



'Forward How? Forward Where?' I: (Post-)Operaismo Beyond the Immaterial Labour Thesis

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abstract

This text, the first in a three-part engagement with the political significance of (post-)Operaismo, attempts to read the 'dominant' form of the reception of (post-)Operaismo thought in recent years – the immaterial labour thesis – politically, both in the sense of class composition analysis, and from the perspective of the 'global movement' as political event. Outlining a theoretical continuity between the original writings of Mario Tronti and recent developments, it weaves the themes of teleology, immanence and transcendence, objectivism and subjectivism and looks at the relationship between thought and movement in (post-)Operaismo in order to investigate the advantages and shortcomings of the immaterial labour thesis in appraising the contemporary condition. In so doing, it criticises the risk of falling back into an objectivism in tendential analysis, and draws some sceptical conclusions as to the emancipatory potentials the hegemony of immaterial labour is supposed to bring about, and the meaning of this hegemony itself – in order not to invalidate the ideas recently furthered by some (post-)Operaismo writers, but to reveal blindspots that (hopefully) also open new paths for thought and action.

A/traverso came out in June 1977 with the title: "the revolution is over, we won". Many read it as an irony; it was actually meant as serious and literal. (...) The demo that closes the [1977 Bologna] Congress, grand and striking, goes on for hours (...) In the end a subtle taste of bitterness, disappointment and frustration follows people to their houses and spaces of life and struggle. Everyone promises to go on, to move forward, but no-one can hide the dramatic question: forward how? forward where? (Balestrini and Moroni, 2006: 582-583)¹

Introduction

All accounts of the period known in Italy as the 'Long 1968', which lasted from 1969 to 1977, necessarily have to end with the brutal State repression brought upon the Italian

1 All translations from the texts not quoted in English are mine unless otherwise noted. I also take the opportunity to thank Arianna Bove, Massimo De Angelis, Nick Dyer-Witford, Brian Holmes and Steve Wright for their comments on previous drafts. All mistakes are just failed contributions to the 'general intellect'.

movement at the end of the 1970s. If one pays attention to the tone of these accounts, however, something odd stands out: the mass arrests and show trials appear more as an epilogue than as an end; like the Minotaur in Borges' (1996) 'The House of Asterion', it feels as if, having nowhere else to move forward to, the movement had stayed put in the place where the State could hunt it down. In a sense, it is the inability to find common ways forward shown at the Bologna Congress that counts as the real end of those years.

The theory and history written in that period have enjoyed a revival in recent years, dating back to the publication of Hardt and Negri's *Empire* in 2000. This is one of those cases where the production and circulation of ideas can be stripped of any semblance of necessity, and related to bare, happy contingency: *Empire* was so important not only because of its content – it remains arguably the most ambitious attempt at charting the present in terms of both what 'is' and what 'could be' – but because it came out at a moment where a new way of reading the present was in high demand. Those were the years of something that *Empire* itself, written as it was before the 'Battle of Seattle', did not directly predict: the resurgence of a powerful social movement in the global North, mostly embodied in the counter-summit mobilisations; and the growing capability of movements in the North and South to relay information and coordinate among them, generating the towering spectre of a 'global movement' capable of becoming a social and political force on a global scale. A 'second superpower', to use Chomsky's (2005) coinage? Or, to employ a key concept in (post-) *Operaista*² thought, a 'new cycle of struggles'?

It is no coincidence then that *Empire* should have been so greedily embraced by sympathisers and detractors alike, and from there a lot of attention should have been transferred to other authors from the same *milieu* and with similar trajectories (Virno, Bifo, Lazzarato, to name a few); as well as to these trajectories and *milieu* themselves. For those who in those years would attend a meeting or action in the day and read (post-) *Operaismo* at night – or vice-versa – the fascination came not only from what the theory said, but how it had been produced. These were not angelic beings who had written about politics, these were political beings who were still doing politics when they wrote. At last, people like us.

Political discourse is of course never 'pure'; in it are always mixed the personas of the scientist and the demagogue, the prophet and the partisan, the functions of description and persuasion, the affects of empathising and manipulating. So inextricably mixed, in fact, that it is normally in telling them apart that one or another reading of the same text differs. Much of (post-) *Operaismo*'s appeal was (and is) to a great extent due to both its unashamed one-sidedness, and to how much the texts are monuments of ongoing debates and struggles, living forces that a contemporary reader can conjure up or find herself in the middle of again. In short, much of the texts' appeal lies in their context-dependence – *both* in terms of what they carry of unreflected in them, *and* of how much

2 I use the term (post-) *Operaismo* so as to highlight the continuity, even if in very transformed terms, between the work being done today and some of the original hypotheses of Italian 'political' Workerism (*Operaismo*). In this way, '*Operaismo*' would refer to the theoretical and political work being done around the time of *Quaderni Rossi*, *Classe Operaia* and the organisation called Potere Operaio; post-*Operaismo* refers to what follows from that experience, from the early 1970s to now; and (post-) *Operaismo* is a way of referring to both moments at once.

in them is geared towards responding to immediate problems and needs. In other words, the immanence of this thought to a movement.

In what follows I wish to pay this context-dependence a double respect. Firstly, by being attentive to the conditions of production of texts and theory, and thus trying to avoid turning contingency into necessity, timeliness into atemporality. Secondly, by attempting to read the paths opened by (post-)Operaismo through the lenses of needs and expectations largely generated by the struggles of the last decade, and the generalised feeling of crisis and impasse that has grown in the last few years – when many people have felt as if they were living their own, never-ending Bologna Congress.

My starting point is to look at (post-)Operaismo in the ‘dominant’ form in which it has been received in recent years – the immaterial labour thesis as found, importantly but not exclusively, in *Empire*. In so doing I try to remain sensitive both to the intellectual and political history behind ideas and to their ‘minoritarian’ reconfigurations in other writings. Still, I am under no illusion about how much artifice there might be in this construction; it is up to each reader to decide how accurate and useful it is.

At first I try to trace a certain continuity between the immaterial labour thesis and the initial theoretical and practical wagers of Operaismo, in order to sketch out the internal mechanism of what I argue is a constitutive tension and oscillation in (post-)Operaista thought between subjectivism and objectivism.

What follows examines the immaterial labour thesis itself, in three steps. First, it lays out in general lines the claims that are made as to the emancipatory potential of immaterial labour; it then works backwards from these towards a discussion of how well they apply to the different forms of labour that are described as immaterial; and finally, it discusses what different meanings speaking of a hegemony of immaterial labour may have. My goal here is not a refutation of the basic elements of the thesis, but an attempt to, treating them as tools, sharpen their practical usefulness by refining their scope and exploring their political implications.

Finally, it must be said that this is the first instalment of three in a debate on the political significance of (post-)Operaismo today. In the second and third parts, to be published shortly, I develop more fully the weaving in of the themes of political practice and theoretical production, immanence and transcendence, subjectivism and objectivism; and then apply the conclusions drawn there to current debates on and experiences of political organisation, and how they relate to the challenges posed by a post-representational politics.

‘Before Our Very Eyes’

In the theoretical toolbox of (post-)Operaismo, three elements stand out. The first is the famous *Copernican turn* that inverts the dialectical relationship between capital and labour by posing the second as the active element to which the first finds itself obliged to react. This inversion necessitates the second concept, that of *cycle of struggles*: instead of a linear accumulation towards an inevitable triad of crisis, fall of the rate of

profit and defeat of capitalism, the struggle between labour and capital is always being pushed to a next level by periods of intensification of the former's counterpower, which force the latter into restructuring measures aimed at dispelling the antagonist's strength.

