



# The imprimatur of capital: Gilbert Simondon and the hypothesis of cognitive capitalism

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## abstract

The paper explores the relevance of Gilbert Simondon's reflections on the notion of individuation for the development of the political and analytical hypothesis known as cognitive capitalism, recently proposed by economists such as Yann Moulier Boutang and Carlo Vercellone. The focus of their analysis is on the new exploitative dimensions of contemporary capitalism. Nowadays, exploitation is exercised on the process of individuation rather than on individuated entities. To theoretically grasp, and politically act upon, this unprecedented configuration, I argue that the Marxian notions of formal and real subsumption are still necessary but not longer sufficient. As a consequence, I will advance and discuss an original concept, that of impression, whose function is to supplement these Marxian notions in an attempt to understand the new modalities of contemporary exploitation. More specifically, the goal is to give a non-neutral account of what seems to be the categorical, albeit paradoxical, imperative of Post-Fordist capitalism: 'be as different from the social norm as you wish, experience your autonomy in its fullness, as long as the outcome of your behaviour is translatable into the homogeneous grammar of the general equivalent – money'. To give empirical consistency to my analysis, I will attempt to apply the notion of impression to the post-welfare discourse of active social policies that aim to 'empower' the unemployed in and through the labour market.

## Introduction

This paper explores the relevance of Gilbert Simondon's philosophy of individuation (2005) for the hypothesis of cognitive capitalism as it has been proposed by authors such as Yann Moulier-Boutang (2007) and Carlo Vercellone (2006a; 2006b).<sup>1</sup> More particularly, I will argue that the application of the Simondonian conceptual apparatus to the contemporary critique of political economy can shed new light on some specific processes of exploitation, processes that are defining features of the Post-Fordist phase of the capitalist mode of production. The current form of exploitation does not refer solely to individuated entities assembled within the category of waged labour. Without departing from that, it nonetheless expands its capture toward individuation itself, namely the process that leads to the creation of individual working figures. To theoretically grasp, and politically act upon, these new exploitative configurations the Marxian notions of formal and real subsumption are still necessary, but not longer

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1 Although not discussed in the economy of the current work, another fundamental source on the notion of cognitive capitalism is Fumagalli, 2007.

sufficient. As a consequence, the core sections of this essay will advance and discuss an original concept, that of impression, whose function is to supplement these Marxian notions in an attempt to understand the unprecedented modalities of contemporary exploitation. More specifically, the goal is to give a non-neutral account of what seems to be the categorical, albeit paradoxical, imperative of Post-Fordist capitalism: ‘be as different from the social norm as you wish, experience your autonomy in its fullness, as long as the outcome of your behaviour is translatable into the homogeneous grammar of the general equivalent – money’.

The exposition will proceed as follows. First, I will briefly outline some of the key concepts of Simondon’s ontological propositions. Second, I will discuss some fundamental theses about the notion of cognitive capitalism. Third, I will introduce the concept of impression and discuss its main theoretical features. Fourth, I will attempt a brief empirical application of impression to the discourse of active social policies that aim to ‘empower’ the unemployed in and through the labour market. Finally, a provisional conclusion will expose possible lines of further research to enrich the general debate.

## Simondon

The philosophical project developed by Gilbert Simondon<sup>2</sup> over a period of twenty years is a highly complex and sophisticated one. Nonetheless, for the purposes of my argument it is sufficient to highlight two main theses through which a sharp line of demarcation has been drawn with regard to the Western metaphysical tradition. The first is the primacy of the process of individuation over individuated entities. From this perspective, Simondon’s polemical object has to be found in the various theoretical approaches that posit as prior a fixed principle that would be able to explain, produce and determine the course of subsequent processes of individuation. Constituted individualities are conceived of as given, immutable substances, so that the fundamental problem ends up being the recreation of the specific conditions that have made their existence possible. On the contrary, Simondon sees individuation as an operation, as a processual becoming by means of which structured individualities can emerge and relate to each other. At stake is the possibility to philosophically grasp the individual through individuation rather than individuation through the individual. As it is evident, the implications of this radical perspective are of primary importance:

