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## Beyond Repression: Reflections on Phoebe Moore's Chapter

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## CHAPTER 11

# Beyond Repression: Reflections on Phoebe Moore's Chapter

Elisabetta Brighi

The UK government recently commissioned a report looking into the question of wellbeing at work, in particular the impact of mental ill health on the UK economy. The 'Thriving at Work' report, authored by a former chairman of HBOS insurance and by the chief executive of the mental health charity 'Mind', estimated the annual cost of poor mental health to UK businesses at £99bn, and stated that 300,000 people lose their jobs each year due to mental health issues (*The Guardian* 2017). Although informative and well-received, the report sadly stands out for lack of critical engagement with an issue now recognised as urgent. To start with, the report relies on a conceptualisation of mental health that narrowly focuses on its economic 'costs', rather than its human, social and political implications. Secondly, the report fails to investigate the relationship between mental health issues, working environments and the wider society, including its dominant economic system. The report's recommendations boil down to well-known, short-term quick fixes: e-learning modules in resilience for employees and increased monitoring of staff's mental health and wellbeing for employers. With a discussion of the relationship between affect and

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neoliberal capitalism beyond the pale, and the effects of alienation duly concealed behind a smokescreen of 'data', the solution remains the same – shift responsibility squarely to the individual, and pathologise normality.

Phoebe Moore's chapter is a timely intervention in the increasingly important conversation about affect and platform capitalism. Taking as her point of departure Antonio Negri's assertion that in the global, postmodern modes of production affect has acquired 'fundamental productive qualifications', and thus 'must be controlled' (Negri 1999, 86, 87), Moore investigates the affective dimension of platform capitalism and charts the way in which technologies have come to exercise such control. The landscape that opens in front of our eyes is one where the injunction of productivity has entirely captured the affective, emotive sphere, rendering wellness just another dimension of performance, just as life becomes another dimension of work. The digitalised workplace of the 'gig' platform economy pits the precarity of workers whose lives are disfigured by the imperative of mobility, flexibility and resilience against a technological management of labour that relentlessly monitors, tracks, measures and sanctions it. As Moore rightly puts it, precarity thus emerges as the purest form of alienation.

The literature on affect and platform capitalism has looked extensively at the ways in which emotions are mobilised and monetised in the modes of production of contemporary capitalism (Hardt 1999, Blackman and Venn 2010, Masumi 2015, Ilouz 2017). Two converging issues are at stake here: the first is that affect seems to have become the real currency of neoliberal capitalism; the second, is that capital seems to have completely captured the emotional, psychological and personal sphere, the sphere of affect. Moore draws on an extensive literature and contributes to it by focusing on the particular form of 'all-of-life work', that is gig work in the 'demand economy'. Here affect emerges as both intensely central to work and intensely regulated through work. In gig work the most intimate aspects of workers' lives, including dispositional, emotional and psychological traits, are at once interpellated, monetised and regulated. The neoliberal imperative of resilience means that workers must constantly draw from their reservoir of mental and emotional resources to succeed in a type of environment that is not only uncertain and hyper competitive, but that often trades in affect (Neocleous 2012, 2013). On the other hand, today's technology offers employers the ability to control and regulate workers' affective sphere, incentivising moods that are functional to the reproduction of capitalist labour relations (Atkinson 2015, Ahmed 2010). Moore's chapter richly illustrates these two points theoretically and empirically.

What perhaps remains to be analysed in greater detail are the effects of the capitalist capture of affect on the lives of workers, both as individuals and as a group or class. In this respect, there is an opportunity for a greater engagement with those literatures, from social and clinical psychology to psychoanalysis, that look at the intimate correspondence between social structures and 'structures of feelings', between social and economic conditions and the individual

psychic and affective plane. Understanding more clearly the affective contours of alienation, however, is crucial if any project of emancipation is to succeed.

Amongst psychoanalysts and psychotherapists there is widespread agreement regarding the psychologically nefarious nature of neoliberalism as incarnated in platform capitalism (Davies 2017, Tweedy 2016, Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). As Paul Verhaeghe recently argued, with precarity and uncertainty dominating the neoliberal workplace, with labour constantly being monitored, tracked and evaluated, workers become stripped of any sense of autonomy, control, independence and ultimately meaning (2014a). This depressive condition of extreme dependency coexists with a manic attitude of extreme objectification to create a number of lacerating self-perceptions: on the one hand, the belief that one is ultimately and independently responsible for one's own success or failure; on the other, the belief that one is disposable, insignificant and utterly dependent. The former reinforces narcissistic and punitive fantasies about dominance, control and production of the self, including its affects; the latter exacerbates alienation, abandonment and apathy. The neoliberal workplace creates therefore a social environment unable to contain our worst fears and instincts – in fact, one that exacerbates these traits and pits them one against the other, while it systematically thwarts the reparative, creative and fulfilling potential of social interaction (Verhaeghe 2014b). Deleuze and Guattari (1972/2004) believed that capitalism produced schizoid personalities, while Žižek (2009) later identified capitalism with perversion. There is now an argument to be made about neoliberalism translating into an epidemic of bipolar disorder – or, indeed, psychosis, with its related tendencies of splitting, projection, and paranoia (Bell 2006, 2016). Moore makes a passing reference to these psychoanalytic dynamics when she writes about the degree to which affect is regulated in the workplace of the 'gig economy':

