CHAPTER 18

The Appropriation of Fixed Capital: A Metaphor?

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1. Labour in the Age of the Digital Machine

In the debate over the impact of the digital on society, we are presented with the serious hypothesis that the worker, the producer, is transformed by the use of the digital machine, since we have recognised that digital technologies have profoundly modified the mode of production, as well as ways of knowing and communicating. The discussion of the psycho-political consequences of digital machines is so broad that it is just worth remembering it even though the results obtained by this research are highly problematic.

They normally propose the passive subjection of the worker to the machine, a generalised alienation, the epidemic character of depressive illnesses, the definition of algorithmic Taylorism and so on and so forth. Among these catastrophic novelties rings the old Nazi adage: 'The earth on which we live is revealed to us as a dead mining district which slices the very essence of man'.

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It seems more sophisticated to think about the impact of the digital by asking if, and perhaps how, the minds and bodies of workers appropriate the digital machine.

Let us quietly remember that if the new impact of the digital machine on the producer happens under the command of capital, not only does the producer yield value to constant capital during the production process, but also, insofar as he is a cognitive work force both in his individual contribution to the productive effort and in his cooperative use of the digital machine, he connects to the machine and can be merged with it, when the connection is effected through the immaterial flow of cognitive labour. In cognitive labour, living labour can invest fixed capital, being both its substance and its active engine at the same time, even though it is subjected to it when it develops its productive capacity.

Therefore, in Marxist circles people have started to talk about 'appropriation of fixed capital' on the part of the digital worker (or the cognitive producer). When the increase in productivity of the digital workers or even the productive capacities of 'digital natives' are analysed, these themes and problems spontaneously present themselves. Are they simply metaphors?

2. The Appropriation of Fixed Capital

And in particular, are they simply political metaphors? By saying 'the appropriation of fixed capital' on the part of the producers (by contrast with the enterprise, which acts for profit) one conjures up themes that have had great resonance in the political and philosophical domains in the past 50 years. The theme of the hybrid human/machine has been developed widely in German anthropology (of Helmuth Plessner, Arnold Gehlen, Heinrich Popitz) as well as in French materialism (Simondon), and in materialist feminism (Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti) (cf. Braidotti 2013, Gehlen 1980, Haraway 1991, Plessner 1924, Popitz 1995, Simondon 2017). Suffice to recall here Guattari's theory of the machinic assemblages that runs throughout his work and greatly influences the philosophical design of *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Probably the most important thing that has happened within these philosophical theories is that their structure – which is homogeneously materialist, despite the many differences between them – has shown new characteristics which are not reducible to any variant of the past. Of course, materialism has long abandoned the epic form elaborated by Enlightenment authors from d'Holbach to Helvétius, and has acquired from twentieth-century physics clearly dynamic features. However, in the theories mentioned above, it now shows a 'humanistic' imprint which, far from renewing idealistic apologies of 'man', is characterised by an interest in the body, in its singularity and density both in thought and in action.

Materialism presents itself today as a theory of production that is widely unbalanced towards the cognitive aspects and the effects of the cooperative hybridisation of production itself. Is it the change in the mode of production,

from the predominance of the physical to the hegemony of the non-physical, which has produced these effects on philosophical thought? Since I am not a follower of reflection theories, I do not believe so. However, I am convinced that this marked change in the materialist tradition has been simultaneous with the growth of the digital mode of production. We can now attempt to answer the question of whether 'appropriation of fixed capital' is a political metaphor? It certainly is, if from this assumption we draw a definition of *power* (constituent power, if need be) in political terms, and the appropriation of fixed capital becomes the analogical basis for the construction of an ethical and/or political subject that is appropriate to a materialist ontology of the present and a communist teleology of the yet-to-come.