The individual has to be understood as having a relative reality, occupying only a certain phase of being as a whole – a phase that therefore rests on a preceding pre-individual state, and that, even after individuation, does not exist in isolation since individuation does not exhaust in the singular act of its appearance all the potentials embedded in the pre-individual state. The process of individuation, moreover, does not bring to light just the individual, but also the individual-environment dyad. In this way the individual possesses only a relative existence in two senses: because it does not represent the totality of being, and because it is merely the result of a phase in

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2 Simondon’s thought has undergone a sort of *renaissance* in recent years. This new interest in his theoretical production has given rise to a rich international debate, whose significant expressions are the following: (in French) Stiegler, 2004; Combes, 1999; (in Italian) Ciccarelli, 2008; (in English) Toscano, 2006.

the development of being during which this latter existed neither in the form of an individual nor as a principle of individuation. (Simondon, 2005: 12; author translation)

The second, closely linked theoretical statement is the primacy of relation over its own terms. As we have seen, the process of individuation requires a field of singularities, conceived of as pure intensities, basic energetic unities; subsequently, these tensive potentials are transformed into relatively stable structures, which in turn bring to the foreground new differential environments. From this standpoint, the emerging system is nothing more than a precarious equilibrium between a pre-individual field of intensities and a trans-individual range of problems that have to be solved through contingent and unexpected structural operations. By referring to the pre-individual field as 'metastable', Simondon intends to advance the idea that, prior to individuality, being is affected by inconsistency, populated by divergent tensions, and pregnant with incompatible potentials. Relationality emerges in this phase of being and is consequently able to account for the onto-genesis of individuated entities. Simondon is strongly critical towards the conceptual dichotomies – matter and form especially – which have traditionally proposed to explain the original manifestation of individuals. Real relations, according to him, are those relations that co-emerge with their terms. They are operations that integrate irreducible differences, 'not the simple relation between two terms that could be adequately known by means of concepts, inasmuch as they would have an effectively separate existence' (Simondon, 2005: 19; author translation). As Alberto Toscano appropriately notes:

Rather than the substantial support of relations that would inhere within it, (preindividual) being is defined as affected by disparation, that is, by the tension between incompatible – as yet unrelated – dimensions or potentials in being. (Toscano, 2006: 139)

To conclude this section, I would like to underline that, although Simondon's emphasis is clearly on the operative and processual realities rather than on the static and individuated entities, the relationship between these two categories might be defined as a-symmetrical complementarity, since each of them represents the condition of possibility for the understanding of the other. And it is from this specific difference, of degree rather than of kind, that I will attempt to map out some internal resonances between the philosophy of individuation and the hypothesis of cognitive capitalism. Moreover, this complex/paradoxical complementarity between opposite terms will open up the theoretical terrain upon which the notion of impression, conceived of as a tool to produce a cartography of contemporary exploitation, grounds its logical justification and political effectiveness.

## **Cognitive capitalism**

The hypothesis of cognitive capitalism is complex and multilayered, and can consequently be approached from a variety of perspectives. However, for the purposes of the present work I will limit the discussion to a general premise and then move directly to the Marxian notion of subsumption, which is the one I would like to problematise. First of all, while referring to a paradigmatic analysis of the current phase the authors I mentioned earlier are not simply posing the problem of a description of the contemporary functioning of the multiple circuits of accumulation and/or valorisation.

Economic sociology has already accomplished this task. Rather, we are dealing with the necessity to provide a partial, class-based understanding of Post-Fordist conditions, an understanding whose goal is from the very beginning its employment in the social struggle to overcome such conditions. As it has always been in the workerist methodological tradition,<sup>3</sup> it is the point of view of the working class that has to be assumed.<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, it is from an analysis of labour modifications that the hypothesis of cognitive capitalism is allowed to perceive the current phase as a new great transformation, a third capitalist era whose difference from the previous two is precisely defined by a shift in the actual way through which capital subsumes living labour under itself.<sup>5</sup> On the basis of this elaboration, Vercellone proposes a periodisation of the history of capitalism marked by the presence of three main stages.

The first is mercantilist capitalism, in which formal subsumption prevails. In this context capital faces an already formed productive network and limits itself to assume it as its own base. In this way the privileged locus of production has to be individuated in the workshop, concomitant with the hegemony of workers' handicraft. The determined class-figure of this first moment is the professional worker.