Finally, the concept of *class composition* is both part of this narrative and broader. Its basic idea is that to the objective, material determinants of the capitalist organisation of labour at any given moment (technical composition) there correspond certain openings, behavioural patterns, a certain subjectivity among workers from which the forms of political organisation and action that correspond to this moment can be read, at least in embryonic form. It is hence part of the *Operaista* narrative, in the sense that a given technical composition implies a certain political composition which leads to a new cycle of struggles, and thence to capital's reaction – which in turn will lead to a new technical composition of the class, starting the cycle all over again. But it also goes beyond, since it provides, even if in skeletal form, a methodological instrument that subordinates theoretical enquiry to political practice, but grounds the former in the latter – and thus subordinates metahistorical constants to the experimental practice of contingency.

It is the double nature of the concept of class composition that provides us with a way of measuring the relative distance of *Operaismo* from a teleological philosophy of history. It is true that it breaks with the straight line of the accumulation of forces of the proletariat against capital, by reintroducing an element of contingency that is the affirmation of political subjectivity against the lifeless objectivism of orthodox Marxism – in this sense, it is clear there would be no *Operaismo* without Lenin. “[C]apitalist development runs along a chain of conjuncture”, says Tronti (2006: 99). These moments of conjuncture are, however, both the eruption of the untimely in history – unpredictable times of creation and opening of possibilities³ – and the affirmation of the proletariat as *the* metahistorical subject whose self-activity directs capitalist development; the *rude razza pagana* (‘rude pagan race’) becomes the secularisation of the Spirit that Hegel, via Plotinus, adopts from Christian Trinitarian theology. The Copernican turn is thus an inversion, merely displacing the active pole of the dialectical relationship, instead of exiting it altogether; and there is a *telos* in the movement of capital's responses, in that it always reacts by increasing the socialisation of labour, hence increasing the power of the proletariat to attack the capitalist social relation *from the inside* (Tronti, 2006: 49-54).⁴ In other words, (post-) *Operaismo* will be more or less free from a Hegelian philosophy of history depending on where one places the emphasis. The conjunctural moments of opening and subjective affirmation yield an immanent process where enquiry provides the elements for potential (re)compositions, the possibility of an open-ended construction. The teleology of struggle-induced capitalist development reintroduces a linearity in the accumulation of proletarian force

3 Kathi Weeks (2005) develops this perspective in her treatment of the theme of the refusal of work in relation to the classic Marxist problem of transition, where the former eliminates any form of two-stage conception of the latter, and makes it appear as “process rather than result, a movement rather than a plan; it is prefigured in the desires that fuel refusal and is enabled – constituted – in the spaces opened up by the separation that this rejection enacts; it is thus by this account inextricably linked to the process of refusal.” (Weeks, 2005: 129).

4 This *telos* is essential to the development of Negri's thought since the early discussions of real subsumption and the tendency (in ‘Crisis of the planner-State’) and the advent of the figure of the socialised worker (in 1976's ‘Proletarians and the State’). Cf. Negri (2005).

and hence transcendence in the form of the necessary development of a metahistorical subject.⁵ The oscillation and tension between the two poles, however, is constitutive of (post-)Operaisma thought; the mechanic of the oscillation is in the relay between the production of theory and political activity, which is to say, in the immanence of thought to movement.⁶

Nowhere is this tension best expressed than in the constant reiteration of the *topos* of the beginning of a new epoch – something that is bound to ring familiar to ears accustomed to the discourse of more orthodox Marxisms. ‘Lenin in England’, in many ways the founding text of *Operaismo*, opens with: “A new era in the class struggle is beginning” (Tronti, 2006: 87). *Empire*, its best known offspring, opens with: “Empire is materialising before our very eyes” (Hardt and Negri, 2001: xi). One can recognise the origin of the *topos* in the Preface of *Phenomenology of Spirit*: at once a movement of historical and systematic completion, where a system finds its whole justification in itself by the achievement of its historical development – (self-)exposition and legitimation (Hegel, 1977).⁷ The political utility of such discourse is obvious: it not only provides legitimation both to itself and whatever political activity is already underway, but also affirms a break with the past that opens up a new time which can only be grasped in its own terms.

This move is repeated in *Empire* in a way that is by now quite well-known. It is here a matter of, following a methodology that the Negri of the early 1970s had already found in the Marx of the *Grundrisse*, identifying a tendency that both allows one to see into the future – “which seeds will grow and which wither” (Hardt and Negri, 2006: 141; Negri, 2003) – and to identify the points of leverage in the present that can lead there. In line with the basic tenets of *Operaismo*, then, *Empire* seeks the present forms of resistance as given (even if just latently) in what is variedly described as post-Fordist, postmodern or biopolitical production. This tendency is identified with the becoming-hegemonic of a form of labour – immaterial labour – and it is from this hegemony that the possibilities of resistance can be read, both as openings and as already existing behaviours.

There is unfortunately no time here to go deeper into the relations between subjectivism and objectivism, immanence and transcendence and theory and practice in

5 This can be compared to what Hardt and Negri (2001: 28) have to say about Deleuze and Guattari.

6 There is no space here to go into an analysis of this mechanic, which I develop in the sequel to this article. At this point, it is worth drawing attention to how Tronti, speaking from a perspective that sees the defeat of the mass worker as a defeat *tout court*, evaluates today the first years of the *Operaisma* experiment: “[O]ut of juvenile enthusiasm, out of intellectual exuberance, perfectly justified and which I do not regret, we fell prey to an optical illusion. (...) [T]he situation then was coloured red, but it was not the red of dawn, but that of sunset” (Borio, Pozzi and Roggero, 2005: 294-5).

7 In particular, §§ 20; 29; 34-7; 47; 70-1. It is interesting to see what Foucault has to say on the subject: “I think here we touch upon (...) one of the most harmful habits of contemporary, or maybe modern, in any case post-Hegelian thought: the analysis of the present moment as being precisely the one of rupture, or the culmination, or completion, or of the dawn that returns. (...) It is only fair I should say that, as I have happened to do it” (Foucault, 2001: 1267).

(post-)Operaista discourse, which merit a study of their own. So before we move on, let us just raise two sceptical questions about the recurring theme of the new epoch.

The first is that determining an epoch is always a work of selection – naming in a given time what is essential and what is accidental to it (“which seeds will grow and which wither”), what makes it different from what came before. It is in this moment of abstraction, where the real is depurated of its messy plurality so that the actuality that underlines it can shine through, that teleology will tend to walk in through the backdoor, carrying objectivism by the hand. If the epoch we live in corresponds precisely to the culmination of the Operaista teleology of socialisation of labour, it is easy to endow it with an inertia where its ‘natural’ direction leads inevitably, objectively, to a conclusion that is no other than communism. The burden of agency in the dialectical relationship between capital and labour is shifted when it approaches its conclusion – it would be capitalist restructuring itself that now “works towards its dissolution” (Marx, 1973: 700).

The other question is: if the question of identifying the places “where the working class is strongest”⁸ entails determining where to focus political activity (as the most likely to yield results in the form of agitation and social unrest that maximises conflict), this means that the areas where the possibility of (or already ongoing) political activity is the strongest will always tend to appear as *the* poles of class recomposition. Is one not entitled to suspect that it is precisely this immediacy of the theory-practice relay, this immanence of thought to movement, that contaminates such theory to the extent that, whenever it speaks the language of universality (*the* present epoch), what it is doing is in fact reorganising reality from the perspective given not by a universal condition (*the* point of view of *the* class), but by the position of the theory in relation to the movement, and the movement in relation to everything else? In other words, not from the god’s-eye point of view (metahistorically, metaphilosophically) guaranteed by the proletariat’s condition as universal subject, but from the conic perspective of the movement’s (geographical, systemic, political) position.⁹

This is the crucial juncture where the thesis concerning the alleged hegemony of immaterial labour, ascribed the role of naming what is essential about the present condition, finds itself. Precisely because this is not theory for theory’s sake, but purports to be able to produce political effects, my method in dealing with the immaterial labour thesis will be to turn its *Darstellung* around. This means working backwards from the claims made about the potentials for resistance that the passage to post-Fordism (and the hegemony of immaterial labour) allegedly bring about, so as to understand what features of immaterial labour justify such claims; and then to examine whether these features are applicable to all the cases that one intends to include under the common name of immaterial labour. If they are not – that is, if the features of immaterial labour

8 “[C]apitalist development runs along a chain of conjuncture. We say that each link of this chain will offer the occasion for an open conflict, for a direct struggle, an act of force, and that the chain will break not where capital is weakest, but where the working class is strongest” (Tronti, 2006: 99-100).

