

## Measure, Excess and Translation: Some Notes on “Cognitive Capitalism”

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Since February of 2007 I have been involved in discussions concerning contemporary forms of knowledge production, education and the university as sites of struggle with many comrades around the world on a list called “edu-factory” (<http://www.edu-factory.org>). The following notes are a slightly edited version of one of my contributions to this debate. They build on Silvia Federici and George Caffentzis reflections published in this issue of *The Commoner* on two concepts that have been central to this discussion (the edu-factory and cognitive capitalism) and addresses three other concepts which have emerged in the debate: measure, excess and translation.

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I would like to follow up the contribution by Silvia Federici and George Caffentzis and develop further some implications of their critical stance on the question of “cognitive capitalism”. In doing so, I would like to draw the attention on the political importance of the arguments raised against the consequences of theoretically de-centering the problematic of class hierarchy and dynamics of stratification. For the sake of continuity and clarity my contribution will follow the two main lines of their argument, and attempt to engage with issues which have not been directly covered in their post, namely, the question of capital's measure, excess, and translation.

## I Wage Hierarchy, Measure, and Excess

The first argument proposed by Federici and Caffentzis is an empirical/theoretical one, in which they argue that the history of capitalism demonstrates that capital subsumption of all forms of production is not predicated on the extension of the “highest” level of science and technology to all workers contributing to the accumulation process. Cases such as the capitalist organization of the plantation system and of housework suggests that work can be organized for capitalist accumulation with the laborer working at a level of technological/scientific knowledge below the average applied in the highest points of capitalist production. This also suggests that the “inner logic” of capitalist development can only be grasped if we look at the *totality* of its relations rather than only at the highest points of its scientific/technological achievements. Looking at this totality reveals that capitalism has always produced disparities along the international and sexual/racial division of labor. These disparities are both the product of its inner workings and of clear strategies which give rise to the “underdevelopment” of particular sectors and are amplified by the increasing integration of science and technology in the production process.

Now, it is important to underline two interrelated things on this first point.

**A) Enclosures and disciplinary integration.** The wage hierarchy here is certainly not a “hypothesis to be verified” and is instead taken as a “paradigmatic” stand, made intelligible by a large theoretical and empirical literature, as well as any common sense observation of the modern horrors. There is a limit to the post-modern flights of imagination and academic conjecturing that we can take on this matter (and note, this does not take anything away to the opportunity to have both within limits). The processes overseeing the ongoing creation of this stratification can be grasped theoretically and empirically though Marx’s classic texts reinterpreted in lights of the issues raised by the struggles of those subjects that in that text were mostly invisible and yet are and have always been so fundamental to capitalism (women, the unwaged reproduction workers, the slaves, the peasants, and so on).

The production of the totality of social relations under capitalism develops along two main co-ordinates (another one is what we can call “governmentality”, or “the class deal” but I cannot talk about this here). One is systematic and continuous “enclosure” strategies, as it has been observed in other posts. These certainly affects all levels in the hierarchy but they also have the effect of continuously re-

stratifying the hierarchy itself. This not only by hitting the bottom layers the hardest (through land/water enclosures, relocation, urban proletarianisation and so on), but also through the use of technology and knowledge products developed at the highest levels as instrument of these enclosures (terminator seeds, GMOs, and of course, remember the 1960s "green revolution"?).

The other one is what Marx labels the process going on "behind the back of the producers", the process of the formation of "socially necessary labour time", and that in order to appease any illusions that our epoch has moved away from the imposition of discipline, we can call "disciplinary integration." The process of competitive markets — despite all its impurities in relation to textbook models—act as disciplinary mechanism that allocate rewards and punishments. They give rise to concentration and centralisation tendencies, the latter understood not as an asymptotic future outcome described by a crystal ball, but as the emergent result of social processes rooted in struggle, *to the extent struggles are subsumed and pit one against another within the process itself*. And, finally, they contribute to ongoing the planetary re-stratification of social labour.

**B) Measure and excess.** We would not go much to the bottom of these two processes of enclosures and disciplinary integration—that bottom that interests us because of its radical implications—if we were not understanding that this "inner logic" of capitalism is predicated on a way of *measuring* life activity which subordinates concrete specific humans to the quantitative imperative of balance sheets, a process of giving meaning to action, of *acting* on this meaning, and shaping organisational forms suitable for this action that produces what capital *values* the most: its own self-preservation as capital (even in spite of the bankruptcy of individual capitals).