The second stage is industrial capitalism, whose apex is represented by the Fordist model. This latter is informed by the logic of real subsumption,<sup>6</sup> which implies that capital produces on its own the means of production and the pivotal locus of production itself is the large-scale factory. This peculiar mass-production of standardised goods implies a polarization of workers' knowledge and skills that in turn involves a strict division between directly productive tasks and planning skills. Here the prevalent class-figure is the mass worker.

The third stage begins with the crisis of the Fordist model and is represented by the emergence of cognitive capitalism, defined by a specific exploitative relation with knowledge, by the diffusion of mass education and, last but not least, by the violent inclusion in the circuits of valorisation of worker's subjectivity, conceived of in terms of means of production (Vercellone, 2006a).

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3 On *workerism* in general, see Dyer-Witford, 1999; Borio, Pozzi and Roggero, 2002; Wright, 2002. On workerist methodology see Negri, 1984.

4 It may be useful to report a passage from the classical *locus* of this methodological formulation, namely Mario Tronti's *Operai e capitale*: 'We too have worked with a concept that puts capitalist development first, and workers second. This is a mistake. And now we have to turn the problem on its head, to change perspective and start again from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class. At the level of socially developed capital, the capitalist development is subordinate to workers' struggles, comes after them and on them it has to build the political mechanism of its own production' (Tronti 2006: 39).

5 With the concept of *subsumption*, Marx qualifies the forms of subordination of labour to capital and, as it is clear, there is a strict link between subsumption and exploitation.

6 'The general features of the *formal subsumption* remain, viz. the direct *subordination of the labour process to capital*, irrespective of the state of its technological development. But on this foundation there now arises a technologically and otherwise *specific mode of production – capitalist production* – which transforms the nature of the labour process and its actual conditions. Only when that happens do we witness the *real subsumption of labour under capital*' (Marx, 1979: 1034-1035).

Now, at this point one might legitimately ask: which kind of subsumption is proper to cognitive capitalism? Vercellone's answer is the following:

[...] the subsumption of labour under capital, [...] from the point of view of the labour process, returns to be essentially formal. This means that the cooperation of labour no longer needs to be ruled by capital, and this reaffirmation of the autonomy of living knowledge could lead to a resurgence of tensions regarding self-determination in the organisation of labour and the social ends of production. (Vercellone, 2005: 10)

According to Vercellone, the new phase does not require a different conceptual apparatus to be grasped in its singularity; no qualitative shift seems to be involved. Rather, it is a matter of investigating a new articulation between formal and real subsumption, an articulation in which the former returns to dominance. In fact, since capital progressively loses its ability to direct/organize social cooperation, exploitation is deployed through a twofold strategy: extension of actual working hours (new centrality of absolute surplus labour) and hyper-productivity of finance (whose nourishment is the autonomy of the general intellect). As a necessary consequence, financial rent – conceived of in terms of Post-Fordist means of exploitation – has to be understood as purely parasitical.

A different perspective is proposed by Moulier-Boutang (2007), who intends to show the unique features of contemporary accumulation by means of a new theory of exploitation, which is in turn based on the pivotal notion of second level exploitation. To introduce this concept, the author provides a preliminary distinction within the notion of living labour: at a basic level, labour would be defined by a physical, material energy expenditure (labour-power), while at a superior level we find memory and cognitive functions (invention-power). At this point, Moulier-Boutang advances the thesis that cognitive capitalism is more concerned with the violent appropriation of affects, subjectivities, knowledge and mental or spiritual capacities, which we find at the superior level of living labour (hence second level exploitation). Conversely, both mercantilist and industrial capitalism were concerned, albeit in different ways, with the transformations of material energy into physical goods. As Moulier-Boutang explains:

The specificity of cognitive capitalism is that it receives its legitimacy from the very nature of its accumulation. And what is the quality of this accumulation referred to? It is referred to the fact that it is essentially grounded on second level exploitation. In as much as the profitability of capital invested in productive activities almost exclusively arises from an exploitation of second degree (which means that exploitation of first degree can be reduced to its simplest expression), we are witnessing the full deployment of cognitive capitalism. Even before being a stabilised regime, a mode of accumulation, capitalism is the tendency to transform the mode of exploitation. (Moulier-Boutang, 2007: 148)