3. Karl Marx on Fixed Capital

However, the development of the theme 'appropriation of fixed capital' is not always metaphoric. It was Marx who, in *Capital* (Marx 1867/1976; 1885/1978; 1894/1981), showed how the very placing of the worker before (the command of) the means of production modified, besides his productive capacity, his persona, his nature, his ontology. In this respect, the Marxian narrative of the shift from manufacture to modern industry is a classic. In manufacture, there is still a subjective principle in the division of labour – and this means the worker appropriated the production process after the production process had been adapted to the worker. This is in contrast to modern industry, where the division of labour is only 'objective', as the subjective, artisanal use of the machine is eliminated and machinery is constituted against the human being. Here the machine becomes a competitor, an antagonist of the worker, or even reduces the worker to a working animal. And yet there is in Marx also another aspect: he recognises that the worker and the working tool also acquire a hybrid configuration, and that the conditions of the production process constitute in great part the conditions of the life of the worker, his 'conditions of his active life process itself, his conditions of life' (Marx 1894/1981, 180). The concept of labour productivity itself implies a tight dynamic connection between variable and fixed capital, and theoretical discoveries – Marx adds – are relayed in the production process through the experience of the worker. We will see later how Marx himself foresees, in *Capital*, the appropriation of fixed capital on the part of the producer.

Now, let us keep in mind that in *Capital*, Marx's analysis is in any case informed by the arguments of *Grundrisse*, that is, by the theorisation of 'general intellect' as substance and subject of the production process (Marx 1857/1858/1973, 706; 831): This discovery showed how central cognitive matter was to production, and how the concept of fixed capital itself was transformed by it. When Marx asserts that fixed capital – which in *Capital* is normally understood as the network of machines – has become 'man himself' (Marx 1857/1858/1973, 712), he anticipates the development of capital in our own time. Although fixed

capital is the product of labour and nothing else than labour appropriated by capital; although the accumulation of scientific activity and the productivity of what Marx calls 'general intellect' are incorporated in the machines under the control of capital; finally, although capital appropriates all this for free – at some point of capitalist development living labour begins to exert the power to reverse this relationship. Living labour starts to show its priority with respect to capital and to the capitalist management of social production, even though this cannot necessarily be taken out of the process. In other words, as living labour becomes a larger and larger societal power, it operates as an increasingly independent activity, outside the disciplinary structures commanded by capital – not only as labour force but also, more generally, as vital activity. On the one hand, past human activity and its intelligence are accumulated, crystallised as fixed capital; on the other, reversing the tide, living humans are capable of reabsorbing capital in themselves and their own social life.

Fixed capital is 'man himself' (Marx 1857/1858/1973, 712), in both senses. Here the appropriation of fixed capital is not a metaphor any more but becomes an apparatus that the class struggle can take on, and that imposes itself as political programme. In this case, capital is no longer a relationship that objectively includes the producer, imposing its dominion by force. On the contrary, the capitalist relationship now includes an ultimate contradiction: that of a producer, of a class of producers, that has dispossessed capital, either in part or in whole, but in any case effectively, of the means of production, thereby imposing itself as hegemonic subject. The analogy with the emergence of the Third Estate within the structures of the *Ancien Régime* is conducted by Marx in the historicisation of the relationship of capital, and clearly presents itself in an explosive, revolutionary way.

4. Labour's Social Networks and Autonomy

At this point, we must bring into focus the new figures of labour, especially those that have been created by workers themselves in social networks. These are the workers whose productive capacities have been dramatically enlarged by their ever more intense cooperation. Now, let's examine what happens here. With cooperation, work becomes more and more abstracted from capital, meaning that it has a greater capacity to organise production itself, autonomously, and particularly in relation to the machines, even though it remains subordinate to the mechanisms of extraction of labour on the part of capital. Is this the same autonomy as the one we have recognised in the forms of autonomous work at the beginnings of capitalist production? Certainly not, it seems to us. Our hypothesis is that there is now a degree of autonomy that does not concern the production process only, but also imposes itself at an ontological level – that in these circumstances work acquires an ontological texture even when it is completely subjected to capitalist control. How can we understand a situation in which both productive enterprises, extended in space and