9 I thank Ana Mendez de Andes Aldama and Francesco Salvini for a conversation on cartography, urban planning, the ‘God’s eye’ point of view, Leibniz and positionality; and Ana again for setting my memory straight about it.

that justify the claims made about the potential for resistance are not applicable to all forms of labour that are described as ‘immaterial’ – that still does not necessarily invalidate the arguments advanced, since it could be argued that such features, even if not universalisable, represent precisely what is ‘hegemonic’ about (at least certain forms of) immaterial labour. It is the idea of hegemony that must then be looked at: what is the nature of this hegemony? How is it exercised over other forms of labour, material or immaterial, and with what political implications?

The aim is not to invalidate any claims – one should always be very slow to invalidate claims about the possibility of resistance – let alone to prove or disprove anything: if a tendency is by definition what is not actual, but may be brought about, how can it be disproved? The question here is rather the extent of these claims’ applicability. And this applicability is exactly not to be understood exclusively as a theoretical, but first and foremost as a practico-political question about the present’s potential of resistance.

Resistance: Looking Forward

What are then, according to the immaterial labour thesis, the potentials that can be deduced from the present class composition? These “positive characteristics [that] are paradoxically the flipside of the negative developments” (Hardt and Negri, 2006: 66) are synthesised in *Multitude* in two: the fact that immaterial labour tends towards biopolitical production, or ‘production of the common’; and the fact that it is organised in networks. Broken down, they reveal the full implication of the authors’ claims.

The first one is based on the fact that “immaterial labour tends to move out of the limited realm of the strictly economic domain and engage in the general production and reproduction of society as a whole” (Hardt and Negri, 2006: 66). This new sphere where social production and reproduction coincide – biopolitical production – is that of the common. Biopolitical production has the common as both its ground – the general human capacities to affect and be affected, to communicate, to cooperate, to reproduce and innovate; and social relations themselves, symbolic and affective codes etc. – and its result: it produces new being, i.e., new subjectivities, new enunciations, new forms of social life. As such, it is “no longer to be limited to the economic but also becomes immediately a social, cultural and political force” (Hardt and Negri, 2006: 66).

This means two different things from the point of view of subjectivity and the point of view of the organisation of labour. From the first, we see a radical transformation in the relation between labour and production, in that the subject is now constituted outside the labour time imposed by capital; “immaterial labour does not reproduce itself (and society) in the form of exploitation, but in the form of production of subjectivity (...) ‘mass intellectuality’ constitutes itself without having to go through the ‘curse of wage labour’” (Lazzarato and Negri, 2001).¹⁰ From the second, this means that, since the

10 “Waged labor and direct subjugation (to organization) no longer constitute the principal form of the contractual relationship between capitalist and worker. A polymorphous self-employed autonomous work has emerged as the dominant form, a kind of ‘intellectual worker’ who is him or herself an

central characteristics of this form of labour are general human and social features, cooperation and communication would not be imposed from the ‘outside’ (through the intervention of the capitalist who provides the machines, controls access to raw materials etc.), but are “*completely immanent to the labouring activity itself*” (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 294). Unlike the Fordist factory, where the presence of the capitalist was necessary to put mass workers to work, capital here becomes parasitic on an activity that can go on without it. “Brains and bodies still need others to produce value, but the others they need are not necessarily provided by capital and its capacities to orchestrate production” – a “potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism” (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 294). Under these two lights, what is often presented as a negative development can be seen from its positive flipside: the flexibility and mobility of immaterial workers is a sign of their latent independence.

Since social life itself appears in the productive cycle of immaterial labour as both the pool of wealth outside the direct process of production that is (always only partially) captured by capital, and the end-product of the cycle (that therefore produces more social wealth); since that entails a complete blurring of the boundaries between life-time and productive (for capital) work-time; and since it becomes increasingly impossible to ascribe a product to the contribution of an individual worker (because all innovation relies on the self-producing pool of social wealth) – the relation between abstract labour time and value as we have known it crumbles. The law of value therefore subsists only as command, an imposition of parasitic capital, and thus the site of struggle between labour and capital *par excellence*.¹¹

Finally, the restructuring of capital that responded to the struggles of the mass worker in the 1960s and 1970s represented a dismemberment and decentralisation of the productive cycle made possible by the development of telecommunication technologies; the network form replaces the assembly line as the abstract form of production. Following three theses on the organisation of struggle – that it must find the most effective form of resisting a specific form of power; that this form is to be found in the dominant model of economic and social production at a given time; and that all new forms seek greater democracy than previous ones allowed – Hardt and Negri will conclude that the network organisation of the movements that appeared in the last decade is the model of resistance in the present. More than that, it is the point where the three principles coincide in “an absolutely democratic organisation that corresponds to the dominant forms of economic and social production and is also the most powerful weapon against the ruling power structure” (Hardt and Negri, 2006: 88).

entrepreneur, inserted within a market that is constantly shifting and within networks that are changeable in time and space” (Lazzarato, 1991).

11 This, arguably the most controversial of the claims related to the immaterial labour thesis, is precisely the one that I will not go into at greater length here. I restrict myself to drawing attention to more capable discussions than I could possibly offer; cf. Caffentzis (2005), Cleaver (2005), De Angelis (2007), Harvie (2005), Henninger (2007), Trott (2007).

Resistance: Tracing Back

What is then immaterial labour? *Empire* locates three different forms of labour under this common name: the one involved in informatised industrial production; the one involved in “analytic and symbolic tasks, which itself breaks down into creative and intelligent manipulation on the one hand and routine symbolic tasks on the other”; and the one that “involves the production and manipulation of affect and requires (virtual or actual) human contact, labour in the bodily mode” (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 293). We are thus speaking of a category that encompasses the different realities of the software programmer and the production engineer, the call centre worker and the nurse, the loan manager and the waitress, the shop assistant and the ‘IT guy’, the teacher and the filmmaker, even (pushing the boundaries between production and reproduction) the student and the parent. So, following the method outlined earlier on, what is necessary is to determine to what extent their inclusion here is justified in relation to the claims made about the potential of resistance of immaterial labour; or, put in other terms, whether the potentials found in the hegemony of immaterial labour can be equally derived from all these forms of work.

Let us start with the network-form. *Multitude* asserts it has come to “define our ways of understanding the world and acting in it”, and, more importantly, it is “the form of organisation of the cooperative and communicative relationships dictated by the immaterial paradigm of production” (Hardt and Negri, 2006: 142).¹² At the same time, it makes clear that it is not the case that networks (social, but also neuronal etc.) did not exist before. It becomes apparent then that what matters for this ‘paradigmatic shift’ is the introduction of a specific kind of network, namely that enabled by telecommunication technologies and the internet (as a many-to-many medium) in particular. Either this is the ‘difference that makes a difference’, or one will have to admit that, in general terms, the social was always immanently organised in the form of networks, and therefore there is no specifically new element to speak of.

