. J. Johnston. New York: The New Press.
- Foucault, M. (1997b) 'The masked philosopher', in P. Rabinow (ed.) *Michel Foucault. Ethics, subjectivity and truth*, trans. J. Johnston. New York: The New Press.
- Foucault, M. (2001) *Fearless speech*, trans. J. Pearson. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Foucault, M. (2008) *The birth of biopolitics. Lectures at the collège de France 1978-1979*. Palgrave London: Macmillan.
- French, R. (2007) 'Friendship and organization: Learning from the western friendship tradition', *Management & Organizational History*, 2(3): 255-272.
- Grey, C. and A. Sturdy (2007) 'Friendship and organizational analysis', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 16(2): 157-172.
- Harvey, D. (2005) *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jones, C. and A. Spicer (2006) 'Entrepreneurial excess', in J. Brewis, S. Linstead, D. Boje and T. O'Shea (eds.) *The passion of organizing*. Copenhagen: Liber & Copenhagen Business School Press.
- Luxon, N. (2008) 'Ethics and subjectivity. Practices of self-Governance in the late lectures of Michel Foucault', *Political Theory*, 36(3): 377-402.
- May, T. (2001) *Our practices, our selves. Or, what it means to be human*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- May, T. (2005) *Gilles Deleuze. An introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- May, T. (2006) *The philosophy of Foucault*. Chesham: Acumen.
- May, T. (2010) *Contemporary movements and the thought of Jacques Rancière. Equality in action*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Miller, P. and N. Rose (1990) 'Governing economic life', *Economy and Society*, 19(1): 1-31.

- Rancière, J. (1999) *Disagreement*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rose, N. (1998) *Inventing our selves. Psychology, power, and personhood*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stivale, C.H. (2008) *Gilles Deleuze's ABCs. The folds of friendship*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Townley, B. (1994) 'Writing in friendship', *Organization*, 1(1): 24-28.
- Webb, D. (2003) 'On friendship: Derrida, Foucault and the practice of becoming', *Research in Phenomenology*, 33: 119-140.
- Willmott, H. (1995) 'Managing the academics: Commodification and control in the development of university education in the U.K.' *Human Relations*, 48(9): 993-1027.

the author

Richard Weiskopf is a professor at the Department of Organization and Learning at the University of Innsbruck. His general interest is in the theory and philosophy of organization; particularly, he is interested in the potential of poststructuralist philosophies for problematizing and rethinking organization and the management of work.

Email: richard.weiskopf@uibk.ac.at



‘Of luck and leverage’

Joyce Goggin

review of

Bjerg, O. (2011) *Poker: The parody of capitalism*. University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor. (PB, pp. 274, US\$35.00, ISBN9780472071630)

Of all the uses to which the work of Slavoj Žižek has been put in recent years, Ole Bjerg’s new book on poker and its relationship to capitalism is, to my mind, one of the most interesting and productive. While Žižek is familiar fare in film and new media studies, literature and cultural studies, Bjerg brings Žižek’s (1991) re-reading of Lacan’s concepts of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary to the analysis of a simple game which, as players know, turns out to be exceedingly rich and complex. Indeed poker, a 19th-century American hybrid of card games like poch, bouillotte and brag that entered the New World from Germany, France and England (Parlett, 1992: 208) has also, in this age of postmodern finance and globalization, become an industry, an important economic driver and a ‘sport’ that people love to watch on TV.

Bjerg’s analysis of poker, how it is played, and its role in the greater scheme of things from the perspective of Žižek’s concepts is nothing short of brilliant, in part because it holds out a truly original explanation for the complexity and seemingly endless depths of poker, a game that has puzzled card and game historians for a long time. Where others have remained baffled by poker’s surface simplicity that masks tremendous complexity, along with the game’s relation to both causal logic and chance, Bjerg’s analysis is able to account for the mechanics of poker along with the fascinating dynamics of bluffing, which serve

to heighten and filter human nature and psychology. The initial step in Bjerg's approach to elucidating the game's more mysterious qualities contained in part one of *Poker: The parody of capitalism*, consists in asserting the notion that poker is neither simply a game of chance nor a game of skill, but rather it involves 'an intricate interplay between chance, mathematical-logical deduction, and psychology' (11).

What Bjerg is then able to explain is how these aspects of poker – both the game and its practice – jive with the Žižekian categories of the symbolic, the real and the imaginary. To begin, the element of logical deduction inherent in poker corresponds to Žižek's (1991) version of the symbolic order, and amounts to the poker-playing subject's compliance with the rules of the game and the notion of causality implied in counting cards, for example, as part of the game's governing system. It is this projected system of rules, including the calculation of odds and card counting, to which and through which the player responds in bidding. Again following Žižek, Bjerg explains the real in poker as the intrusion of chance, or the 'singular instance' that upsets the apple cart of logic, and particularly the 'law of great numbers', through which one is supposedly able to project the probability of an event's occurrence, such as the turn of a particular card. In other words, the real manifests itself as a disruption, as the element of chance that no amount of card counting can forestall, hence when it asserts itself, the real disrupts the laws of probability by not being reducible to any law.

