

## Immaterial and Affective Labour: Explored\*

Emma Dowling, Rodrigo Nunes and Ben Trott

That capitalism has undergone a series of transformations over the past few decades, and that these transformations have been reflected – at least to some extent – in a qualitative change in the nature, form and organisation of labour is increasingly undisputed. Also widely recognised is that these developments have in turn had a reconfigurative effect on the political organisation of workers and their resistance. The precise *extent*, *nature* and *implication* of these mutations, however, are far more widely contested. It is within the literature addressing precisely these issues that concepts such as ‘immaterial’ and ‘affective’ labour are gradually becoming the object of debates with consequences that are far more than simply academic.

Whilst the work of authors belonging to the Italian tradition of (post-) *Operaismo* (or ‘workerism’) – and in particular, of course, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (2001) – has been the source of increasing debate within and beyond the social sciences over the past few years, these debates have mostly focused on the propositions as to a shift in sovereignty from the nation-state to ‘Empire’, the supposed ‘end of imperialism’, and the emergence of the ‘multitude’ as the revolutionary subject of the post-Fordist era. The claim made by a number of authors belonging to this tradition as to the emergence of new forms of labour, their nature, and the means by which they are understood as exerting their hegemony (Hardt and Negri, 2001 and 2004; Lazzarato, 1996; Virno, 1996) have received – within English language discussions<sup>1</sup> – relatively

---

\* We would like to thank all of those who have contributed to making this project possible. It has been a great pleasure, and inspiring experience, to work together with all the contributors to this special issue, as well as those who have translated, proof-read and anonymously peer reviewed the papers included within the following pages. A huge thanks as well to Valeria Ossio [valeria\_ossio@gmx.de] for the cover artwork. And finally, we would like to thank the *ephemera* editorial collective for their patience and assistance, as well as their invitation for us to embark upon this project.

1 The situation is notably different within non-English language discourses where the notions of immaterial and affective labour have received far more detailed attention. In German, for example, see: Atzert et al. (2002), Atzert and Müller (2004), Birkner and Foltin (2006), Lazzarato et al. (1998), and Pieper et al. (2007). In French, it has been in the pages of the journal *Futur Antérieur* and subsequently *Multitudes* that the original debate on immaterial labour has taken place. See also Corsani et al. (1996). In Spanish, one can refer to the assorted writings in ‘arte, máquinas, trabajo inmaterial’, *Brumaria* Issue 7, December 2006 [http://www.brumaria.net/publicacionbru7.htm]; and Blondeau et al. (2004), published by Traficantes de Sueños, a publishing house and bookshop that has played a key role in the Spanish-language reception of (post-) *Operaista* thought. In Portuguese,

little attention. Our aim with this journal has been to provide a space for an interdisciplinary engagement with the issues of immaterial and affective labour, to both broaden and deepen the debate and enable connections between different approaches. We believe that the contributions included within the pages of this journal succeed in both building upon existing literature, flagging up limits and potential problems as well as seeking to move beyond them.

One of the important points of departure for us as the editors of this special issue was the hypothesis that, whilst the concepts of immaterial and affective labour – as theorised primarily by Maurizio Lazzarato, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri – succeed, to a certain extent, in describing real and existing tendencies, their analyses have taken particular forms of this labour as the *de facto* ‘advanced’ forms of all the others. This has been the case to the extent that their particular (and singular) characteristics become imposed upon the rest. Important differences – related not only to the empirical realities of day-to-day labouring practices and their respective positions within (global) hierarchies of privilege and exploitation; but also in terms of the possibilities (or otherwise) for the self-constitution of antagonistic social subjects with a capacity to act in common – have been obscured in the process.

To these ends, alongside texts that offer a critique of various aspects of the immaterial and affective labour thesis; those which locate the current debates within particular historical realities and discourses; and those which seek to build upon and develop the theoretical and analytic framework provided by (post-) *Operaismo*, there are also a number of papers here which attempt a far more rigorous investigation into the material conditions of various forms of immaterial and/or affective labour than has been attempted until now. We hope that such investigations – and similar future projects which are surely necessary – will allow for a (re-)evaluation of the existing conceptual framework and contribute to our collective ability to identify the lines of fracture that make resistance possible today.