Now, it is clear that this specific kind of network does not correspond to the productive reality of all the forms of labour that the category of immaterial labour encompasses. Shop assistants, for instance, may be said to behave like a network (and to manifest some form of immanent network intelligence) when, without a word being spoken, they ‘decide’ which one of them is going to deal with the customer that has just walked in. This does not mean, however, that they have an increased capacity to determine the content and form of their productive activity in the same sense that networks of software programmers can coordinate individual efforts over a great distance and long periods of time in order to come up with a common product.

On the other hand, it is undeniable that the “increasingly extensive use of computers has tended to progressively redefine (...) all social practices and relations” (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 291). The socialisation of telecommunication technologies, the internet in particular, has not only enhanced the potential for production of social relations, but also created the social landscape where the network-form appears as a possibility,

12 Their discussion here parallels Deleuze’s (2004: 44-9) analysis of the immanent cause and the abstract machine in Foucault’s panoptism.

almost necessity.¹³ If the fact that production is more and more organised in networks does not make Starbucks workers any more capable of communicating with each other across different shops, it is clear from the developments of last decade that the network-form has become the key model for political organisation; something that can be observed even in the mode in which hierarchical organisations relate to each other or to non-hierarchical ones. To trace it all back to a change in the material conditions of production would seem, however, not only a gross reductionism that empties the event of the appearance and spread of these technologies, but to reintroduce a teleological scheme where the proletariat as metahistorical subject ‘forces’ capital into introducing them. More than that, it obscures Lazzarato’s insight that the production of subjectivity tends to happen more and more outside the direct process of production and the wage relation. In other words, if it is true that networks have become the dominant model of the organisation of production and resistance, this cannot be predicated on the material conditions of production of all immaterial workers *as workers*. If shop assistants and Starbucks *baristi* are involved in the production and reproduction of social networks, it is not because this is the way in which their work is organised, but because of the contemporary social life makes available greater possibilities of networking than ever before.¹⁴

So it would seem that any talk of a hegemony of immaterial labour in this case must be qualified. From the point of view of ‘autonomous’ and computer-based work, it is the very form of its organisation that is networked. In less autonomous, less computer-dependent work, speaking of an increasing becoming-network is a conflation of two different factors: the present state of technological development; and how much this intensifies and reconfigures the being-network that has always been part of social life. In this case, it seems one could only speak of a hegemony if one were ascribing these two factors to the reshaping power of (some forms) of immaterial labour over the rest of social life – which seems a rather exaggerated claim to make.

The differences between the various forms of immaterial labour become even more important when one speaks of what would be the most important consequence of this becoming-social of work and becoming-network life – the “potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism” brought about by communication and cooperation becoming “*completely immanent to the labouring activity itself*” (Hardt and Negri, 2001: 294, italics in the original). This phenomenon, I would argue, can only fully happen in the way in which it is presented in the forms of immaterial labour that combine three factors: creative work; low- or zero-cost reproducibility of the product; and an investment in fixed capital that can be easily shouldered by the worker (as well as the general human capacities of living labour). ‘Spontaneous communism’ could then be seen as a conflation of the capacity to determine the content and form of the product,

13 For the more sustained discussion I cannot provide here, cf. Nunes (2005: 299-301).

14 Of course one can say that while executing their work they are also involved in productive networks, such as the one that mobilises the process that goes from the coffee plantation to the decaf soya latte that the customer buys. This, however, clearly does not have the significance that *Empire* ascribes to the network-form – workers’ participation in this case is exclusively as relays of a chain that they do not exercise any control over, without any increased capacity to communicate with other chains of the network. If anything, the ‘social reproduction’ in which they are engaged with here is that of capitalist relations.

the product's belonging to a regime of non-scarcity, and the socialisation of the means of production and circulation of this kind of product.

As Lazzarato suggests, the key to understanding the non-scarcity of knowledge lies in understanding one distinction:

The statement 'the value of a book' is ambiguous, for it has both a venal value as something that is 'tangible, appropriable, exchangeable, consumable', and a truth-value as something that is essentially 'intelligible, unappropriable, unexchangeable, unconsumable'. The book may be considered both as a 'product' and as 'knowledge'. As a product, its value may be defined by the market - but as knowledge? (Lazzarato, 2004)

Knowledge ('truth-value' in Gabriel Tarde's terminology) always exists as something which is 'intelligible, unappropriable, unexchangeable, unconsumable'; it can be shared with no cost for either side, without any of it being lost – it is outside both 'destructive consumption' (it can be shared and consumed without being destroyed in the process) and 'definitive alienation' (if I share it with someone, I do not lose any of it). It thus stands in opposition to what is 'tangible, appropriable, exchangeable, consumable', that is, as that whose possession and consumption by one requires the exclusion of others. It finds itself outside the regime of scarcity.¹⁵

The 'immaterial' quality of knowledge production identified by Tarde in the beginning of the last century is much increased in the beginning of this one by the present stage of technological development. If in the past some kind of 'materialisation' into a product (e.g. the book) was necessary for knowledge to be shared, today it is possible for it to be reproduced and shared at zero cost and in zero time.

Now, in the case of the 'creative' immaterial worker – that is, the worker that creates the content and form of the commodity she produces – we can see how the claim regarding the increasingly parasitic, external position of the capitalist to the productive cycle makes sense. Under the present conditions of technological development, not only does the creative immaterial worker tend to possess the means of production (a personal computer connected to the internet, a mobile phone, a digital camera), she also possesses the means that allow for zero-cost, zero-time reproduction and circulation of the product.¹⁶

15 One must recognise two different levels of scarcity. One is that of its production, that is, the way in which a certain configuration of social relations regulates access to goods in ways that effectively exclude some people from them. In this sense, one could say capitalism is a system of enclosure, i.e., production of scarcity; and the fact that knowledge production is today *potentially* outside the regime of scarcity does not obscure the fact that the great line of conflict around it is precisely the attempts at enforcing scarcity represented, for example, by intellectual property rights (cf. Lazzarato, 2004; Rullani, 2004). The other level, which underlies the first one, is the one this paragraph speaks of. At this level there is a substantial difference between knowledge production and the production of material goods.

16 Of course, this does not mean that the production of knowledge goods is 'free'. There are costs involved in the reproduction of the knowledge worker, in the time put into the production of the knowledge good, in the overall social production of knowledge from which the individualised knowledge good draws from, the production of the means of production and circulation of knowledge etc. If the argument here seems to isolate the knowledge worker from the social relations in which

The capitalist then simply profits from what is brought into the productive cycle by the worker herself and, via the worker, society as a whole – her skills, knowledge, schooling, training; her imagination, creativity, control of cultural codes; her social networks of cooperation; even the essential machinery, in the form of a computer, telecommunication infra-structure. The capitalist's role is restricted to “placing in a sequence the segments of work that are not given in continuity, thus recuperating the implicit externalities produced by cooperative production and, more generally, the community” (Lazzarato, 2001: 96). One can see here why one would speak of a ‘communism of capital’.