## **The concept of impression**

Now, although this analysis might appear overly simplistic and excessively schematic, and although the distinction between labour-power and invention-power may recall a kind of body-mind dualism to which a shrewd post-Cartesian epistemology has addressed convincing critiques, nonetheless we find it very important since it underlines

the necessity to think the new forms of exploitation outside (albeit in no way against) the Marxian notions of formal and real subsumption.<sup>7</sup> In a fundamental passage, Moulrier-Boutang explains that, in order to exploit the general intellect under cognitive capitalism, it is necessary ‘to avoid a perfect objectification (reification or alienation) of the invention-power in the labour process or in the product’ (Moulrier Boutang, 2007: 147-148; emphasis added). If we substitute the expression ‘perfect objectification’ with ‘transformation in individuated entities emptied of their potentials’, it becomes possible to see how Simondon’s thought can help us in a proper conceptualisation of the forms of exploitation specific to cognitive capitalism.<sup>8</sup>

At this point, I can advance two hypotheses and an inference: 1) Both formal and real subsumption essentially cope with relatively homogeneous individuated entities (in the first case capital finds them as already formed, while in the second it establishes a disciplinary process which starts from a well defined point – the individual worker formally free to sell her labour-power – and ends in another well defined point – the forced inclusion of the proletarian in the scarcely differentiated category of waged-worker)<sup>9</sup>; 2) Capital, in its cognitive phase, must grant to social cooperation, or subtly impose to productive citizens, a certain degree of self-government in order to subsequently, ex post, capture the value they produce. Here, self-government means the possibility for them to enter in a non-disciplinary – yet not uncontrolled – process of individuation; 3) If these two hypotheses are plausible, then it becomes possible to argue for a new conceptual apparatus potentially capable of providing a mediation between a determined mode of exploitation of individuated entities (formal and real subsumption), and a just as determined mode of exploitation of processes of individuation.

This is the reason why I propose to supplement (not to substitute) the notion of subsumption with the concept of impression, whose function is to define at a theoretical level the specific characteristics of the exploitation of individuation. The reason why the term impression is chosen is twofold: on the one hand, it recalls the Latin locution nihil obstat quominus imprimatur, generally abbreviated in the term imprimatur. This expression was used by the ecclesiastical authority to approve the printing of books<sup>10</sup> and refers to a form of control that (rhetorically) does not impose a pre-given outcome

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7 For a truly remarkable analysis along the same argumentative line, see Chicchi, 2005.

8 It may be useful to note that I do *not* want to argue for a perfect transition from Fordist and Pre-Fordist forms of exploitation to Post-Fordist ones. On the very contrary, these exploitative practices tend to supplement each other presenting themselves in complex configurations dependent on the singularity of each given context. However, this should not prevent us from investigating the *specific form of exploitation in cognitive capitalism*, which is becoming more and more diffused especially in the metropolitan areas of the planet.

9 A further specification seems necessary at this point. When we refer to ‘scarce differentiation’ we are *not* suggesting that professional and mass workers are comparable to mere automatons and that their working activity should be interpreted as mere repetition of mindless gestures. In contrast, what we want to highlight is the transformation of the role of autonomous creativity in the process of capitalist value-production: from fatal threat to be fought through discipline (mercantilist and industrial capitalism) to necessary resource to be simultaneously incited and controlled (cognitive capitalism).

10 Texts to which the *imprimatur* was rejected were immediately included in the list of prohibited books (*Index Librorum Prohibitorum*), formally abolished by Pope Paul VI in 1966.

