



The Politics of Peer-Production and the Immateriality of the Commodity

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ABSTRACT:- This paper deals with the immateriality of the commodity and the very thin line that exists between labour exploitation and creative collaboration in post-modern societies. As the Industrial Revolution has changed the organisation of production the Internet is changing the production set-up today. The main commodity in Post-Fordism is information and the Internet traces the lines of communication and made possible to shift the labour force from the factory to the society. The world has not been totally reinvented – some structures will potentially change however the system remains the same.

Keywords:- *Immaterial Labour, Social Factory, High-Tech Gift Economy,*

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper engages with literature related to the conceptions of the creation of value in late capitalism and focus on issues surrounding user-generated content. The form of this paper is an extended literature review and based upon a series of publications about new forms of the reorganisation of production. On the one hand, the production of the informational and cultural content of the commodity includes debates about new technologies, reorganisation of the labour force and the shifts happening in workers' labour methods. On the other hand, the Digital Economy consists of the public sector, private sector and the gift economy [1]. For Richard Florida [2] and Michael Reich [3], it is a matter of a new prime division of work within the domain of immaterial labour. Just as for well over a century industrial labor tended to transform all other forms of production, forcing them to adopt its qualities and industrialise, so, too, immaterial labour is today transforming other forms of production and forcing them to adopt its qualities, to be communicative, informal, image-oriented, and so forth." [4]. This writing suggests that the capitalist is losing the control of production; however, they still provide the overall infrastructure—e.g. Google, Facebook, Fiber Connection, Microsoft and Apple. Thus, This writing consists of the analysis of key elements related to late capitalism and discusses topics such as creative collaboration and free labour.

Due to the limitations of this paper, it was not possible to include a review of all resources relating to these subjects. Nevertheless, it aims to refer to established authors in the field of immaterial labour [1] [2] [3] [5] [6] [7]. The research of the above-mentioned literature is relevant because it interrogates and deals with crucial questions about the immateriality of the commodity, the shift from the secondary to the tertiary sector (information commodity), and the influences of immaterial production on the late post-industrial societies. Hence, we need to understand the externalities that trigger the collective action to solve problems and achieve results if we are to find out how production is organised.

II. THE TOOL

The technology of computing has been around for over five decades and like previous technologies before it, has gradually found its place in our society. For most of their early existence, computers were something removed from normal life, seen as tools for the world's brightest minds, something akin to 'rocket science'. Today, of course, things are very different. Computers are fully integrated into our lives and our interactions are increasingly computer based. For instance, when we wake up to the sound of a digital clock, when we cross the street to buy milk or bread or when the traffic lights turn green or red, our actions are directly or indirectly connected to a computer network. The twentieth century introduced to us a new technology, a new way to interact with machines, with others and ourselves. It might be argued that the advent of computer

technology has few parallels in the entirety of human history – certainly, it can be ranked alongside the invention of the wheel, the printing press or the telegraph in terms of its impact on human culture. Today, the computer is a universal tool. Computer technology today consists of two parts: the material (hardware) and the immaterial (software). Nevertheless, there was a time when there was no distinction between software and hardware, material and immaterial. The earliest computing machines – made possible by the theoretical innovations of the great British mathematician Alan Turing – were so enormous they had to be held in warehouses, they were very expensive, not very powerful and comprised essentially of on and off switches. By establishing a connection between many of these switches it was possible to create a binary code, a language that the material understood, and a means of communication between the material and the immaterial. Immateriality circulates mostly in binary form, in this language if you like. A common language is one of the major requirements for the interaction between humans or between humans and machines. Hence, the information revolution, as we see today, at a time when computer technology has overtaken most aspects of our life, was based on the decline in costs of these binary systems. Although, there was a time when the material was so expensive that only a couple of companies in the private sector and government agencies could afford it. This, it is the youngest and, I think, arguably the most impressive communication device to come out of the last two centuries of revolutionary communication technology, from the telegraph to the telephone and mobile telephony, to radio and television. The computer represents the pinnacle of that evolution.