This subordination means that the sensuous *and* cognitive features of concrete labouring are—precisely—subordinated to the drive for making money. And the existence of this subordination implies that there is always and has always been "an excess" which is not put to value by capital, precisely because value for capital is "abstract labour", or "human labour power expended without regard to the form of its expenditure", as Marx put in the first chapter of *Capital*. This "excess" emerges in the contradictory nature of what is of value for capital and what is of value for waged and unwaged workers. This "excess" with respect to what is required by profit-driven production in given contexts, is often a way in which these "value struggles" manifest themselves in given forms and degrees. We can find it cutting through the noise of assembly lines in the jokes that workers shout to each other; or in the whispers of children hiding from the eyes of

terribly serious Victorian schoolmasters; or emerging from the regimented fields of slave plantations in the form of songs, chants and rhythms allowing communications to flow in avoidance of the whip of slave masters. In other words, the production of excess is not the prerogative of “cognitive labour” and therefore of contemporary forms of capitalism. The “excess” is the outcome of the struggle of situated workers facing the frontline and contesting the reduction of their life-activity to “human power expended without regard to the form of its expenditure” because subordinated to the priority of balance sheets. This excess is social form that is valued by the struggling subjects, it is human power expended with regard to the form of its expenditure. But let us not be fooled by these “excesses”. Capitalism is a dynamic system. If in given contexts, times and situations, an intellectual, artistic or “cognitive” product emerges as a means or result of struggle, in a different situation and temporal framework, the same “product” can act as a retro fashion item seeking valorisation in a niche market, hence subject to capital’s measure. What was before the result of the struggle at the frontline, it is now the condition from drawing a new frontline, a new clash among value practices, among modes of “measuring” life activity, out of which a new excess will certainly emerge.

Capital captures struggle and excess to a variety of degrees depending on contingent power relations. But the very fact that it does it and continuously seeks to do it through the imposition of its measure and hierarchy cannot be wished away: it is the condition we must face up to and overcome through class recomposition. But class recomposition is not a given. I disagree with the argument that “cognitive labour” points at what is common across the multitude. To posit cognitive labour as a common is to indulge into idealising commons in similar ways as those who romanticise the past. This because it removes rupture and struggle the center of the problematic of commons re-production.

“Cognitive labour” is an idealised common because it is neither what is common across the hierarchy, nor what *tends* to be common. In the first case, it is simply not the case —as it has been argued by Silvia Federici and George Caffentzis post. One cannot claim in any meaningful sense that the *different* concrete labours across the global factory have “cognitive labour” as common. The claim would be true only if we maintain it as a general platitude, that is the fact that subjects are engaged in processes of acquiring/formulating/producing knowledge and understanding through thought, experience and sense. This is obviously always the case in all modes of production, and in

capitalism—as pointed out by Silvia and George—in every layers of the wage hierarchy.

And the second case simply cannot be made, since one thing that the “tendencies” within capitalism reveal is only that the class struggle gets wider and richer in form, together with the associated deepening of the hierarchisation of waged and unwaged labour. And this implies that the problematic/puzzle of political recomposition ahead of us gets more challenging at the same time as the potentials for liberation that would be made possible by this recomposition get more plentiful.

What is really common across the “multitude” is that *in so far as capital production is concerned*, our production in common, occurs through the subjection of multiplicity to a common alien measure of doing, of giving value to things, of ranking and dividing the social body on the basis of this measure. Thus, the strategic emphasis on knowledge production that comes from various institutional bodies is not the evidence of a “tendency” to turn all work into “cognitive labour” announcing a new phase of capitalism (cognitive capitalism, precisely). Rather, we are faced here with the strategic attempt to launch a new wave of enclosures and disciplinary integration that recreate the “fucked up” commons that capital attempts to impose on all of us: that of its measure of life processes. The specific character of this new wave has *certainly* to be critically studied in *details*. But it is terribly dangerous to approach this study with the illusion that the current emphasis on knowledge production by the institutional agents of capital is anything else but to serve as instrument of competitiveness, capitalist growth, new modes of enclosures and commodification of life, and, *therefore*, planetary class stratification.

## II Political Recomposition and Translation

From their first theoretical/empirical point, Silvia Federici and George Caffentzis develop an important political argument. There is in fact a political consequence in using constructs such as “cognitive capitalism” and “cognitive labor” in such a way as to overshadow the continuing importance of other forms of work as contributors to the accumulation process. And this is the development of a discourse that precludes *class recomposition*. There is in fact the danger that by privileging one kind of capital (and therefore one kind of worker or one kind of labouring) as being the most “exemplary of the contemporary paradigm” we contribute to create a new hierarchy of struggles, thus engaging in forms of activism that “precludes a re-composition of the working class.” To become possible, this political re-composition must

be predicated on the awareness of the continuity of our struggle across the international division of labor and wage hierarchy, which means that we need to “articulate our demands and strategies in accordance to these differences and *the need to overcome* them” (my emphasis).