but rather establishes an initial (and firmly indisputable) condition of acceptability. On the other hand, it suggests a photographic metaphor; in fact, it recalls the constitutive indeterminacy of the impression of a photographic plate before subsequent treatments bring it to full development. Moreover, it discloses the virtual (but nevertheless real!) edges of an image without filling them with actual content. To put it otherwise, it refers to a dynamic regime of superimpositions in which at the beginning, *ex ante*, the establishment of a limit or threshold takes place.<sup>11</sup> This limit then influences the process of subjective becoming without positing a necessary outcome to it. However, impression is not configured as the purely formal act which consists in drawing an immaterial border; on the contrary, it presents itself as a direct tool for governing life, as a biopolitical dispositif aimed at selecting subjective trajectories ‘potentially’ functional to capitalist valorisation. I say ‘potentially’ because, although the negative injunction occurs *ex ante*, its economic validation, its inclusion in the circuits of accumulation cannot but manifests itself *ex post*, at the end of the process, when the unpredictable but not unlimited outcome actually appears. In other words, although impressed, a process of individuation always remains partially indeterminate (since, by definition, it proceeds through the activation of unactualised potentials, whose transparent measurement, or complete management, is simply impossible). This means that capitalism is forced to keep open this indeterminable processuality, whose mode of development necessarily implies the production of antagonisms.

At this point, however, another consideration seems unavoidable: just beside the negative injunction (impression as the establishment of a limiting threshold), we always find a correlative positive injunction which incites/imposes the subject to conform as much as possible to the imperative of enjoyment by means of differentiation (impression as the act of governing the social body through the production of market-led forms of freedom).

Here the double injunction of the capitalist categorical imperative we sketched above acquires its proper sense. In fact, the twofold prescription ‘(1) be as different from the social norm as you wish, experience your autonomy in its fullness, (2) as long as the outcome of your behaviour is translatable into the homogeneous grammar of the general equivalent – money’ finally rests on the paradox of a coercive freedom,<sup>12</sup> of a refined governmental dispositif which controls while inciting to subjective autonomy.

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11 It is important to stress that I refer to a temporal terminology from an abstractly logical (as opposed to linearly chronological) perspective.

12 According to Michel Foucault, freedom is a necessary condition for capitalism (and biopolitics) to function. In *Birth of Biopolitics*, he recognises the incapability to properly manage the process of freedom-production as one of the main causes of the crisis of liberalism (a political rationality that ‘consumes freedom’). From this crisis emerges neoliberalism as a specific governmental practice whose relationship to freedom-production is ‘refined’ through a radical anti-naturalism. Nonetheless, production of freedom is more a contested battlefield than a flat surface upon which power can be boundlessly exercised. As Foucault brilliantly explains: ‘Finally, and above all, there are processes of clogging such that the mechanisms for producing freedom, precisely those that are called upon to manufacture this freedom, actually produce destructive effects which prevail over the very freedom they are supposed to produce. This is, if you like, the ambiguity of all devices which could be called “liberogenic”, that is to say, devices intended to produce freedom which potentially risk producing

It is this inherent paradox, from whence the productive and interventionist side of capitalist command issues, which seems to me lacking in the hypothesis of cognitive capitalism as proposed by Vercellone (and, to a certain extent, also by Moulier Boutang). While focusing exclusively on the economic validation *ex post*, they seem to delineate a mystical profile of social cooperation, an image of the multitude as good in itself, as intrinsically innocent. For these reasons we agree with the critique recently formulated by Alberto Toscano, according to whom:

The question is in what sense we are justified in speaking simply of ‘capture’: are we not dealing with the incitement by capitalism of a simulacrum of self-valorisation, an ideology of cooperation which would mistake a global constraint for a subjective initiative? Is cooperation really outside, or even relatively autonomous from, the self-valorisation of capital? (Toscano, 2007: 80)

Since social (even autonomous) cooperation does not emerge in a vacuum, *ex nihilo*, the problem posed by Toscano has to be taken seriously. To envisage an answer to his last question, however, it is necessary at the very least to introduce some illustration of how impression might work in a concrete analytical context.

### **Impression applied: Exploitation in active social policies**

As an empirical example, I propose to analyse the debate about active social policies (basically concerned with the reform of welfare state) that has arisen in recent years in the field of economic sociology (Geldof, 1998; Larsen and Van Berkel, 2009). Welfare is here conceived of as the institutional apex of the Fordist phase, a relatively stable balance of force relations marked by a ‘tacit agreement’ between labour and capital (increased wages for increases in productivity and social rest). From this perspective, welfare directly refers to the issue of exploitation – to put it crudely, the working class forced through struggle a different distribution of surplus value – and seems consequently to be a suitable terrain to advance a preliminary evaluation of the heuristic and political potential of the concept of impression.

