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Vital Strategies

Maurizio Lazzarato and the Metaphysics of Contemporary Capitalism

Alberto Toscano

1. Bergsonist!

IN THE heat of the revolutionary councils movement of Turin in 1921, this was one of the epithets hurled at the likes of Antonio Gramsci for his supposed spontaneism, so at odds with the gradualism and evolutionism that had characterized much of the Second International's use of Marx's *Capital* (Gramsci, 1921). Such a perceived conjunction of radical politics and Bergsonism – a philosophy which, to all intents and purposes, presents itself as anything but militant – might strike today's reader as exceedingly peculiar. All the more so if we consider that the Bergson renaissance we have been privy to over the last decade or so has been driven by concerns which are not primarily political, or even sociological, in character.

An initial survey of this return to Bergson would suggest that it may be regarded as a theoretical option taken by thinkers working either within the Deleuzean or the phenomenological camp, broadly construed. Here Bergsonism operates in a twofold manner. Defensively, it is a brake on the thoroughgoing, quasi-mechanicist materialism that characterizes a certain Spinozist tendency present in Deleuze (and Guattari), as well as a step back from the single-minded concern with the analysis of late capitalism evinced by those who place their work in the wake of the *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* project. Prospectively, it advocates a reinvigoration of philosophy which, in the aftermath of postmodernism's patent exhaustion, seeks to circumvent discourses of derealization by postulating a method of intuition that would be capable of tracking and diagramming a virtual real, and thus 'keep up' with social and scientific mutations that are supposedly taking us beyond the confines of a 'reductive' materialism.[1]

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Indeed, a not-so-charitable depiction of the 'New Bergsonism' might see it as an escape from the socio-political inscription of philosophy, as a quest for purification in which the philosopher's privileged access to an unrepresentable, non-utilitarian becoming serves to immunize him or her from the contagion of critical ventures that would interrogate the purity of philosophy and its subject of enunciation. Even more stark is the verdict emanating from historical materialism and critical theory. We may cite the accusation of collusion with the ideological (or even imperialist) forces of reactionary irrationalism (Althusser, 2003: 1–18; Lukács, 1980: 24–9, 403–17) or the somewhat kinder estimation of Bergson's philosophy as incapable of reflecting on its own conditions of production (Horkheimer, 2005; Jay, 2003: 50–1). What these earlier treatments of Bergson interrogated was the relation between 'spiritualism and present history' (Horkheimer, 2005: 10). And it is exactly this relation which Maurizio Lazzarato seeks radically to recast by mobilizing the Bergsonian metaphysic for a transformative perception of *our* present history. By way of introduction to Lazzarato's article included in this issue – which stands on its own as a detailed excavation of a crucial aspect of Bergson's philosophy, but whose character as an intervention into the politics of theory might otherwise remain opaque – I would like to investigate the intellectual and political context of the book *Videofilosofia* (Lazzarato, 1996a) from which this essay is excerpted, a book produced in parallel with Lazzarato's seminal work on the concept of immaterial labour (1996b; 1997) and anticipating his massive transvaluation of the sociology of Gabriel Tarde (2002), as well as his recent seminars on the 'revolutions of capitalism' (2004).

2. Communists against the Left

In 1998, the Italian journal *Futuro Anteriore*, in which both Lazzarato and Toni Negri played a driving role, published an editorial entitled 'Our Tradition'. This text is of considerable use for orienting oneself around the work of Lazzarato. Above all, it puts forward the idea that, beginning in 1960, something like a post-socialist, communist critical theory was hatched in Italy, a theory that still remains the unorthodox source for an entire domain of radical philosophy and political thought. Besides the two political points of reference – the 'blocs of "facts"', as it calls them – to be found in the urban praxis of *Lotta Continua* from 1969 to 1972 and the Movement of '77 in Italy, the editors suggest this canon, which is almost Borgesian in its heterogeneity:

> Italian workerism (*Quaderni Rossi*, *Classe Operaia*, the Potere Operaio group, *autonomia*); situationism, in particular the pre-emptive and acute critique of postmodern culture to be found in Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*; the knowledge/power *dispositifs* of Foucault and the 'molecular revolution' of Deleuze and Guattari; the theses of Hans-Jürgen Krahl on intellectual and mass work and the 'long march through the institutions' of Rudi Dutschke; the historiographic reflections of the journal *Primo maggio*; the treatment by Sohn-Rethel of science and abstract labour. (Futuro Anteriore, 1999: 97)

Perhaps of greatest significance for the appreciation of Lazzarato's own work is the violent separation of this 'materialist tradition' (Futuro Anteriore, 1999: 98) from the fortunes of 'classical' Marxism in its practical and theoretical guises, a separation polemically celebrated in the parricidal slogan: 'Communists, *therefore*, not of the Left' (1999: 98).