Pinning to the corporeal, affective gig labourers do not engage in creative production using their own affective capacities. They are engaged in a type of *affective repression* by which the required subordinate performances corrode their own psychosomatic and bodily wellbeing. [my italics]

Because of their complexity, however, the emotional, psychological and affective dynamics that whirl around in the neoliberal workplace exceed the relatively simple process of repression and cannot be exhausted in this category. If repression was the only psychological mechanism really at play, the current condition would not be so self-lacerating – and the possibility to transcend it would be less difficult to imagine.

This feeds into a second, important theme explored in Moore's chapter, one which also necessitates further analysis. This is the theme of affective resistance and of the construction of an emancipatory project able to move beyond platform capitalism. Here again Moore draws on Michael Hardt (1999) and

Antonio Negri, as well as Spinoza, to make the argument that ‘affect and immaterial labour’ provide ‘possibilities for resistance, collective subjectivities and formations of communities’. In fact, Moore argues, ‘affective solidarity’ leads ‘to the most difficult form of resistance to stop, since affect already infiltrates all-of-life’, and again, ‘affective resistance is a serious threat to systems of workplace operation’ – which of course explains neoliberalism’s determination to control it. The material presented by Moore is certainly significant – in the chapter there are a number of examples of workers exercising their power to resist the ever more intrusive reach of neoliberal technologies by exiting projects because of concerns about privacy and/or corporate surveillance, or by turning the asymmetry generated by tracking technology on its head, so as to have more, rather than less, control. Yet these examples fall somehow short of conjuring up a ‘real alternative’. If the aim, as Moore claims, is ‘an alternative that does not prey on insecurity but builds solidarity, a constituting of the political without the requirement for a single leader, a rhizomatic formation of activation, without requiring a class identity in the orthodox sense’, the data presented only goes so far. This is not so much an issue of quantity, or critical mass, but rather a qualitative issue that points back to the question of what might be really at stake in affective resistance, beyond the issue of repression.

According to Negri (2017), in the conditions of global post-Fordist capitalism, ‘the struggle will always be a combination of exodus and desertion. Desertion from command and exodus beyond command’. But what does that entail exactly from an affective perspective? What does it mean to affectively desert the neoliberal workplace and to psychologically refuse its command? What does it mean to feel and act politically in platform capitalism? I would argue that the vocabulary of alienation and repression does not cut deep enough into the affective entanglements of neoliberalism to permit the construction of emancipatory projects. ‘For solidarity to fully emerge amongst digitalised workers, class consciousness in the Marxist sense is necessary’, writes Moore. And yet she is aware of the centrifugal forces that today threaten to dismember any notions of ‘class’.

The capitalist capture of affect is important precisely because it completes the process of the atomisation of society: it brings alienation to perfection. As such, it reduces the possibility, not only of class consciousness, but of individual consciousness, to its minimum – in fact it actively aims to pervert, manipulate, control and regulate consciousness. The possibility of deserting and refusing the capitalist command today inevitably plays out on this battlefield, at the level of this extreme individualisation, and boils down to a discernment of sorts. Against the barbaric neoliberal transformation of notions of the ‘care of the self’ into a purely commodified and self-interested version of depressive, hedonistic accumulation, the alternative may well unfold through the articulation of a non-servile virtuosity (Virno 1996, 200), a consciousness about ourselves that is aware of our entanglement with others; that refuses to project unwanted feelings of anxiety onto vulnerable others by preying on insecurity;

that demystifies the delusion of autonomy and independence and uncovers its sadistic, violent import; that refuses to relate to ourselves and to others as commodity; that believes in the human capacity to create, live, care and heal.

In his *Political Theory of Exodus*, Paolo Virno (1996) praises intemperance, as opposed to incontinence, as a cardinal virtue. Incontinence, according to Virno, is a vulgar unruliness and disregard for the law that bursts into the public sphere with the aim of capturing its institutions and power – the same disruptive quality with which symptoms violently burst into consciousness after years of repression. Virno argues that intemperance, on the other hand, ‘is not ignorant of the law’ nor does it merely oppose it – rather, it ‘discredits it’ on ethical and political grounds, and ‘in the name of the systematic interconnection between Intellect and political Action’ (Virno 1996, 199). The aim, therefore, is not to overthrow the state nor capture its institutions, but rather to safeguard positive prerogatives, forms of life and ‘works of ‘friendship’ that have been achieved and conquered, not without struggle, en route. Given the atomisation of contemporary labour relations, I would argue that the development of a class consciousness is contingent on the development of an individual consciousness which, in turn, *is first and foremost affective* in nature. The task may still be to educate the masses, but the place to start today may be a ‘sentimental education’ – i.e., an education about the emancipatory and self-sabotaging affects mobilised in the neoliberal workplace.

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