To simplify a little, active social policies aim at re-including in the labour market subjects that are, for various reasons, unable to successfully cope with it as it is usually configured and, consequently, represent a burden on the social security budget. In general, it might be said that the discourse of activation assumes as its polemical object the so-called welfare dependency, which is to say a putative tendency on the part of recipients (usually poor and/or unemployed) to live off their allowance. This polemical object, however, presents from the very beginning of the debate (mid-1980s) an interesting ambiguity: it can be addressed starting from both a disciplinary and an emancipative premise. In fact, some authors (Murray, 1984) see activation as an opportunity to enforce a disciplinary reform and to bring an end to the supposed situation where social benefits constitute a hammock rather than a safety net, whereas others (Katz, 1990) focus on the obligation for the state not to limit its action in providing benefits as financial compensation for social exclusion, but rather to actively create material/symbolic conditions for individuals’ ‘free’ empowerment. This duality

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exactly the opposite’ (Foucault, 2008: 68-69). For an excellent commentary on Foucault’s 1978/1979 Lectures at the Collège de France, see Zanini, 2006.



is perfectly reflected in the twofold rhetoric of the activation discourse: on the one hand, there is a clear emphasis on workfare, namely the imposition of compulsory labour or service on people who receive financial aid through welfare as a necessary condition of their assistance (mandatory participation in designated activities). On the other hand, what is stressed is the role of employability (and its lifelong updating), which is to say the ever-changing set of skills, competencies and factors of adaptability that are supposed to support individuals' empowerment in and through the labour market.

Although always somehow co-present, these two sides of the activation discursive regime (disciplinary workfare versus empowering employability) have very different historical roots; whereas the former has tended to be a crude electoral argument for certain neoliberal right-wing formations, the latter has been progressively inscribed into the official language of the large majority of Western democratic institutions.<sup>13</sup> This is hardly surprising from the standpoint of the present reflection. In fact, while the disciplinary solution would not require a conceptual innovation to be grasped in its essence,<sup>14</sup> a form of exploitation based around an incitement to empowering creativity poses new, urgent problems to be faced by means of new theoretical tools. An anomalous social situation is in place: elements such as affectivity, learning attitudes and sensitivity, that in principle have nothing to do with work performances and have in the past been banned from them, enter now imperiously into the vortex of the process of valorisation. This is clearly illustrated, for example, in the 56 Employability Skills 2000+ gathered by the Conference Board of Canada<sup>15</sup> in 2000. Among them we find suggestions such as 'access, analyse and apply knowledge and explain or clarify ideal skills from various disciplines (e.g., the arts, languages, science, technology, mathematics, social sciences, and the humanities)'; 'recognise the human, interpersonal, technical, scientific and mathematical dimensions of a problem'; 'be innovative and resourceful: identify and suggest alternative ways to achieve goals and get the job done'; 'be willing to continuously learn and grow' (Conference Board of Canada, 2000). To repeat: personal talents, interests and abilities, once rigidly separated from working requirements, are today an important segment of the process of value production. As a consequence, one of the main tasks of social policies is to channel this chaotic and elusive raw material of value toward its institutional refinery: the labour market.

From this unprecedented configuration arises a fundamental question: how do we address, from the perspective of the activation discourse, the paradox of an exploitative procedure that extracts surplus-value by calling for the free/innovative development of its own 'victims'? The main issue here concerns the articulation of the concept of

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13 For example, employability is one of the four 'pillars', along with entrepreneurship, adaptability and equal opportunities, of the European Employment Strategy sponsored by the EU.

14 In fact, it would be sufficient to argue for a partial return to formal subsumption: forced increase of absolute surplus-labour as a result of the extortion of a quota of the indirect wage represented by welfare. To be sure, this process *is taking place*. Nonetheless, in my opinion, it does not exhaust the profound complexity of the issue at stake.