Some of the contributions here respond directly to this challenge. Elizabeth Wissinger (writing on modelling as affective labour), Adam Arvidsson (elaborating the functional connections between networks of the creative ‘underground’ and the advertising industry in Copenhagen), Kristin Carls (researching shop assistants in retail chains in the Northeast of Italy) and Emma Dowling (conducting an inquiry into affective labour in the restaurant industry) provide theoretical insights into and empirical evidence of the way in which these forms of labour are organised and deployed, and the ambivalence of their conditions. Wissinger seeks to unpack what she terms the ‘technical-affective link’ in the fashion modelling industry to understand the complex and not always directly conscious process by which this type of affective labour generates images intended to convey certain feelings (of attention, excitement, or interest), so that they may be bought and sold in a circulation of affective flows. Arvidsson points to how the relative autonomy of cultural producers is predicated upon both structural conditions such as a

---

the pages of the journals *Glob(A.L.)* and *Lugar Comum*, can be consulted, as well as Lazzarato and Negri (2001). And in Italian, of course, there have been wide-ranging debates around the issue. See for example many of the issues of the journal *DeriveApprodi*, especially issue 18, as well as Borio et al. (2002) and Lazzarato (1997).

strong welfare system and the capacity to selectively ‘drop in’ or ‘out’ of the market relations established by corporate advertising. Both Carls and Dowling relativise the claims about some sort of natural in-built tendency to communism that immaterial labour as a whole (and affective labour as part of the genus) would have. While the kind of work done, they argue, is certainly more expressive and social than that of the assembly line, this does not necessarily mean that the autonomy this entails substantially subverts the relation with capital. Carls shows how relations in the workplace are organised around the interplay of control mechanisms and coping strategies that both create and arrest autonomy; whilst Dowling makes it obvious that, in the chain of production that leads from the kitchen to the table (and back) one can find a huge internal stratification (along pay as well as national lines).

The invitation to go back to an analysis of the material conditions and organisation of new forms of labour contained in this issue’s original Call for Papers is of course neither new nor isolated. While it does address a lack in recent academic debates, particularly around the reception of (post-) *Operaista* thought, this is probably an area where discussions within the academy have lagged behind those taking place around and outside it. In these spaces, a lot of calls for a return to, or a re-problematisation of, the practice of workers’ inquiries, militant investigation (*investigación militante*) and co-research (*conricerca*) have been recently made. Nevertheless, as one of the texts here reminds us, that they have been made does not mean they have necessarily been followed. The contribution of Antonio Conti et al. sets out to imagine what a project of co-research that responds to present transformations in production and in the productive territory can mean. They seek to differentiate this practice from a merely external inquiry that envisages the knowledge produced as neutral and establishes the place of political agency outside of the process of its own production – in order to conclude that co-research does not produce knowledge without producing subjectivity and political organisation at the same time. This proposal is complemented in this issue by the report of a joint work, still in progress, developed between the *Experimental Chair on Production of Subjectivity* (an experiment in the creation of a non-state, non-market university, set in Rosario, Argentina) and the trade union delegates at a local call centre.

To speak of co-research is of course to place oneself again in the political and theoretical trajectory of Italian Workerism that starts with the *Quaderni Rossi* and the pioneering work of Romano Alquati. Steven Wright’s article draws upon the transcripts of the interviews with some of the protagonists of this trajectory that were carried out for the book *Futuro Anteriore* (2002) by Guido Borio, Francesca Pozzi and Gigi Roggero, a comprehensive examination of the *Operaista* legacy. In doing so, he restitutes the plurality of voices and analyses in which some themes central to this special issue – such as immaterial labour, post-Fordism, the nature of subjectivity and the role of workers’ enquiries and co-research – are addressed within this tradition; a plurality that tends so often to get lost in English-language debates, overdetermined as it is by the impact of the works co-authored by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt.

Lepoldina Fortunati and Kathi Weeks also offer reflections on the genealogy of the concepts of immaterial and affective labour. Fortunati’s text charts the development of the recent discourse on immaterial labour, starting from the pre-history of the concept in authors such as Marx, Tarde and Sombart. She highlights the importance of the feminist

beginnings of the debate about immaterial labour, with specific emphasis on domestic and reproductive labour. Further to this, she seeks to unpack the role of the 'machinization' of immaterial labour in the valorisation process and the detachment from more immediate human interactions that this mechanisation process brings with it. Weeks assesses socialist feminist contributions to the Marxist analysis of productive labour. She couples this with an analysis of Arlie Hochschild's (1983) addition of the emotional labour of pink collar service workers to the critical analyses of white collar immaterial labour exemplified by the work of C.W. Mills (1951). Through this, she proposes a better understanding of the specificity of labour in the immaterial mode and the difficulties posed by its theorisation, concluding with a proposal for an alternative immanent strategy of critical/political intervention in post-Fordist regimes of work.