III. THE SOCIAL FACTORY

Like the Roman's roads or the railways in the great era of Victorian industrialisation, the Internet traces the lines of global communication. Its form is like what the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, and the Italian psychoanalyst, Félix Guattari would describe as a rhizome: "The rhizome is [...] a map and not a tracing. [...] What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented with the contact with the real [...] It fosters connections between fields [...]. The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions." "Perhaps the most important characteristic of the rhizome," he continues, "is that it always has multiple entry ways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back 'to the same'." [8]. Here, the authors are making an analogy between the old praxis of transmission, e.g. radio and television, and the new bi-directional model of the Internet. The old method represents the structure where the centre broadcasts to the peripheries while the Internet represents a viral system with no centre or peripheries.

Indeed, the Internet is a space full of virtual life with many access points. It is bound together by a constant production of value and is driven by technical labour; e.g. modifying software packages, building virtual spaces and reading and creating e-mail lists. It is fully inherent and integrated into the cadences of the modern networked society. Thus, it is very important to understand how the connections between users are established to really grasp how societies interact with each other. A parallel modern development is the 'social factory', through which the labour force has shifted from the factory to the society, thus putting into operation an authentic compound apparatus. Tiziana Terranova argued that the growth of the Internet had given a theoretical and tangible basis to the current bias towards increased flexibility in the workforce, and the diffusion of practices such as taking additional work home from the office, or working remotely from a home office, so-called 'teleworking' [6]. The Internet displaced the assembly line as the organisational model of production in its path to the informational economy [3].

There is a very thin line between the collaborative work model proposed by the scholar Richard Barbrook and the point of view of a Marxist-inspired writer such as Terranova. What one might call a collaborative work philosophy, the other calls labour exploitation in a postmodern society. It is important to note the assumption here that cyberspace is about avoiding the real world, to comprehend how the reality of the Internet is acutely associated to the growth of the late post- industrial societies. It is through this immateriality that the character and extent of labour has been adjusted.

The notion of the 'social factory' challenges the idea and established paradigm of a set dynamic between production and consumption, labour and culture. As a matter of course, the Internet does not necessarily create the conditions to turn every user into a functioning producer, nor the proletariat into a creative class. The method by which production and consumption are restructured within the nature of 'free labour' shows the advancement of another paradigm, but it is not a brand new constituent that needs attentive evaluation. In nations of so-called 'advanced capitalism', the death of the sweatshops has accompanied the elimination of artisans who have been frequently recognised as active consumers of material commodities. In line with what modernisation did in a past cycle, postmodernisation or informatisation incorporates a new approach of becoming human [3].

IV. THE HIGH-TECH GIFT ECONOMY

Barbrook proposes that the High-Tech Gift Economy emerged around 1998 and laid the groundwork for both the purism of the New Left do-it-yourself culture and the neoliberalism of the free market ideologues [9]. Terranova suggests that Barbrook embellishes the autarchy of the high-tech gift economy from capitalism. The process of trade that fuels the Internet is not conveniently the rebirth of communism at the forefront of the economy. Yet, Barbrook argues, “money-commodity and gift relations are not just in conflict with each other, but also co-exist in symbiosis.” [9]. Barbrook’s arguments were made at a time when the dynamics of Web 2.0 was about to make a real impact on all of us. Although his arguments are brilliant, it was made very early in the whole process of the commodification of the Internet. Hence, It is essential to keep in mind that the gift economy became part of a greater digital economy. It is in itself providing a valuable dynamism within the reproduction of the labour force in late capitalism [6] Whether on the Right or the Left, most commentators issue forth the same social prophecy: “the class is prefiguring today how everyone will work and live tomorrow” [2]. The foundation of ‘free labour’ is a cardinal force in the conception of value in the digital economies. As Terranova points out, “the conditions that make free labour an important element of the digital economy are based in a difficult, experimental compromise between the historical rooted cultural and effective desire for creative production [...] and the current capitalist emphasis on knowledge as the main source of value added.” [6]. In my opinion, Terranova’s arguments are sound, but we have to understand that she criticised Barbrook’s work five years later; in a fast-paced industry such as the digital economy, five years can make a huge difference. Nevertheless, the Internet vigorously acts as a rhizome via which ‘human intelligence’ exhilarates in its ability to produce. ‘Human intelligence’ holds out the dilemma of not being organised in the same manner as more conventional kinds of labour. Along these lines, Paulo Virno argues: “labouring activity is less measurable on the basis of abstract temporal units, since it includes aspects that up until recent times belonged to the sphere of the ethos, of cultural consumption, of aesthetic taste, of emotion. On the other hand, labour time remains the socially accepted unit of measure.” [10].