Now, this articulation is certainly dependent on processes of “translation”. But we would be fooling ourselves if this was the only thing required. Translation is of paramount importance for two things.

First, in understanding the development of capital's strategies in specific contexts. Hence in so far as the stratified class (“multitude”) relation to capital is concerned, capital has indeed to codify “labour” in its own grammar and code, which rises for us the problem of—precisely—translation of categories in terms relevant to us. And this certainly happens at the level of what used to be called “bourgeois” discourses which apprehends social processes grounded on social conflict with the discursive closure (but strategic focus) embedded in its premises, methods, “policy implications” and, nowadays, “governance recommendations”. At this level of critical engagement, translation is of paramount importance, as a way to map the “enemy” stance vis-a'-vis struggles.

Second—and more in tune with the theme of this section—“translation” is important in relation to communication among rebellious subjects who—precisely because are divided across the wage hierarchy—one way or another are actors in processes such as those that reproduce racism and patriarchy, or relate to the world moving from the life-worlds they inhabit, with their cultural norms, “imaginaries” and mythologies. Thus, we always need to engage in processes of “translation” so as not only to “talk” to each other, but to give meaning to words, speech-acts, texts. And this of course, with all the caution we need in such exercises: who translates and who speak? who hears and who listens, who holds the “dictionary”, so to say, what meanings are left out? and so on. In this sense, ongoing processes of translation are part and parcel of the constitution of commons.

A translation however is giving meanings to *words*, it is mapping meanings from a code to another. It is not yet to act upon these meanings, creating effects through these actions and giving meaning to both these actions and their results. It is not yet, to value in the full sense of the word, the sense in which to value becomes a social force of transformation! Yet, this is precisely what capital does in its process of labour abstraction. This is not—as claimed in some posts in the edufactory debate—simply a process of “translation” of human labour—as if the latter could exist in the form it does independently from the meaning given to it by capital (perhaps echoing some illusions that are circulating that today's cognitive labour has reached “communism”, a

form of labour cooperation that is largely independent from capital). Capital does not simply give meaning to words, does not only map meanings from one code to another. It does so as a moment of a process of valorization that must be conceived as much more than translation. The process of valorisation of capital is a process founded on giving meaning to action in a context in which this meaning can be to a variety of degrees enforced (through pervasive enclosures of various forms backed by state monopoly of violence—even if this is a “transnational” state—enforces a configuration of existing property rights and various degrees of exclusion from the commons) and with results that to a large extent give shape to social actions, and create consequences.

Through this valorisation process, human powers are transmuted into commodities, and social doing is transmuted into work, into abstract labour. In this sense, abstract labour is not so much the result of a “translation”. It is the result of a real abstraction, i.e. a transmutation, as a transmutation of one species into another, one species of humans into another one. A transmutation for example that still is largely responsible to fill evening commuting trains with drained bodies, whether of “cognitive labourers” or cleaners; one that rhythmically and cyclically accumulates the *detritus* of capital's measure into our competing and colliding bodies in the forms of fear, stress, excessive antibiotics, and anxieties; one that also operates linearly, for example when it turns farmers into reserve army of labour due to, say, the *detritus* accumulated in their land by virtue of being adjacent to an aquaculture pool producing shrimps for export; or one also that creates the condition for turning local mothers into migrant nannies, that transmutes the direction of their affects away from their communities into the children of their busy employers, mainly because, in given conditions within the planetary wage hierarchy, the former are less socially valued than the latter; or finally one that turns that brilliant team of creative workers that have come up with that brilliant innovative idea, into the competitive *means* to de-value some other cognitive labourers, threaten their livelihoods and push them to a “life-learning” process to discover always new forms of undermining an invisible “other”, to join a “friendly” team so as to organise a competitive retribution.

The task of political recomposition ahead of us, cannot be faced if we de-center the problematic of hierarchy and the measuring process of life-activity connected to it which re-create hierarchy and division. The task of recomposition passes certainly through the “one no” to the “fucked up” commons of capital. At the same time, it passes through the open problematic of how to produce other commons,

more meaningful to us, predicated on many “yesses”, that is on “valorising” processes other than those posited by capital. Hence, despite being a crucial issue, the central question is not “translation”, but the *transformation of our interconnected lives*. And this transformation cannot avoid to posit the question of the overcoming of existing divisions as the central problematic of our organisational efforts.