Another area of heated debate around immaterial and affective labour is on the contention, held by authors such as Negri and Virno, that the post-Fordist configuration of production and reproduction empties the Marxian law of value of any meaning, since labour becomes 'immeasurable' or 'beyond measure'. In this issue, Dowling's article addresses this question, critically, through an analysis of the measuring practices deployed within the context of affective labour in the restaurant industry. Max Henninger argues that Negri's position distorts aspects of Marx's theoretical framework in ways that yield counterfactual and contradictory claims, pointing to the problems of disregarding the importance of Marx's quantitative approach to value for combating an entrepreneurial strategy that consists in expanding the sector of unremunerated or underpaid work within what has been called the social factory. George Caffentzis takes a different approach and finds in a defence and expansion of Marx's theory of machines a position from which to argue against the immeasurability thesis. He holds out that the neglect of Marx's theory of machines is the source of the confusion that allows some authors to fail to see how (physical, material) labour remains the sole source of value; a confusion that is only enhanced by the employment of a category – that of 'immaterial labour' – that fails to capture what would be the defining features that it seeks to address.

Ben Trott's contribution also touches upon the argument concerning the alleged demise of the law of value. Moreover, however, it seeks to stress and defend, against many hurried and uncharitable criticisms, the tendential nature of the arguments advanced by Hardt and Negri. In doing so, it provides a comprehensive unpacking of *Empire* (2001) and *Multitude* (2004), but also draws attention to a number of important weaknesses in such works. In particular, he points to how the potential power of Hardt and Negri's revolutionary subject, 'the multitude', is dramatically over-stated.

For Rodrigo Nunes, if the tendency described by the immaterial labour thesis is essentially predicated upon an alleged hegemony of immaterial labour over other forms of labour and social life itself, the central question becomes defining what exactly this hegemony can mean. His contribution reads the immaterial labour thesis politically (both in the *Operaista* sense of class composition analysis and in relation to the political phenomena of the last ten years) and against the grain (from the claims made about the potentials for resistance to the differences between various forms of labour encompassed by the category) to raise some sceptical conclusions about the political and organisational consequences of such talks of 'tendency' and 'hegemony', which

bear more than a hint of orthodox Marxist objectivism and whose philosophical underpinnings he attempts to reveal.

To what extent is a discourse on hegemony not the reintroduction of a vanguard subject placed as the end-product of a necessary teleological development? And to what extent is the discourse on the becoming-immaterial of labour not reliant upon a productivist utopia of ‘liberation through mechanisation’? Mariarosa Dalla Costa’s contribution poses, from the perspective of care, a crucial problem to be considered today: that of the *limit*. The attitude of care that the peasant stands for in Dalla Costa’s text re-situates the debate at once in the earth, the world, and materiality. In doing so, it opens a window onto political issues of finitude (ecological and human) that mount a challenge against the notion of progress that has been one of the central tenets of Western thought, and hence Marxism, for centuries.

Finally, two texts attempt to move beyond the present way in which affect is currently being debated. Mark Cote and Jennifer Pybus look into the phenomenon of MySpace as a place in which young adults ‘learn’ to immaterial labour – in what that entails in terms of developing and maintaining networks and fashioning a flexible ‘self-brand’ that functions as the digital interface of an individual’s subjectivity – pointing to affect as the binding force that makes immaterial production cohere. The ambivalence of MySpace as a privileged site of both value extraction and the production of new, (potentially) self-valorising subjectivities is left unresolved, indicative of the more general ambivalence of immaterial labour. Patricia Clough et al draw from debates in the physical and biological sciences as well as contemporary philosophy in order to advance the thesis of an economy of ‘affect-itself’, where capital invests the self-forming properties of matter and moves from avoiding probabilistic trends to promoting and bringing about transformations, coupled with a form of governance they term ‘radical neoliberalism’.

That so often the contributions in this issue should end in a note of scepticism and highlight the ambivalence contained in capitalist transformations is of course no coincidence. First of all, the debates which are carried out in this issue and elsewhere do not take place in a vacuum. Placing themselves on the side of struggles and resistance, they belong to a context where these themes are not merely the matter of theoretical debate, but of the practices, possibilities, victories and defeats in which political actors such as social movements and trade unions, as well as local groups and individual subjects, are enmeshed. In this sense, the most optimistic ideas put forward by books such as *Empire* (2001) were partly the product of a moment of intensification of struggle in the late 1990s. That many today should take a more sober – sometimes sombre – note reflects a less hospitable environment, where many of the advances of that period seemed to have been stalled or reached dead-ends.

But, more importantly, this ambivalence is the very nature of the game, for two reasons. The first one is that it is constitutive not only of immaterial labour, but of the relation between labour and capital in general. To say “*resistance comes first*” (Deleuze, 1999: 95) – a line of analysis which of course finds much resonance in both the fields of

French post-structuralism as well as Italian (post-) *Operaista* Marxism<sup>2</sup> – means that there is always an excess that labour produces in the process of reproducing capitalist relations. This is an excess whose threatening potential capital must always work to recuperate, trapped as it is in its eternal dependence on the power of what is at once its condition of possibility and (potentially) mortal enemy, labour. That capital today seems to rely to such an extent on an enhanced subjective and productive autonomy of labour does not eliminate, but rather intensifies this ambivalence. To picture immaterial labour as a new vanguard subject with an inertial potential for communism would be an attempt to foreclose by decree, in theory, what can only be resolved in practice. If and how, in what situations and in what ways, something ‘escapes’ capture and produces resistance is the ambivalent question *par excellence*, and it is only in ‘the real movement of things’ that it can be answered.