As we will see later in this paper, immaterial labour is not always perceived as work and the social factory is open 24/7. Therefore, it is very hard to define (in hours) how much work and effort has been put into a particular undertaking. Tasks related to immaterial labour are also done during the so-called leisure time. Facebook is a platform where people can express themselves; thus, Facebook users intend to make their profile more interesting to others by constantly adding value to it—e.g. a new photo, a new comment or a new like. Unfortunately, most users do not make a note of how many hours a day they are adding/hacking value to their profile.

The digital economy is a relevant frame for the examination of value and free cultural/affective work. It is applicable to an unequivocal embodiment of production; e.g. modifying software packages, multimedia production, and so on, but is also relevant to concepts of labour that we do not associate as such straight away. Some have called into question whether the advancement of the knowledge economy has altered the exploitative organisation of capitalism in any evident way [2]. The practice of immaterial labour differs from that depicted by established, left wing thinkers about the appropriation of genuine cultural movements; it is not a question of capital having relocated or gone underground. It is rather the way of redirecting a joint cultural labour into a commercial channel.

The harvest of aggregated cultural labour has not been merely hijacked, yet deliberately readdressed and arguably reformed by and within capitalism. What is clear here is that this time the capitalists are not trying to make money out of the images of subcultures—e.g. Punks from Camden or Hip-Hop artists from the Bronx—it is a much more complex system. The capitalists are commissioning the society as their work force, which gives an additional reason to argue that the Internet has replaced the assembly line in its way to Post-Fordism [3]. Thus, according to Darko Suvin (1991), multimedia artists, writers, software programmers and activists collectively with small and large businesses are at the heart of this activity. For some they are its cultural elite for others a new form of proletariat [6]. The growth of the information worker can be interpreted as the imminent triumph of either dotcom capitalism or cybernetic communism, depending on your point of view. Some share the opinion that the Internet is a tool for either ways; its triumph is the result of the ideology of some protagonists combined with the business aspiration of others and the investments of the public sector. Barbrook summaries the essential element of the discussion as a mixed economy, which consists of three main elements: the public sector, the private sector and a Gift Economy [9].

The shift from agrarian and mining sector to post-modernisation is broadly unquestioned. Hardt and Neri explain: “Whereas the process of modernisation was indicated by a migration of labour from agriculture and mining (the secondary), the process of post- modernization or informatisation has been demonstrated through the migration from industry to service jobs (the tertiary) ... ” [3]. Although, it remains the question: if this Internet culture consists to a great extent of ‘knowledge workers’ then it is of value to grasp whether they

are perceived as the economic and cultural elite, or rather as the new agents of the formation of labour? This paragraph aims to exemplify the two different views that exist within this debate. It is obvious that there was a shift from the secondary to tertiary sector in the developed world. However, there is an active discussion about labour class division.

V. THE RESTATEMENT OF THE GRUNDRISSE

A considerable number of empirical studies have been carried out in regards to the contemporary modes of organisational work. Maurizio Lazzarato explains: “An initial synthesis of these results – framed in terms of an attempt to define the technical and subjective-political composition of the working class – can be expressed in the concept of *Immaterial Labour*, which is defined as the labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity.” For Lazzarato the theory of immaterial labour deals with two different concepts of labour. Firstly, as to the ‘informational content’ of the commodity, it applies to the shifts happening in workers’ labour methods in large enterprises in the industrial and tertiary sectors, where the abilities asked for in direct labour are progressively skills requiring cybernetics and computer control (and horizontal and vertical communication). Secondly, with regard to the actions that produce the ‘cultural content’ of the commodity, immaterial labour implies a series of actions that work to specify and debug cultural and artistic standards, fashion, tastes, consumer norms and, more imperatively, public opinion [5].