15 The Conference Board of Canada is an influential not-for-profit organization dedicated to researching and analysing economic trends, as well as organizational performance and public policy issues. Self-declared 'objective and non-partisan', the Conference Board of Canada claims not to lobby for special interests.

freedom. Through impression, whose functional aim is to bond ontological individuation and contemporary exploitation, it is possible to argue that activation policies can work – as they actually do, at least to a certain extent – only in so far as the creativity and innovation they enact are declined along a prescriptive idea of freedom which is not pure, abstractly disembodied, but rather concretely specific: it is freedom to subjectively compete in entrepreneurial forms.<sup>16</sup> Active social policies presuppose impressed subjects, competitive individuals that are always-already potential entrepreneurs. In other terms, this kind of governmental regulation requires a politico-economical setting such that capital and labour do not confront themselves on different (but mutually implicated) levels of the productive process. Capital and labour do not face each other from a structural asymmetry that nonetheless preserves their identities as incommensurable. Rather, labour appears to be progressively absorbed into capital: potentially (and rhetorically) every individual is a self-entrepreneur and must economically compete to reach its realisation (as profit).<sup>17</sup> This is why the target of activation policies does not confront the labour market from a merely external position, as was the case, to a significant extent, for welfare recipients. In fact, for this kind of social program to work, co-operative subjectivities must already be impressed by capital, which is to say that they entertain a relation of proximity with the meta-rules of the market before they actually get lost in the maze of actually existing job markets. To put it differently, contemporary social subjectivity is from the very beginning embedded in a market-led grammar whose syntax is represented by the enterprise, whose morphology is configured as competition and whose phonetics is incarnated into money.

The fundamental point I would like to stress is that the notion of impression does not intend to shift the analytical focus from the problem of exploitation's violence to that of exploitation's seduction, or simulacrum of self-realization. Rather, it aims at reconfiguring the violent substance of contemporary exploitative practices within the framework of its seductive form (which is obviously not the only one, but nevertheless increasingly central). In other words, the hypothesis of impression would like to set in motion a critical rethinking about the status of the relationship between social cooperation (and its possible – not to be taken for granted – autonomy) and capitalist command (and its necessary coercion). The pivotal question here is the following: how to descriptively discern and prescriptively act upon the points of friction that are operating within the conflictual and dynamic relationship that exists between incitement

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16 Christian Marazzi has brilliantly linked this new dimension of the notion of freedom to the neoliberal transformation of the *homo oeconomicus*: '*Homo oeconomicus* is no longer a subject of exchange, as in classical economics, but rather a subject whose definition is provided by *abstract labour*, a subject contained in exchanged commodities (among which is labour power), a subject of production. The *homo oeconomicus* is the self-entrepreneur, the cornerstone of neoliberal ideology as well as the emerging figure of Post-Fordist transformations [...] It is a subject to be considered as an enterprise and, as such, it must manage its life as a *business plan*, which is to say according to criteria such as savings, investment, innovation, speculation, etc.' (Marazzi, 2008: 136). See also Chicchi, 2008.

17 From a sociological perspective, Vando Borghi and Federico Chicchi refer to this process as the tendential shift from a Fordist-Taylorist *objectification of labour* (marked by standardized gestures, rhythms, tasks) to a Post-Fordist *objectification of workers* (characterized by self-management as incitement to subjective differentiation). See Borghi and Chicchi, 2007.

and control?<sup>18</sup> The concept of impression does not yet answer this question, but allows it to be posited in such a way that analytical extremes like the naive innocence of social cooperation and the impenetrable pervasiveness of capital's rule are avoided from the very beginning. Even more importantly, through the concept of impression it is finally possible to address the issue of new political (namely non-neutral) criteria by means of which to criticise (and propose alternatives to) both private and public policies that concretely organise the exploitative practices everyone of us face on a regular basis.