But the greatness of poker resides in the fact that, while skilled players can sometimes get an edge by assiduously counting cards, they must also respond to the actions of other players. This, of course, is where the added layer of bluffing comes in. In order to read the behaviors, ticks and postures of one's opponents, one must constantly project fantasies in an attempt to explain opponents' tells, based on what they might be holding. Here, poker enters the imaginary, which 'consists of fantasmatic projections mediating the gap between the real and the symbolic' (12). In other words, in poker the imaginary consists of explanatory fantasies that make it possible for players to imagine and pre-empt other players' behaviors in the game. So, if one is competing with someone who plays fast and loose, for example, one might anticipate that this same player's raise is symptomatic of a naive interpretation of the strength of his or her hand, or simply a matter of reckless betting, perhaps due to inexperience or a propensity to embrace unjustifiable amounts of risk. On the other hand, the same behavior might be a bluff by a strong player who initially adopts a certain mode of play to create the impression of looseness, only later to switch to a different, 'tighter' strategy once other players have been duped.

What makes this 'ontology of poker' so appealing is its potential for broader application. As Bjerg argues, Žižek's (1991) re-reading of Lacan's psychoanalytic theory makes it applicable not only to an analysis of the game that psychologizes poker strategy, but also to a sociological analysis of the relationship between poker and poker playing subjects, as well as to poker and the market both inside and outside the game. Hence, while Bjerg analyzes poker itself in terms of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary, this tripartite logic is then extended to player types, namely, Suckers, Grinders, and Players. As Bjerg writes, 'while the Sucker is playing his luck, the Grinder is playing the cards, the Player is playing the opponent' (156). This section of the book likewise makes inroads into exploring the notion of 'entrepreneurial selves' and the hybrid potentials and skills that Grinders, Suckers or Players may possess, and which they may strategically develop and deploy. That said, however, Bjerg largely limits his discussion to the in-game economy, making this specific area one that has potential for much broader application in the future.

The Sucker, the first in Bjerg's typology, is the kind of player who counts on luck, plays wildly or loosely and clings to the romance of chance, and therefore, to the 'dimension of the real' (146). The Grinder, on the other hand, knows that chance is randomly distributed and therefore, operates squarely in the order of the symbolic. Moreover, as a player who attempts to make fairly steady and predictable returns in the game, the Grinder will carefully estimate every hand in relation to some form of deductive logic or theory of probability. And finally, the Player relies on his or her ability to read hesitation and weakness in the opponent. The Player will attempt to read opponents' tells as a means of projecting what is going on their minds, in the hopes of predicting their fantasies of how the game will pan out. In other words, the Player works largely in the area of the imaginary both by reading other players' bluffs and, with the Grinder, the Player makes long-term imaginary predictions as to how the law of great numbers might work in his or her favour.

Part Two of Bjerg's magnum opus contains a fascinating investigation of the poker economy, the first section of which deals with on-line poker and the general shift that has occurred as players have become increasingly skilled since the game was first virtualized. Here again the author explains a range of player types, from sharks (strong players, often professional) to donkeys, or those players who win in games with lesser or equally skilled players, and then make the move to a more professional crowd only to lose, thereby transferring the wealth from one level of the on-line community to the upper echelons of more skilled players. In 'A tough way to make an easy living', Bjerg explores how the 'enormous amounts of money circulating in the poker economy have made poker playing a viable way to make a living for a substantial number of players

worldwide' (111). Here Bjerg also begins to explain the conditions necessary for poker to become professionalized and how this relates to contemporary postmodern capitalism, wherein televised poker tournaments become big entertainment business.

In subsequent chapters of *Poker: The parody of capitalism*, Bjerg focuses more specifically on the game in the greater economy, comparing, for example, the previously established types – Suckers, Grinders, and Players – to how we interact with capitalism. Hence the Sucker, according to Bjerg, is like a worker in the system who 'acts in the most immediate relation to the real' and, like the worker who produces surplus value to be exploited, by counting blindly on chance the Sucker feeds the game with money which is then 'redistributed in the order of the symbolic and the imaginary in favour of the Grinder and the Player' (237). Likewise, Draw poker, Stud poker and No-Limit Texas Hold 'Em, are all analyzed in the chapter entitled 'The history of poker', in their relation to developing economic modes from industrial to postindustrial capitalism. And this permits Bjerg to conclude, and quite rightly I believe, that No-Limit Texas Hold 'Em is a perfect expression of what he calls 'No-Limit Capitalism' (234) in that 'there is no secure medium for trading and pricing commodities' since the collapse of the Bretton Woods, which he relates to the 'smaller number of exposed cards in Texas Hold 'Em' (238). That few cards are exposed in this game effectively makes skill in playing it more contingent on reading one's opponents imaginary projections, hence there is 'no way of neutralizing the fluctuations in the imaginary order by mathematical calculations', just as in the current financial market even the veneer of any conformity to a theory of market efficiency is out the window (239).