Let us take two examples. Both the waitress and, in a different way, the graphic designer who produces a billboard advertisement work in the production of affect; the feelings of ease, pleasure etc. they create and continue to produce effects long after the process of their production – reactivated in memory, generating new relations (people who recommend the restaurant or the thing advertised), and so on. The difference is, again, that once the design is finished, it can be reproduced without that implying any extra work for the designer. Relayed to the advertising agency via email (in the same way that the picture it includes had first been sent to the designer by the photographer), the product, from the point of view of the immaterial worker, is finalised – turning the design into a billboard is the agency's problem, not hers. For the waitress, however, even though the affect produced is unappropriable, unexchangeable and unconsumable, the relation in which it is produced is not: if affective work can be summarised as ‘selling with a smile’, the materiality of the smiles remains inescapable, and thus insurmountably scarce. In an industry where the capacity to produce more affect represents a competitive edge (Dowling, 2006; and this issue), a firm would have little future if the affective relation it supplied were to be showing a pre-recorded smiling waitress on a screen. In other words, even if it mobilises the general human capacities and shared social codes of the waitress and the customer; even if the affect it produces is immeasurable, that is, non-scarce and productive of new social relations; it remains a fact for the waitress that the performance that produces the affect will have to be repeated anew every time a customer or group of customers walks into the restaurant. The *performance* is therefore scarce – the attention given to one table detracts from the attention given to others; it requires the physical presence of the worker and the (always varied and variable) repetition of a certain sequence of acts; it is therefore measurable.¹⁷ As long as each performance of affect has to be repeated for each new customer, the waitress' condition remains different from that of the individual worker who “steps to the side of the production process instead of being its chief actor” in the highly mechanised industry Marx speaks of, where it is “the development of the social

she is placed, this is because the argument is being made from *inside* the immaterial labour thesis – that is, this is a problem of the thesis itself, and in order to make sense of it in its own terms one has to incur in it as well. But to make the point of this paragraph clearer, I believe that this transformation – the growth in qualitative and quantitative importance of creative immaterial labour, and the way in which it is organised – is the main thought-producing event behind the immaterial labour thesis; which is to say, it is the main phenomenon that it attempts to grasp, and (as I wish to show here) it does so in a way that raises serious questions and highlights important limits.

17 Dowling (2006 and this issue) in fact shows how, in a high-end restaurant which has affect as its edge over other establishments (*Vorsprung durch Affekt?*), this relation can be meticulously controlled, prescribed and measured, while at the same time tied to the imperative to ‘be oneself.’

individual which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth” (Marx, 1973: 750).

The difference between the creative immaterial worker and other forms of networked, computer-based work is of a different order. In the latter case (think of the workers who appear as the nodes in the communication between market, factory and supply chain in the Toyotist system), they have no particular control over the content and the form of the information flows they produce/relay. In this case, it is their very participation in the chain put together by the capitalist that provides the content of their work; as Trott points out, a distinction must be made between the “*qualitative* as opposed to the *quantitative* nature of the communication involved in productive processes” (Trott, 2007).¹⁸

Again, it appears that the potentials of resistance that are said to inhere in immaterial labour are predicated upon only a fraction – the smallest, in fact, from a quantitative perspective – of what the concept is supposed to contain. (Let alone the fact that they can only be made sense of if one does as I have done here, and takes the workers in isolation from the overall productive chains in which they are mediately related to ‘material’ workers.) It is no wonder then that free software production will tend to reoccur as the prime example of what is so emancipatory (at least in potential) about immaterial labour.¹⁹ The problem is, these emancipatory potentials only appear in the fullness in which they are affirmed of the whole of immaterial labour – and, through an affirmation of its hegemony, increasingly of social life itself – in very specific and clearly delimited cases such as that of software production.

It would then seem that the immaterial labour thesis starts from the observation of a number of undeniable facts – the growing importance of telecommunication technologies in contemporary production and social reproduction; of autonomous, creative and computer-based work; of the service and creative sectors; the growing decentralisation of production and its reliance on mechanisms that place the different parts of the productive chain in sequence – but then derives its farthest reaching conclusion from some very specific labouring figures that this new situation creates. As Dyer-Whitford (2005: 154) puts it, it works by “ostensibly expanding the designation [of immaterial labour] to a very broad swathe of workers, yet still deriving its primary models from those in close proximity to computer and communication technologies”. What it should be able to tell us about the present’s possibilities of recomposition, therefore, seems to fail to grasp the productive realities of most workers apart from a few, unevenly distributed across the globe and circuits of production. In other words, it presents a conic perspective that starts as an adequate response to how transformations taking place affect what is ‘close’ to it – but then, as is always the case in conic perspectives, it shows objects with more distortion the farther they are.

18 Cf. note 14, supra.

19 Cf. Bauwens (2006); Corsani and Lazzarato (2004).

‘A Vortex that Gradually Transforms Other Figures’: Hegemony, Tendency

As said before, this still does not necessarily restrict the claims of the immaterial labour thesis, since, when one speaks of its hegemony and tendency to reshape all other forms of labour, these could precisely be the features and forms that are being referred to. It is to how this hegemony is to be understood that we must now turn.

First of all, it is clear how it should not be understood. As Hardt and Negri are at pains to emphasise to various critics of *Empire*, their argument is tendential, and not quantitative, but qualitative; it is not a matter of immaterial workers being or even – one would assume – becoming the majority of the global workforce, but that, like industrial labour before, immaterial labour tends to reshape all other forms of labour, and social life itself, in its own image. “Numbers are important, but the key is to grasp the direction of the present, to read which seeds will grow and which wither” (Hardt and Negri, 2006: 141).²⁰

Nevertheless, it is difficult to understand how exactly this process is supposed to take place. As shown above, it seems uncertain that certain qualities of immaterial labour – restricted to its creative form, or what Lazzarato symptomatically calls ‘properly’ immaterial instances²¹ – particularly those that seem to offer the greatest emancipatory potential (like the capitalist’s externality to the productive process), could really develop in other areas. If this ‘reshaping’ cannot then mean a (positive) levelling of labouring realities, one is left to wonder what else it could mean.

Negri’s particular way of dealing with class composition is developed in dialogue with the Marx of the ‘Method of Political Economy’ in the *Grundrisse*, and with Lenin. From the former he extracts the basic idea that “[i]n all forms of society there is one specific form of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others” (Marx, 1973: 100-8). From the latter he appropriates the idea that a ‘determinate social formation’ can be identified through a set of relations of production that serve as the material, objective substratum that underlies the corresponding production of subjectivity; in this sense, the organisation of labour is a prefiguration of the political organisation of the proletariat. This is why, for the rather heterodox Lenin advanced by Negri, there is no discontinuity between the espousal of spontaneity expressed in economic struggles and the subsequent leap towards a specific form of political organisation (the party): it is in the divisions and hierarchies of the labour process of the Russian factory that the structure of the party can be found; the ‘professional worker’ as ‘paradigm worker subjectivity’ inside the factory is to be reproduced in the relation between vanguard and masses (Hardt, 2005: 18-9). In what is a characteristic mode of arguing for Negri (being the basic mode of his engagement with the *Grundrisse*), he can then show that the contemporaneous importance of the Leninist method lies in surpassing it: if it is “effective as a worker’s organisation in pre-revolutionary Russia because it recuperates the specific

20 Cf. also Hardt and Negri (2006: 142-4; 221-2); Trott (2007).

21 The examples given are “[a]udiovisual production, advertising, fashion, software, the management of territory, and so forth (...)”. Cf. Lazzarato (1991).

organisational forms which are immanent to the contemporary industrial production process” (Hardt, 2005: 19), today, when these forms do not apply anymore, the faithful application of the method must bear no faithfulness to the original conclusions it produced.

Could the hegemony of ‘properly’ immaterial labour be seen from this point of view – i.e., the point of view of organisation? This consideration does seem to play a role in what Hardt and Negri have to say about the importance of the network-form today; even if, as argued above, this does not necessarily have anything to do with labouring realities as such, but more with the modes of socialisation that are made possible by telecommunication technologies, and the internet in particular.²² Of course, for some – both as workers and in terms of their general access to social wealth such as technology, education (literacy, computer literacy, knowledge of multiple languages) etc. – this can only appear in the present as a promise. In any case, the analysis of this case suggests two possible, intimately connected meanings to this ‘hegemony’: one political, the other one organisational.