continuous in time, and collective, cooperative inventions on the part of the workers are in the end fixed as extracted value by capital? This is difficult unless we shake off linear and deterministic methodologies and adopt a method that is articulated through apparatuses. By doing this we can recognise that, in the current situation, the production processes in the hands of the workers and the capitalist means of valorisation and control are increasingly pulled apart. Work has reached such a high level of dignity and power that it can potentially refuse the form of valorisation that is imposed on it and therefore, even under command, it can develop its own autonomy.

The growing powers of labour can be recognised not only in the expansion and increasing autonomy of cooperation, but also in the greater importance that is given to the social and cognitive powers of labour within the structures of production. The first feature, an expanded cooperation, is certainly due to the increased physical contact between digital workers in the information society, but even more so to the formation of 'mass intellectuality' that is animated by linguistic and cultural skills, by affective capacities and digital powers, as Paolo Virno has always suggested. There is also a second feature: it is not a coincidence that these abilities and creativity increase the productivity of work. Let us therefore reflect on how much the role of knowledge has changed in the history of the relationship between capital and labour. As we have already seen, during the phase of manufacture, the craftsman's knowledge was employed and absorbed in production as a separate, isolated force that was subordinated to a hierarchical organisational structure. In the phase of modern industry, by contrast, workers were considered to be incapable of the knowledge that was necessary for production, which was therefore centralised by management. In the contemporary phase of 'general intellect', knowledge has a multitudinous form in the production process, even though, from the owner's point of view, it can be isolated just as the craftsman's knowledge was in manufacture. In fact, from the point of view of capital, the way in which work self-organises remains a mystery, even when this becomes the basis of production.

In order to move forward, let us take an example: a powerful figure of associative labour is today made invisible in the functioning of algorithms. Together with the ceaseless propaganda about the necessity of capitalist control and the sermons on the impossibility of an alternative to this system of power, we often hear praise of the role played by the algorithm. But what is an algorithm? Firstly, it is fixed capital, being a machine born of cooperative social intelligence, a product of the 'general intellect'. Although the value of productive activity is fixed in the social process of extraction of surplus labour by capital, we should not forget that the force of living labour is at the root of this process. Without living labour, there is no algorithm.

Secondly, however, algorithms also present many new features. Let us consider Google's Page Rank, perhaps the best-known algorithm as well as the largest generator of profit. Now, the rank of a web page is determined by the number and quality of its links, and high quality means a link to a page that

itself has a high rank. Page Rank is therefore a mechanism to incorporate the judgment and the value given by users to Internet objects. Matteo Pasquinelli (2009, 152) writes that 'while every link on the Web contains a little bit of human intelligence, all the links combined contain a great deal of intelligence'. However, a marked difference of algorithms such as Google's Page Rank is that, whereas industrial machines crystallise past intelligence in a relatively fixed and static form, these algorithms continually add social intelligence to past results in such a way as to create an open and expansive process. It seems that the algorithmic machine is itself intelligent – but this is not true. It is instead open to continuous modifications by human intelligence. When we say 'intelligent machines', we must understand that machines are capable of continually absorbing human intelligence. Another distinctive feature is that the process of extracting value established by these algorithms is itself open in an incremental way, and socialised in such a way as to eliminate the border between work and life. Google users know this very well. Finally, another difference between the production processes studied by Marx and this kind of value formation consists in the fact that today's cooperation is no longer imposed by the owner of the means of production but is generated by the relationship between producers. Today we can really speak of the re-appropriation of fixed capital by the workers, and the integration of intelligent machines under autonomous social control, which, for instance, takes place in the process of construction of algorithms that are connected to the self-valorisation of both social cooperation and the reproduction of life.