The second reason is related to the very newness of the cycle of struggles of the last decade. This newness does not necessarily mean complete non-relation with previous struggles, or lack of continuity with previous trajectories; but is to a great extent a consequence of the rupture produced by its appearance in a post-Berlin Wall, post-‘end of history’ world. It is the phenomenon of capitalist globalisation itself, in what it entails in terms of both subsuming different realities to the same logic and creating conditions for them to communicate with each other, that generates an awareness of interdependence and connectedness among diverse realities of exploitation, oppression and resistance. This sensibility does not imply the flattening out of the differences that would cancel them into a general scheme, a ‘masterplan’. On the contrary, it calls for heightened attention to the composition among differences as the pre-condition for any ‘solution’ to emerge. So here again, it is only in practice that questions can be answered, and no ‘one-size-fits-all’ theory can evade that.

It is in the space of this double ambivalence that the question of political organisation is deployed today.

## references

- Atzert, T. et al. (eds.) (2002) *Kritik der Weltordnung. Globalisierung, Imperialismus, Empire*. Berlin: ID Verlag.
- Atzert, T. & J. Müller (eds.) (2004) *Immaterielle Arbeit und imperiale Souveränität. Analysen und Diskussionen zu Empire*. Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot.
- Blondeau, O. et al. (2004) *Capitalismo cognitivo, propiedad intelectual y creación colectiva*. Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños.
- Borio, G. et al. (eds.) (2002) *Futuro anteriore. Dai “Quaderni Rossi” ai movimenti globali: ricchezze e limiti dell’Operaismo italiano*. Rome: DeriveApprodi.
- Corbeira, D. et al. (eds.) (2006) ‘arte, máquinas, trabajo inmaterial’, *Brumaria*, 7 [http://www.brumaria.net/publicacionbru7.htm].
- Corsani, A. et al. (1996) *Le bassin de travail immateriel (BTI) dans la metropole parisienne*. Paris: L’Harmattan.

---

2 The notion of the ontological priority of resistance – clear throughout much of his work (cf. Deleuze and Guattari, 2004) – is raised by Deleuze in relation to Foucault’s analysis of power. In a footnote, he comments, “In Foucault, there is an echo of Mario Tronti’s interpretation of Marxism [...] as a ‘workers’ resistance existing *prior* to the strategies of capital” (Deleuze, 2004: 96).

- Deleuze, G. (2004) *Foucault*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit.
- Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari (2004) '1227: Treatise on Nomadology: - The War Machine', in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi. London and New York: Continuum.
- Hardt, M. and A. Negri (2004) *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin.
- Hardt, M. and A. Negri (2001) *Empire*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983) *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lazzarato, M. (1996) 'Immaterial Labor', trans. P. Colilli and E. Emery, in M. Hardt and P. Virno (eds.) *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 133-147.
- Lazzarato, M. (1997) *Lavoro immateriale. Forme di vita e produzione di soggettività*. Ombre Corte.
- Lazzarato, M. et al. (1998) *Umherschweifende Produzenten: Immaterielle Arbeit und Subversion*. Berlin: ID-Verlag.
- Lazzarato, M. and A. Negri (2001) *Trabalho imaterial*. Rio de Janeiro: DP&A.
- Mills, C.W. (1951) *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pieper, M. et al. (eds.) (2007) *Empire und die biopolitische Wende: Die internationale Diskussion im Anschluss an Hardt und Negri*. Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag.
- Virno, P. (1996) 'Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus', trans. E. Emery, in M. Hardt & P. Virno (eds.) (1996) *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 189-210.

#### **the editors**

Emma Dowling is a doctoral candidate at the School of Politics and Sociology, Birkbeck, University of London.

E-mail: e.dowling@pol-soc.bbk.ac.uk

Rodrigo Nunes is finishing a PhD on 'Immanence, truth and philosophy in Foucault and Deleuze' at Goldsmiths College, University of London. He is an editor of *Turbulence: Ideas for movement* ([www.turbulence.org.uk](http://www.turbulence.org.uk))

E-mail: rgnunes@kein.org

Ben Trott is a doctoral candidate at the Freie Universität Berlin. He is an editor of *Turbulence: Ideas for movement* ([www.turbulence.org.uk](http://www.turbulence.org.uk))

E-mail: b.j.trott@gmail.com