The two are intimately connected in that they both come together as an avatar of the historical figure of the vanguard. Thus, from the organisational point of view, like the professional and the mass worker before it, the immaterial worker would represent the ‘paradigm worker subjectivity’ of our time. This seems to be a true claim in many senses – in that it expresses flexibility, casualisation, decentralisation of production, but also a more skilled, more independent, more connected, in short, more ‘socialised’ workforce. There are nevertheless some serious problems in this claim, particularly when one places the immaterial worker in the global articulation of capitalist production. The classic thought-experiment here is to consider all the labour that goes into producing a personal computer; it is ‘negative developments’ such as precarisation rather than ‘positive flipsides’ that seem to be the main commonalities. And if it is true, for reasons sketched out already, that not everything that applies to ‘properly’ immaterial labour can be extended, even in the imaginable future, to other forms, the corollary of that would be that it is precisely from this unbridgeable gap that the immaterial worker comes to occupy the same place that was bestowed upon the professional worker in Lenin’s Russia.

The political point of view takes us back to the discussion of the conic perspective of a theory immanent to a political practice. One cannot reduce the trajectory of post-*Operaismo* from the mass worker to the immaterial labour thesis to the political and existential trajectory of the *Operaisti*; in the first section I hope to have shown some of the internal articulations that underpin and necessitate certain developments beyond any facile reductions of theory to (individual) life. Still, as soon as one recognises one of the distinctive marks of (post-) *Operaismo* as the immediacy of the relay between theory and practice, in the practical imperatives that make it more than ‘theory for theory’s sake’, it is easy to see how the transformations captured in thought correspond to

22 At this point, as discussed above, the authors of *Multitude* could of course retort that these technologies are a direct consequence of the transformations in labouring realities – a claim that would seem highly reductionist to me. This discussion is not essential to the argument, however.

transformations in the social base that the *Operaisti* were in relation to.²³ This is, of course, part of the ‘impurity’ of political discourse, of the many who speak in the thought of one, in the ‘unconscious’ sense of a discourse that is *immanent* to something – “Who speaks and acts? It is always a multiplicity, even in the person who speaks and acts. We are all *groupuscules*”, as Deleuze would have it (Deleuze and Foucault, 2001: 1175-6). But it is also ‘conscious’ in the way that the *Operaista* question remains Leninist in its attempt to read *in this immediate* reality the conditions for political action: given certain objective conditions here and now, what are the subjective possibilities that are open?

The problem then lies in the other sense in which the question is tied to Leninism, or to Marx (and Hegel) more generally – namely, the way in which the answer to the question is then transcribed into a universalising discourse where the immediate reality comes to stand in for the whole. In other words, how a conic perspective that organises reality and its possibilities from *a* point of view of the class becomes translated in theory as *the* point of view of the class. Understood in this way, a political hegemony of immaterial labour can mean two things. Firstly, that it corresponds to the topography that the theory speaks from: its immediate environment and audience, the place where it is meant to produce political effects; which can in turn be understood spatially (as corresponding more accurately to certain parts of the globe than others), temporally (as the places where the ‘tendency’ is more accentuated) and/or systemically (as the sites in which the particular configuration described by the immaterial labour thesis applies, but which in turn depend on a larger global chain of production and reproduction that runs through sites where the thesis is less applicable; which of course represents a serious problem for a simple temporal, ‘developmental’ understanding). As Dyer-Witheford (2005: 151) very acutely observes, *Empire* represents an extension of the thesis of the ‘socialised worker’, essentially developed in a (European, or, in very schematic terms, ‘global North’) metropolitan context to a global scale.

The second sense in which one can speak of a political hegemony of immaterial labour ties in with the organisational interpretation. In this case, the immaterial worker does appear as the vanguard subject, not only as the one whose ‘paradigm subjectivity’ determines what is to be done and how, but also as the one who is in the privileged position of starting and setting the tone for a new cycle of struggles – which fits squarely into Tronti’s idea that a new wave of attack on capital must take place where the working class is the strongest, as well as with the ulterior development of (post-) *Operaista* thought, and its, quite unique in the 1960s-70s, thorough rejection of third-worldism.

This is one point in which the immaterial labour thesis can provide a light under which to interpret the political developments of the last decade. When speaking of a global movement in the beginning, I deliberately phrased it as two complementary phenomena

23 A text written by Negri in 1993 follows the trajectory of the “more than ten thousand workers” who had struggled in and subsequently been laid off from the factories of Porto Marghera, a pole of intense Autonomist activity, into the surrounding territory of the Veneto, where they will become ‘political entrepreneurs’ relying on the cooperative social energies of their immediate communities who will take a new position – outside the factory – in the emergent process of productive decentralisation that starts taking place in the Italian Northeast. Cf. Negri (1996: 66-79).

rather than a unified entity: the resurgence (or rather, quick intensification) of political and social struggles in the global North, mostly seen in counter-summit mobilisations, and the (exponential growth in the) capacity of movements and individuals to communicate and coordinate actions across the globe. This distinction is important because it helps to break down the (probably unworkable) idea of ‘global movement’ into the marks by which it became identified. Mobilisation and struggles had of course been happening all along and all over since before one could start speaking of a global movement – for instance, Via Campesina was founded in 1993, and most of the movements that are part of it today were already existent then. It was a quick succession of events, such as the Zapatista insurgency in Mexico in 1994 and the Reclaim the Streets! actions in the UK in the late 1990s, and above all their culmination in the massive protests against the WTO summit in Seattle in 1999 that ‘created’ the ‘global movement’. That is, they increasingly produced the idea of a global circulation of struggles both in the sense that it produced ‘more’ struggle (got more people involved, provided a conjuncture in which more mobilisation was possible and, in a way, ‘necessary’ in order to act on that conjuncture) and provided it with a complementary dimension, the imperative to communicate, network, coordinate.²⁴

In this sense, one can see the key role of creative immaterial workers – in the broad sense that, today, under certain conditions of access to the available technology, almost everyone can occupy the place of immaterial worker – in the process. The production of the event ‘global movement’ is to a great extent dependent on the increased existence of a highly skilled, flexible workforce that could produce the forms and contents of the communication that produced the ‘global movement’. Even more, to the extent that it can be said that some events – namely, summit mobilisations like Seattle or Prague – produced the ‘global movement’ event more than others, one can geographically locate the crucial moments of this production in areas of the globe where the immaterial labour thesis’ conic perspective is rooted. In this sense, one could perhaps see some sense in understanding the hegemony of immaterial labour politically. It is nevertheless clear that this ‘vanguard’ position is the very arrangement of the global system expressed in a different form; the division of labour that makes some into the ‘marketing department’ of the ‘global movement’ follows the lines along which the world economy unevenly distributes material and immaterial production, as well as the access to technology, education, skills, mobility, welfare etc.²⁵

To make the immaterial worker into the vanguard figure of the present can in turn have different meanings. Some seem fairly unquestionable. For instance, to say that it is essential to widen the access to technology, education and mobility and, more than that, to make the production and appropriation of knowledge into a strategic site of struggle. In general, the immaterial labour thesis and the concept of biopolitical production seem

24 It is interesting to look at what Maurizio Lazzarato (2003) has to say about the same phenomena.

25 It should be made clear that I use ‘vanguard’ here in a very specific sense – as a function that can be occupied by this or that social subject in a given moment, rather than in the traditional sense. Perhaps the conclusions of my analysis of the ‘global movement’ event can be compared to what Bifo says when reminiscing about the journal *A/traverso*: “the position we had was centred around an idea of a process of self-organisation where political subjectivity played no role apart from that of an instrument of information, never a direction, but only ever an instrument” (cited in Borio, Pozzi and Roggero, 2005: 86).

to open onto a programme for reclaiming the ‘positive externalities’ appropriated by capital – that is, the public (education, transport, telecommunications infra-structure) or private investment (in education, in skills, in collaborative activities), as well as natural commons (water, air) and the “development of the social individual” (cultural and technological innovation) (Marx, 1973: 705). It is useful to the extent in which it provides a language that helps make visible and politically problematic the progressive encroachment of circuits of capitalist accumulation into more and more areas of social life and the parallel movement of externalising more and more all the risks of entrepreneurial activity to workers (flexibilisation, precarisation) and to living beings as such (negative externalities such as environmental degradation). It is perfectly in line with the programmatic tradition of *Operaismo* in refusing to accept a debate whose terms are posed by capital and the State as the need for an austerity to be shouldered mostly by workers, not enterprises – as a condition for a development that will then produce trickle down effects. It is the acceptance of these terms by the vast majority of the Left that marked the great victory of neoliberalism. The ‘point of view the class’ has always meant refusing to place oneself in the point of view of the totality, which would imply assuming the position of governance and management of the existing system, and on the contrary to affirm an absolute ‘selfishness’ that increasingly burdens that system with demands that it cannot accommodate.