More importantly, Bjerg argues that poker, and particularly Texas Hold 'Em, has a great deal of explicative potential to help us to understand how capitalism works as an economic system that has particular impacts on the subjects that function within it. For example, in 'A tough way to make an easy living' Bjerg explores the cruel irony of the plight of the professional poker player who embarked upon this career in the pursuit of freedom – only to discover that, given the 'strong element of repetition and routine even in advanced poker playing' (135), the very opposite of freedom 'seems to be built into the profession and the game of poker' (*ibid.*). In other words, the subject who takes on poker as a profession in an attempt to subvert or sidestep the contemporary social and political economies ends up finding that poker is very much a part of those same economies, and demands slavish attention and sustained labour.

All of this said, however, I also have a few minor points of criticism that readers of Bjerg's book might want to take into account. The first concerns what might

be called a certain 'weakness' in Bjerg's book, which may ultimately turn out to be a considerable strength. *Poker: The parody of capitalism* is an enormous undertaking and this is reflected in the book's structure. This is to say that the book is divided into four parts, which are then subdivided into chapters, but each of the parts could readily become stand-alone books on their own. Indeed, with updating and elaborating this book could well lead to a good deal more work on the topic of poker – from an historical perspective, an economic perspective, or a cultural perspective – and again, this might just be the book's potential strength. Ultimately it is Žižek's re-reading of the Lacanian notion of the symbolic, real and imaginary that will ultimately guide any future applications that the book may have, thereby potentially imparting the same methodological rigor to subsequent studies.

My second criticism of the book is connected with the title which would lead readers to expect a more sustained analysis of the game and its relationship with contemporary capitalism. Unfortunately, this aspect of the book, although highly interesting, remains buried in the final section, and comes only after a long investigation of players, behaviours, in-game economies and so on. And while the book relates Texas Hold 'Em to the current market situation, I believe there is much more to be said on the topic in terms of the game's cultural framing in tandem with the cultural framing of the market. Again, it is perhaps what is left to say on the topic that makes Bjerg's contribution so stimulating, and one can only hope that his book will spawn more research on this under-theorized topic.

And finally, one might also take issue with Bjerg's reading of the Grinder and the 'reality', as it were, of imaginary projections of outcomes through the law of great numbers. What I am getting at is this: on the one hand Bjerg writes that 'any symbolization of the real [read: chance] in the form of mathematical calculation or logical deduction is structured around a central lack and then recognizing the way people compensate for this lack through their imaginary fantasies'(156). Good enough. But elsewhere in the book, Bjerg seems to suggest that the success of the Grinder type relies on the 'long run' view, that is, his or her ability to look forward to an 'imaginary point where the symbolic order is complete', or a moment at which 'the effects of the unruly real have been neutralized, chance is fully "tamed", and the universe is subordinated to the symbolic regularity and calculability of probability theory' (147). But this, to my mind, constitutes a fairly major contradiction in terms, given that the singular event – the chance occurrence – can never be entirely ruled out by counting cards or any other strategy, so that the real will always assert itself and disrupt the best laid plans of any player. Indeed herein lies the 'juice' that most gamblers crave almost regardless of their style of play but, more importantly, this is also why the market is so unpredictable and susceptible to crashing. In other words, it seems at turns

that Bjerg argues for the impossibility of taming chance, and elsewhere to believe that, in the past, one could rely on the law of great numbers and probability. This suggests therefore, that before our current post-Bretton Woods, post-modern, post-industrial, dematerializing economic paradigm, there was some form of economic realism whereby people could accurately predict outcomes and reliably make money. One need only cast the most cursory of glances in the direction of the mercurial economy of the 19th century, and the vicissitudes of the European market in that century, to see that this was far from being the case.

That said, however, Bjerg's insight that poker is about the three ontological orders – the real, the symbolic and the imaginary – and that, for example, Texas Hold 'Em's fascination and popularity resides in the game's 'structure that balances the three ontological orders very well against each other' provide the kind of 'aha' moments that make the book well worth reading, cover to cover (38). And more than simply worthy of a good read, *Poker: The parody of capitalism* is sure to inspire new research on this overlooked yet urgently important topic. Indeed, scholars should take the game of poker, and its most recent incarnation in Texas Hold 'Em, more seriously for a variety of reasons, among which are the game's potential to mirror the financial structures of the economy in which it operates, and its importance as an industry, as a profession and as a leisure activity. Hopefully, Ole Bjerg's important work on the topic will provide a springboard to more studies on the cultures of poker, and the liquid, changeable and highly adaptable structures of poker, which will doubtless continue to morph in step with the economy well into the future.

references

- Parlett, D. (1992) *A dictionary of card games*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
 Žižek, S. (1991) *Looking awry: An introduction to Jacques Lacan through popular culture*. London: Verso.

the author

Joyce Goggin is a Senior Associate Professor of literature, film and media studies at the Universiteit van Amsterdam. She has published on gambling and speculation in a variety of media including painting, film, new media and literature. Dr. Goggin is currently working on a cultural and financial history of the entertainment industries in Hollywood and Las Vegas.

Email: j.goggin@uva.nl