## Provisional conclusion

At this point, I would like to advance a brief specification in order to prevent possible misunderstandings. These critical remarks are not intended to reinstate the disempowering and ultimately self-consolatory paranoia of the 'omnipresence of the monster': capital remains a historically determined social relation, absolutely not eternal and, what is more important, pervaded with antagonisms which constantly put into question its reproduction. Simply, I would like to avoid the opposite extreme, namely to see the monster – yes – but to believe at the same time that it is already dead. In particular, the concept of impression, which emerges at the intersection between the Simondonian ontology of individuation and the paradigm of cognitive capitalism, might be able to further problematise two of the most discussed issues in the context of so-called post-workerism. The first refers to the ontological opposition between biopolitics, conceived of as the level at which the potentiality of social cooperation is autonomously and fully actualized, and biopower, seen as the vampire-like apparatus through which capital ensures a purely dominant form of extortion (Hardt and Negri, 2000; 2004; 2009). I contend that this model is too schematic (even Manichean) and does not grasp in depth the complex and often contradictory phenomenology of contemporary exploitation. Through impression, which involves a strong emphasis on the constitutive ambivalence of the current phase of capitalist development, this rigidly dichotomous distinction might be rethought in more empowering political terms and more effective explanatory formulations.

The second issue concerns the thesis according to which profit is increasingly becoming a form of rent (Vercellone, 2006b). From this perspective, the new centrality of rent would prove the exclusively parasitical nature of cognitive capitalism and finance would be configured as a totally non-productive governance of externalities.<sup>19</sup> Again, impression might function as a practical/theoretical tool to further investigate the active role of finance in subjectively shaping social actors and objectively establishing neoliberal environments. In fact, financialization has to be understood as the specific form of capital accumulation attuned to the new processes of value production (Marazzi, 2010), namely a governmental dispositif which is able to 'configure discursive regimes that, by affirming themselves as indisputable truths, influence

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18 This is how I would rephrase Toscano's last question as quoted in the preceding section.

19 Let us note, in passing, that the *becoming-rent of profit* does not necessarily imply (neither logically nor politically) the *becoming-entirely parasitical of financial capital*. It might very well simply suggest a different configuration of contemporary circuits of accumulation, valorisation and exploitation.

people's conducts through a modulation/amplification of their trust and expectations' (Luce, 2010: 63).

To better delineate this key issue, let us briefly consider the recent crisis of global capitalism (Bazzicalupo and Tucci, 2010; Mezzadra and Fumagalli, 2010; Orsi, 2010). Many interpretations focus on the distinction between financial and real economy and, consequently, point their analytical gaze toward processes of over-production and/or under-consumption. Other, more original readings see the massive indebtedness of the working class (especially in the US) as a sign of an antagonistic assault on the domain of credit whose goal is the re-appropriation of money to pay for social reproduction. This argumentative line recognises the systematic attack performed by neoliberalism to workers' conditions and can thus convincingly explain how they have been completely subsumed under finance and then turned into compulsive debtors. As the Midnight Notes Collective aptly put it:

Workers demanded access to the requirements for reproduction through the credit system. Capital's "sharing" with workers of accumulated value through making credit available comes at a price: the workers' desires for access to the means of reproduction (home, auto, appliances, etc.) are aligned with capitalists' desires for accumulation. (Midnight Notes Collective, 2009: 7)

As we see, this analysis addresses the very core of the issues. In order for workers to powerfully access the golden realm of consumption (which is to say, to fully experience their autonomy), their subjectivity must already be inscribed in the structure of capital's desire (which is to say, it must be translatable into the homogeneous grammar of money).<sup>20</sup> Thus, the concept of impression provides a suitable terrain not only to theoretically grasp this complex and paradoxical dynamic (which is at the origin of the current crisis), but also to undertake a reflection about how to politically force and possibly ensnare capital's valorising junctions and articulations. Whereas it is impossible to predict what the outcome of this process of practice/knowledge production will look like, it is fairly easy to recognise its profound urgency.

To conclude, let me re-state my main point: the subject of social cooperation does not appear by spontaneous genesis and is not a natural given. On the contrary, for its antagonistic emergence to occur a collective act of organisational creation is required. This is why the crucial question of the project of a different institutional setting cannot be avoided. At stake is nothing less than the necessity of a new grand narrative based on a cautious, but nonetheless ambitious, prefiguration of a desirable world to come.

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20 This is just another way to say that the problem of *capitalist co-optation* is pivotal and must be further analysed. To put it succinctly: how is it possible that a workers' offensive move proves successful in the very moment in which it is absorbed into capital's wish-for-profit? As it is evident, simple answers are of no use. I hope impression will provide a valuable theoretical device to politically solve this nefarious riddle.

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