For Hardt and Neri the tertiary sector of the economy offers diverse methods of productive communication. Most commodities are about the constant exchange of information and knowledge. Since the produced services are not material and durable goods, he describes the phenomenon as immaterial labour: “that is, labour that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication.” [3]. They identify three different types of immaterial labour: industrial production, analytical symbolic and labour involving the production and manipulation of affect. Robert Reich defines immaterial labour as “symbolic-analytical services – duties that comprise problem-solving, problem-identifying and strategic brokering activities.” [3].

The derivation of the theory of immaterial labour is broadly Marxian and is a contemporary advancement of Marx’s essential conception of the ‘general intellect’ as illustrated in the *Grundrisse*, in a segment called ‘Fragment on Machines’ [7]. According to Terranova and Lazzarato, Immaterial Labour (unlike the ‘knowledge worker’) is not limited to a specific class but is a form of activity of every productive subject within postindustrial societies [5] and Terranova has concurred [6].

Providing a counter argument to Lazzarato and Terranova, Barbrook says: “During the past two decades, prominent thinkers on the Left have identified the employees of the knowledge economy as the new working class: the Cyborgs, the Digital Artisans, the Immaterial Labourers, the Multitude, the Cognitariat and the Cybertariat. As in the dotcom definitions of the Right, creativity is still a privilege of the few.” [2]. For Hardt, immaterial labour has not yet taken over the economy and is not uniformly apportioned across the globe. Hardt goes further, arguing that “agricultural production continues to occupy the majority of workers in quantitative terms and the numbers of industrial workers have not decreased whereas immaterial production tends to be isolated to the dominant regions of the world [...] just as for well over a century industrial labor tended to transform all other forms of production, forcing them to adopt its qualities and industrialise, so, too, immaterial labour is today transforming other forms of production and forcing them to adopt its qualities, to be communicative, informal, image-oriented, and so forth.” [4]. In this sense, the theory of immaterial labour offers ways into deciphering economic affinities and political battles, while also calling into question the contemporary focus on arts as an independent field.

VI. CORE OR LOW VALUE?

As Richard Florida admitted in 2005, the innovators were only a small minority of the class of the new; e.g. the Super-Creative Core who are responsible for ‘the highest order of creative work’: developing hardware, building software, making films, writing books, designing buildings and composing music [2]. Along these lines, Michael Reich identified that the development of the knowledge-based employment of creative symbolic manipulation ran parallel to a growth in low-value and low-skill labour of routine symbol manipulation; e.g. data entry and word processing. He suggested the beginning of a prime division of labour within the domain of immaterial labour [3]. What Florida and Reich advocated was that there are digital workers whose job is to upload photos to a web page or to add the metadata to a file. These kinds of activities are nothing more than the labour exemplified by Charlie Chaplin’s film *Modern Times* (1936). I have worked as an Ingest Operator for many years in the broadcast sector and have done a lot of repetitive work. It not only excluded me from creative jobs but also meant that my colleagues and I were defined as the operators rather than the creatives. These classifications exemplify the classes suggested previously.

Lazzarato explains: “The activities of immaterial labor force us to question the classic definitions of work and workforce, because they combine the results of various different types of work skills: intellectual

skills, as regards the cultural-informational content; manual skills for the ability to combine creativity, imagination, and technical and manual labor; and entrepreneurial skills in the management of social relations and the structuring of that social cooperation of which they are a part. Immaterial labour constitutes itself in forms that are immediately collective, and we might say that it exists only in the form of networks and flows.” [5]. This model has huge benefits on the human scale: it furthers cultural interactions; creative collaboration and can integrate groups of people in the periphery of societies. Virno suggests that the worker is (and must be) wordy. The dialogic word is installed at the very heart of capitalist production. Labour is interaction [10].