The problem is that, if in the 1960s-70s this position corresponded to a struggle within the national limits of Italy, today it is possible and necessary to pose it in global terms. Consequently, the question now is whether the refusal of compromise and austerity by workers in one part of the world does not mean increased austerity and exploitation for those somewhere else; or to put it differently, whether the subjective affirmation of labouring subjects in one part (geographic or systemic) of the total system does not imply a selfishness not only towards capital, but towards other workers. Take the example of what is the greatest political expression of anything resembling a (post-) *Operaista* programme, the demand for a guaranteed social income by movements in Europe. Were such a measure to be adopted within the limits of the European Union, what would it mean for migrants who come to Europe looking for better work and life conditions? Even assuming a European guaranteed social income would be accompanied by a regularisation of migrants and an open border policy that would make them eligible for the benefit, it is likely that those who are less skilled and work to send money to their home countries would not refuse menial jobs, but only have one job instead of the two they have nowadays.²⁶ It is very likely that creative workers would flourish without the constraint put on them by having to sell their labour in the market; those in the worst and least remunerated jobs in the service industry would not profit as much (A similar argument can be made about the gendered division of labour: the fact that everyone would be paid a guaranteed income and hence be free from having to engage in the wage-relation would not necessarily change the fact that most

26 From my experience working as an organiser in the Justice for Cleaners campaign in London, I would wager that at least two thirds of migrants working as cleaners in the London Underground, the City and Canary Wharf, have two jobs, the (low) income of which they need to support themselves and their families in the UK as well as their extended families in Africa, Latin America, or Eastern Europe.

reproductive labour would still probably be done by women).²⁷ More importantly, it is likely that the tendency towards the ‘immaterialisation’ of economy (expansion of ‘creative industries’ and service sector) would cause more relocation of the ‘material’ sector to countries outside the European zone, reinforcing the global division of labour and possibly worsening the work and life conditions elsewhere; as well as, *ceteris paribus*, producing more environmental damage. Even if one can imagine a progressive mechanisation of agriculture and industry all over the world that would put more and more individual workers in the position of “[stepping] to the side of the production process instead of being its chief actor” (Marx, 1973: 705), it is more likely that given all the present conditions this would mean less the liberation from work and an increased emancipatory potential than the fact that an even larger share of the world population would be rendered entirely expendable, unskilled and immiserated. (Let alone the fact that in this case, the necessity for high investment in fixed capital makes the capitalist more, and not less, necessary. Sure enough, one can imagine that the power of the new ‘overseers’ of production over the entire process will be increased and thus their possibility of appropriating the means of production. It is however much more difficult to imagine that happening in the same peaceful way in which creative workers can appropriate their means of production – i.e., without intense political, even physical confrontations. In which case the strength in numbers of the mass worker will certainly be missed.)

The point here is that the ethical imperative to ‘think global’ is constitutive of the event ‘global movement’; the ‘point of view of the class’ must be able to oscillate between the one-sidedness of subjective affirmation and an ethical care for the totality of life and social relations. Since the impossibility of finding a one-bullet solution that could bring movements all over the globe around a single set of rallying points is, as far as one can see, insurmountable, perhaps the only bet that we have today is an intensification of struggle everywhere that can eventually bring about a transformation of the global system.²⁸

Here one can raise three sceptical questions regarding the Negrian reading of class composition as described by Michael Hardt. First of all, is the ‘paradigm subjectivity’ paradigmatic through necessity or through framing – that is, if Lenin were writing under very different conditions (where the Bolshevik party were mostly capillarised among the peasantry, for example) would he still see the professional worker as *the* pole of class recomposition? (This is the issue of the conic perspective again.) Furthermore, is the hierarchy reproduced in the Leninist party just a mirror effect of the determinate social formation in question, or rather precisely the consequence of the attempt to identify a paradigm subjectivity? In other words, can one not at least suspect that it is the political-theoretical requirement of identifying what is most relevant in a given situation that produces the political-theoretical necessity of subsuming different realities

27 Cf. Henninger (forthcoming).

28 “The problematic of individuating a hegemonic subject (...) risks reintroducing a centre-periphery model that, in the contemporary form of production, has imploded completely. In a composition characterised by the co-presence of different forms of labour, extraction of surplus-value and subsumption, each figure can speak at the same time the language of particularity and generality, with no one term having to be sacrificed for the other” (Borio, Pozzi and Roggero, 2005: 33).

under one – that is, what creates both all-encompassing categories *and* political directions? And finally, if one accepts those elements of the immaterial labour thesis that point to a ‘becoming-work of life’ – real subsumption, biopolitical production – is one not forced to conclude that there can be no paradigm worker subjectivity as such?

The ever-vague idea of the ‘social factory’ – that under Fordism ‘society becomes factory’ – finds no correlative in the idea that ‘life becomes work’, since life cannot become work without work becoming life. That is, if labour today is becoming more and more productive of new forms of social life and subjectivity, and the production of subjectivity happens more and more outside the direct process of production and the wage relation, that means the method of looking for the material, objective underpinnings of the resistant subject *in the organisation of labour* has its applicability substantially reduced. In other words, the ‘social factory’ thesis could confirm the centrality of the mass worker by pointing to its quantitative weight in the direct process of production and projecting the shadow of factory relations over the organisation of social life. But if one accepts the idea that the boundary between production and reproduction is becoming increasingly blurred, this would mean that subjective elements become just as, if not more, important than the objective organisation of production in determining the sites of potential conflict. This was a path somewhat forced upon post-*Operaismo* by the strength of the feminist and student/youth movements in mid-1970s Italy, necessitating a revision in the idea of the centrality of the mass worker – which produced the figure of the ‘socialised worker’ in Negri’s thought, and was taken to its ultimate conclusions in the attention to the subjective elements of class composition in Bologna’s ‘The tribe of the moles’ (1978).

In this text, Bologna refutes the thesis of the ‘two societies’ with which some intellectuals of the Italian Communist Party had tried to pit the ‘productive’ members of society – who, they would expect, would see how the Historical Compromise was in their interest – to those who formed the social base of what would become known as the 1977 movement.²⁹ It does so by identifying the objective underpinnings of these new subjects in the restructuring already well underway in the Italian North; but at the same time it is forced to conclude that these new conditions mean that

[c]lass reproduction becomes a problem of political legitimation of social behaviours, a problem of cultural and ideological identity, of acceptance or non-acceptance of behaviours imposed by the State-form; classes lose all ‘objective’ character and become political subjects.

But in this process the driving force comes from below, from the production of systems of culture and struggle, the continuous invention of codes of behaviour that are always more ‘illegal’, the liberation of spaces from official institutions (...). (Bologna, 1978: 19-20)

This is a conclusion that at once confirms and creates a recursive problem for the immaterial labour thesis: on the one hand, by posing the production of subjectivity as the essential site of struggle today, it would reinforce the claim that production becomes biopolitical under the hegemony of the immaterial worker; on the other, it would divest the immaterial worker *as immaterial worker* of any centrality – unless, perhaps, in the

29 On the ‘two societies’ thesis advanced by Asor Rosa on the pages of the official vehicle of the PCI, *L’Unita*, and the response it caused among the *operaisti*, cf. Wright (2002: 200-3).

residual (and very abstract) sense that, if immaterial production is the production of forms of social life, everyone is an immaterial worker.