We can add that even when cybernetic and digital instruments are put into the service of capitalist valorisation, even when social intelligence is put to work in order to produce obedient subjectivities, fixed capital is integrated into the bodies and brains of workers and becomes their second nature. Ever since industrial civilisation was born, workers have always had a more intimate, insider knowledge of the machines and their systems than have capitalists and their managers. Today, these processes of workers' appropriation of knowledge can become decisive. They are not actualised in the production processes only, but they are also intensified and put into effect through productive cooperation in the vital processes of circulation and socialisation. Workers can appropriate fixed capital while they work, and they can develop this appropriation in their social, cooperative and biopolitical relations with other workers. All this determines a new productive nature, that is, a new life form that is the basis of the new 'mode of production'.

5. The Changing Relationship of Fixed and Variable Capital

In order to go even deeper into this subject, and to eliminate that semblance of utopianism which, if it doesn't damage our argument, might sometimes seem to add confusion, let us consider how some of those who have studied cognitive

capitalism structure the hypothesis of the appropriation of fixed capital. David Harvey (2012) studies this appropriation through the analysis of the spaces of settlement and crossing of the metropolis by the bodies that are put to work – movements of variable capital that produce radical effects on the conditions and practices of the subjected bodies, which are nevertheless capable of autonomous movements and of autonomy in the organisation of labour. This analysis remains, however, superficial. Much more incisive is the one proposed some time ago by André Gorz (2010), who overturned the complex web of exploitation and alienation by emphasising that the intellectual powers of production are formed in the social body. Liberation from social alienation restores the capacity to act subjectively/intellectually in production. Proceeding step by step in this vein, one is not surprised to discover that today '*intangible capital*' (R&D, software but above all education, training and health) has exceeded the portion of physical capital in the global capital stock' (Lucarelli and Vercellone 2011, 87). Fixed capital appears now within bodies, imprinted into them and at the same time subordinated to them – this is even more the case when we consider activities such as research and software development, where work is not crystallised in a physical product that is separate from the worker, but remains incorporated in the brain and inseparable from the person. Laurent Baronian (2013), finally, stresses, by returning to *Capital* and its analysis of the relations of production, that the power of bodies and minds is generalised in the figure associated with the qualifying element of fixed capital. Fixed capital is here social cooperation. Here the line between dead and living labour (that is, between fixed and variable capital) is blurred once and for all.

Indeed, as Marx (1894) concludes in *Capital* on this matter, if from the standpoint of the capitalist, constant and variable capital become identical under the heading of circulating capital, and if for the capitalist the only essential difference is the one between fixed and circulating capital, it follows that, from the point of view of the producer, constant and circulating capital become identical under the heading of fixed capital, and the only essential difference is the one between variable and fixed capital. Therefore, variable capital's interest in re-appropriation needs to focus on fixed capital.

The emancipatory conditions of living labour's cooperation therefore invest and occupy more and more the spaces and the functions of fixed capital.

Still on this point, let us proceed with Carlo Vercellone and Christian Marazzi. What is called immaterial or intellectual capital is in fact essentially embodied in humans, and it therefore corresponds in a fundamental way to the intellectual and creative faculties of the labour force. We find ourselves before the overturning of the concepts of constant capital and the organic composition of capital that we inherited from industrial capitalism. In the relationship of constant and variable capital c/v, which indicates mathematically the organic social composition of capital, it is precisely v, the labour force, that appears as main, fixed capital and, to repeat an expression by Christian Marazzi (2006), presents itself as 'body-machine'. Marazzi (2006) clarifies that this is because, besides

containing the labour force, the labour force also plays the role of the container of the typical functions of fixed capital, of the means of production insofar as they are sediments of codified knowledge, historically acquired knowledge, productive grammars and experiences – in short, past labour.