VII. COGITAMUS

Kevin Kelly (1994) suggested that the Internet is the affirmation of an entity of self-organisation and never-ending productive action of connected human minds. Hence, for Lazzarato, immaterial labour can be characterised as the ability to mobilise and advocate productive cooperation [3]. According to Pierre Levy we are shifting from a Cartesian concept of thoughts grounded on the singular awareness of cogito (I Think) to a common / plural cogitamus (we think) [6]. What Levy suggested is that there is a sense of distributed knowledge where problems are solved together from different time zones. People are connected in form of a rhizome forming one big system that is able to solve extremely complex issues in a shorter period of time.

Levy argues that computer networks emphasise the incomparable value of human intelligence as the genuine architect of value in a knowledge economy. In his assumption, considering the economy is progressively contingent on the formulation of creative subjectivity, this production is eminently at hand to give rise to a new humanism, a new centrality of human creative potential. Lazzarato implies that we have reached a knowledge summit of sorts, where collective learning action has shifted to the central essence of productivity. It is not about the acquisition of other ways of accommodating and structuring existing labour but rather discovering new ones [5].

The general intellect is a statement of attached capital (machines) and living labour (the workers). Assuming we behold the Internet and computer networks as the current apparatus - the prior proclamation of set capital – then it will not be over-ambitious to envisage the general intellect as being alive [6]. For Barbrook: “We are not the passive victims of uncontrollable market forces and technological changes. Without our daily work, there would be no goods or services to trade. Without our animating presence, information technologies would just be inert metal, plastic and silicon. Nothing can happen inside cyberspace without our creative labour. We are the only subjects of history.”[9]. Barbrook is referring to a time where the vast population did not use the Internet—they did not even know what the Internet was used for.

According to Paolo Virno, mass intellect is the complex aggregation of Post-Fordist living labour, not only of a proficient few, an elite, within a separate third sector; it is the collection of cognitive capabilities that cannot be embodied in machinery [10]. As Fordism advanced into post-Fordism, the strand of social prophecy had to leave behind its bureaucratic ideals. Therefore, in the knowledge economy, all interpretation of the new middle class has to be a new version of the knowledge class [2]. For Virno mass intellect is the opposite of a new labour aristocracy. It is the paramount frame in which the general intellect is asserted; what matters more is the intellect’s ability to think rather than the results of that thought.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The literature stressed that late capitalism requires information technology and intellectual labour. Those characteristics mean not only the quintessence of Post-Fordism concepts about production but it is definitely rooted in a global economy in which technology is central.

Late capitalism is based upon the organisation of intellectual labour, as claimed by Hardt and Neri [3], Lazzarato [5], Terranova [6] [7]. Through the technological innovation of 20th century, it was possible to reduce production costs and to re-arrange the workforce in a more flexible way [4]. By replacing the assembly line with the Internet, it was possible to shift the production from the factory to society [6]. Late capitalism suggests a collection of associated conceptions linked to a global effort beyond Fordism. Along these lines, flexibility and geographic diffusion are instruments through which capitalism has become organised and information is the main commodity.

Nevertheless, the investigation of the literature has demonstrated a one-dimensional perspective. I argue that despite the fact that the authors have a Marxist approach to late capitalism, they still represent the Western school of thought. More research is necessary to cover other viewpoints that represent developing countries’ ideas of immaterial labour. The discussion of the literature has also indicated that the Digital Economy consists of the public sector, private sector and the gift economy [1]. Through the sharing of information, the Gift Economy provides a model where people from different cultures and backgrounds can grow economically and culturally—a form of democratic utopia. The primary reason is that the capitalists are

taking advantage of new technologies to acquire cheap / free labour.

As with many of these new theoretical ideas related to new technologies most of them are based on the old system with new structures. The world has not been totally reinvented - some structures will potentially change however the system will remain the same. This writing has addressed various issues concerning late-capitalism methods of immaterial production. First, it tried to explain how the Internet expands itself and how the labour has shift from the factory to the societies. Second, it showed the formation of two different labour classes performing two diverse kinds of work. Third, this work has stressed the idea of a general knowledge – the idea of we think (cogitamus) rather than I think (cogito).

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