Finally, it must be noted that ‘properly’ immaterial labour, while presenting those conditions that would make the best case for an intensified emancipatory potential, is at the same time one area where the subjective incentive for not ‘exiting the game’ is very strong. As Marcel Duchamp once observed, “[a]rtists [read: creative immaterial workers] of all eras are like Monte Carlo gamblers, and the blind lottery sends some on their way and ruins others”.³⁰ That is, all properly immaterial workers know that they are entering a game where only a handful will succeed; the fact that the rewards for those who do are so high represents a powerful incentive to not opting for the ‘exodus’ strategy of producing collaboratively and outside the intellectual property rights system, since it is enforcing intellectual property rights upon their work that makes them eligible for eventually being picked among the crowd of also-rans.³¹ In fact, if one enlarges the picture beyond the individual ‘properly’ immaterial worker and sees her within the context of the global circuits of production that provide her computer and mobile phone, as well as other conditions such as social welfare, it becomes rather doubtful whether one can speak of ‘exodus’ or only ‘relative autonomy’ from capital.³²

So let us take stock of where we have got so far. We have seen that the hegemony of immaterial labour cannot be understood as a levelling of labouring conditions; that it can be understood from an organisational point of view (networks, the role of mediatic-symbolic actions), although it is questionable how much of this can really be ascribed to the so-called hegemony; and that understanding it politically can lead to both useful and potentially dangerous conclusions.

So in the end it seems that, if the formal hegemony of immaterial labour is going to have a meaning any more substantial – that of reshaping reality in its image – this meaning is synonymous with what is called in the immaterial labour thesis ‘biopolitical production’. It is beyond the scope, and interest, of this article to discuss how ‘accurate’ this concept can be said to be.³³ There certainly is a lot to be gained from this perspective – not least, as I said above, a political language in which to reclaim as commons what capital appropriates as ‘positive externalities’; or in which to articulate

30 In a letter to Jean Crotti dated 17 August 1952. I believe this letter is, like others written by Duchamp, to be found in the Archives of American Art of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington; I have not been able to confirm this. The translation used here can be found at <http://www.pseudopodium.org/search.cgi?Duchamp>.

31 This can be compared to Virno’s (2004: 86-90) analysis of the ‘emotional tonalities of the multitude’.

32 Cf. Arvidsson (2007).

33 Which is not to say that this is not an interesting and important debate; if one wants somewhere to start, one could do worse than take the *majeure* of the first issue of *Multitudes* as a point of departure. Cf. *Multitudes* (2000, 1: 11-116). Generally, I would say that my position is that capitalism has always relied on the appropriation of externalities, although it might be possible to say that this has over time been constantly expanded to new areas; therefore, the situation described as biopolitical production is not new in itself, but only an exacerbation of certain structural determinants of capitalism. The one area where the emphasis on the newness of the present epoch appears as clearly problematic is that of reproductive work; the immaterial labour thesis takes on board the feminist critique of the 1970s concerning the importance of reproductive labour to production, but then only so often makes it seem as if this were a new feature, rather than having always been the case.

phenomena as disparate as the flexibilisation of labour, the externalisation of entrepreneurial risk and its attendant effects in the relation between life- and work-time and how this modulates the body and mind of the worker ('workfare'); or the way in which behavioural or linguistic trends can be captured to add value to commodities; or how data on individual and population behaviour can be made profitable in direct (e.g., Radio Frequency Identification [RFID]) and indirect ways (by projecting trends for the development of anything from pharmaceutical products to property developments).³⁴

In the Guise of a (Partial) Conclusion: Recomposition

But one must also ask what is lost in, or what the dangers are of choosing such spectacles to see the world with.³⁵ First of all, as I have argued, there is something dangerous in speaking in terms of 'tendency' – precisely because of the tone of inertial inevitability that can be deprehended from it. If there is a tendency, it is not only one whose final effect of levelling of labouring and living realities is rather doubtful (I hope to have raised enough elements for such an argument), but there are also serious counter-tendencies in place.

Second, and partially as a corollary, there is danger in, by finding concepts in which the logical rigour of the tendency can be grasped, taking for granted what would be its end-result and place it as the starting point. If we can speak of a 'becoming-affective', 'becoming-woman' of labour today, this should not obscure the fact that some of us still enter the work market and the sphere of reproduction in their socially assigned roles of women.³⁶ If we can speak of the 'wealth of the poor' as the grounds on which to base a political project of new kind, this should not obscure the enormous stratification of immaterial labour, the differences between immaterial and material labour, or the immiseration of a good chunk of the world's population. If we speak of a process of becoming-Empire that spreads across the globe regardless of national borders, this cannot obscure how different parts of the globe are articulated in and by this process, or how important an element like national borders is in determining stratification. Finding formulas for a present day recomposition necessarily entails understanding these articulations and creating languages in which such different realities and subjectivities can be articulated.³⁷

34 For a thought-provoking extrapolation on such possibilities, cf. Clough et al. (2007); on RFID, Mako Hill (2004).

35 "[A] theory (...) must work, must function. (...) It is curious that it is Proust, an author considered a pure intellectual, who said it so clearly: treat my book as spectacles to look at the outside with, and well, if they do not serve you, take others, find yourself your apparatus, which is necessarily a combat apparatus" (Deleuze and Foucault, 2001: 1177).

36 It should not obscure either the fact that there is something problematic in the equation of 'affective' and 'woman'.

37 De Angelis (2007) develops a similar argument with a discussion on the law of value in mind; two of the points he makes seem particularly interesting to me: the first, that tendency should be seen as a category of (value) struggle; and that, as long as 'production in common' happens under capitalist relations, it will reproduce social stratification. Another angle of criticism which I have not employed

The most mysterious element in the narrative and methodology of class composition is the last one – recomposition. Initially, the main focus of *Operaista* agitation was wage struggles in the big factories where the *Operaisti* had managed to develop a social base. In the Keynesian compact, to turn the wage into an independent variable whose only measure was the relative political force of the mass worker was a key strategic moment in the affirmation of a subjective ‘selfishness’ that pushed the system to its limits. With the end of the welfare state arrangement and productive restructuring, the point of recomposition seems to become more and more abstract: – first the party-building fixation of Potere Operaio’s last days, then, in Negri’s work, abstract labour (‘Crisis of the planner-State’) and the socialised worker (‘Proletarians and the State’), even if the political direction of the mass worker to some extent still goes affirmed. Less about what is already there, a concrete demand or rallying point, and more about what needs to be constructed (the party) or an abstract concept from which a direction can be logically derived – and which, following the *Operaista* teleology of a growing socialisation of the proletariat, will become more and more all-encompassing with time.

The problem with these abstract points of recomposition is that conceptual development and logical rigour can at best give indications as to where to move. They do not solve, or even pose, problems of organisation. Whereas any talk of composition is at least half objective, and can be absorbed in a Marxist discourse, the mystery of (re)composition is probably best understood in Spinozist terms – that is, as that striving of the *conatus* to select the things it enters in relation with so as to enhance its power of acting; as the arrangement of encounters that produce more *potentia* (Spinoza, 1992).³⁸ As such, it can only be determined experimentally; it is only after entering a relation, managing to produce a ‘composition’ (in the Spinozist sense), that one can tell what it can mean. Here again, “organisation is spontaneity reflecting on itself” (Negri, 1976: 26).

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here, but is intimately connected to any discussion on teleology and objectivism, is that of Jason Adams (2003) in identifying the productivist assumptions at work in *Empire*.

38 Cf. particularly P2-4, IV; P8, IV; P18-21, IV; P26, IV; P31, IV; P59, IV.

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