6. Machinic Subjectivities

One can, for instance, characterise the youth who spontaneously enters the digital world as having a machinic subjectivity. We conceive the machinic, not only in contrast to the mechanical, but also as a technological reality that is separate from and even opposed to human society. Félix Guattari explains that whereas traditionally the problem of machines has been seen as secondary, compared to the question of *techne* and technology, we must recognise that the problem of machines is primary and the problem of technology comes later. We can see, he maintains, the social nature of the machine: 'Since the "machine" is opened out towards its machinic environment and maintains all sorts of relationships with social constituents and individual subjectivities, the concept of technological machine should therefore be broadened to that of *machinic agencements* [machinic assemblages]' (Guattari 1995, 9).

The machinic, then, never refers to an individual, isolated machine, but always to an assemblage. To understand this, we can start by thinking of mechanical systems, that is, machines that are connected to and integrated with other machines. Let us then add human subjectivities and imagine humans as integrated into machinic relationships, and machines as integrated within human bodies and human society. Finally, Guattari, together with Deleuze, conceives machinic assemblages as progressive, incorporating all sorts of human elements and both human and non-human singularities. The concept of the machinic in Deleuze and Guattari (1987), and in a different form the concept of production in Foucault, highlights the need to develop, outside spiritualist identities, subjectivities of knowledge and action, and to show how these emerge from productions that are materially connected.

In economic terms, the machinic clearly appears in the subjectivities that emerge when fixed capital is re-appropriated by the labour force, that is, when material and immaterial machines and the various kinds of knowledge that crystallise past social production are re-integrated into the social subjectivities that cooperate and produce in the present. Machinic assemblages are thus partly grafted onto the notion of anthropogenic production. Some of the more intelligent Marxist economists, from Robert Boyer (2002) to Christian Marazzi (2005), characterise the novelty of contemporary economic production – as well as the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism – by focusing on '*la production de l'homme par l'homme*' (the production of man by man, Boyer 2002, 192), in contradistinction to the traditional notion of 'production of commodities by means of commodities' (Sraffa 1960). The production of subjectivities and life

forms becomes more and more central in capitalist valorisation. And this logic leads directly to the notions of cognitive and biopolitical production. The machinic extends further this anthropogenic model in order to incorporate various non-human singularities in the assemblages that it produces. To be more precise, when we say that fixed capital is re-appropriated by the working subjects, we do not mean that it simply becomes their possession, but rather that it is integrated into machinic assemblages that constitute subjectivities.

The machinic is always an assemblage, a dynamic composition of the human and other beings, but the potency of these new subjectivities is only a virtual one until they are actualised and articulated within the commons and in social cooperation. Indeed, if the re-appropriation of fixed capital took place on an individual basis, by transferring private property from an individual to another, it would only be robbing Peter to pay Paul and would have no real meaning. When, on the other hand, the wealth and productive power of fixed capital is socially appropriated and therefore transferred from private property to the commons, then the power of machinic subjectivities and their cooperative networks can be fully actualised. The machinic dynamic of the assemblage, the productive forms of cooperation and the ontological basis of the commons are intertwined in the closest way.

When we see today's young people absorbed in the commons, determined by their machinic engagements in cooperation, we must recognise that their very existence is resistance. Whether we are aware of it or not, they produce resistance. Capital is forced to recognise this hard truth. Capital can economically consolidate the development of those commons that are produced by the subjectivities from which capital extracts value, but the commons is only constructed through the forms of resistance and the processes that re-appropriate fixed capital. The contradiction becomes increasingly clear. 'Exploit your self,' says capital to productive subjectivities. And they reply: 'We wish to valorise ourselves, to govern the commons that we produce'. No obstacle in this process, not even virtual obstacles, can prevent the arrival of conflict. If capital can only expropriate value from the cooperation of subjectivities and these resist exploitation, capital is then forced to increase the level of command and put in place ever more arbitrary and violent operations for the extraction of value from the commons. And the theme of the re-appropriation of fixed capital will lead us to this passage.

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