Elsewhere, Negri has succinctly and effectively characterized what he sees as the signal achievement of the intellectual experience around the journal *Futur Antérieur* and its Italian counterpart, which, forged in the 'disjunctive synthesis' of exiled Italian activists and salient figures of the extra-parliamentary French Left, 'transformed the socialist thinking of totality into a communist thinking of difference' (Negri, 2003). Incidentally, we should note that the theoretical work of authors more or less associated with this heretical tradition – Negri, Lazzarato, Virno, but we could also mention Marazzi and Bifo – has in the past few years manifested considerable divergences, if not differends. Though it would require another article to make the case properly, we can discern at least three lines of development for the 'theoretical communism' that found expression in the '90s in journals like *DeriveApprodi*, *Futuro Anteriore* and *Luogo Comune*: (1) a more 'classical' autonomist strain, represented by Hardt and Negri above all, which combines the Spinozist theory of the multitude and certain post-structuralist themes with an abiding, if heretical, fidelity to some of its Marxian sources (concepts of antagonism, class composition, living labour, real subsumption, and so on); (2) a 'naturalist' line, headed by Paolo Virno and the new journal *Forme di vita*, which marries the theory of post-Fordism with inquiries into generic human capacities (or potentialities) anchored in the philosophy of language, cognitive science and post-Heideggerian anthropology; (3) a kind of 'differential spiritualism', pioneered by Lazzarato, which distances itself from the Marxist coordinates of the workerist and autonomist legacy for the sake of an analysis of 'the revolutions of capitalism' in terms of notions of publicity, communication and minority.

3. The Immaterial Turn

Prior to the full-blown emergence of the theme of the multitude as an organizing theme, it could be argued that the singular tradition of 'theoretical communism' delineated above found its analytical and programmatic crystallization in the notion of *immaterial labour* (Lazzarato, 1996b, 1997). In its original form, where it functions as an immanent critique and extension of Marxist concepts of labour and political subjectivity (through the pivotal notion of 'class composition'), immaterial labour drew theoretical attention to the kind of labour that produces 'the informational and cultural content of the commodity' – the labour which, by its very nature, foregrounds the ability to activate and manage cooperation, in all of its affective, communicational and informational senses, for the sake of intensified productivity (Lazzarato, 1996b: 133–5). The specificity of immaterial goods or commodities was connected in turn to their being in principle collectively enjoyed, to the notion that they are, at least in a latent manner, beyond the regime

of property. The spatio-temporal constraints of ideas and information, in this respect, are seen to belong to a different spatio-temporal regime than that of material commodities, which are both perishable and demand an exclusive location. Moreover, the notion of immaterial labour incorporates the idea, already prevalent among several New Left thinkers, that consumption – conceived as the consumption of ideas, affects and feelings – becomes in some sense or another productive: that the consumer is not just a passive terminus but a complicit and creative relay in the reproduction of capitalism. We could thus say that there is a shift here from a paradigm of material scarcity to one of immaterial abundance, beyond the socialism which tried to emancipate the capacities of material production towards a politics that seeks to emancipate the specific traits of immaterial production – with the help of a different, non-dialectical metaphysics that would have done with the alleged Hegelian infrastructure of the Marxian concepts of labour and struggle. This metaphysics also entails a transformation in the bearer of both production and change: a consequence of the postulated hegemony of immaterial labour is that we witness the growing centrality of a kind of 'intellectual proletarian' (Lazzarato, 1996b: 137) in the productive cycle, together with a tendency to blur the distinction – and indeed the physical separation – between conception and execution. An important corollary here is that once communicative and affective capacities are forcefully demanded by capitalism, the *subjectivity* of the worker becomes of paramount significance (1996b: 140).

One of the more emphatic criticisms of the immaterial labour research programme – both in terms of its metaphysical core and its protective belt, to paraphrase Lakatos – has come from the Marxist political philosopher Alberto Burgio. Burgio discerns, in the dilution of a working class subject effected by Lazzarato and other thinkers of capitalism's 'immaterial turn', the disappearance of a lever for the overthrow of bourgeois, capitalist power; in other words, the celebration of the obsolescence of the labour movement. The prism through which this evaluation is carried out is that of Marx's polemics against the utopian socialists and their ignorance or obfuscation of the contradiction immanent to capital accumulation (needless to say, it is the workerist-autonomist line that is here portrayed as 'utopian', i.e. in the last instance *reformist*). More specifically, Burgio sees the biopolitical underpinnings of the theory of immaterial labour – and here I am confident that Lazzarato would hardly object – as a termination of the classical capital/labour dialectic. Biopolitics, read by Lazzarato et al. through the lenses of the notion of *general intellect*, first formulated by Marx in the *Grundrisse*, results in the extension of exploitation to the whole social field (in a kind of biopolitical *hyperexploitation*). The social is thereby rendered indiscernible from a common field of cooperation – a field which is, be it virtually, communist. In defence of Lazzarato's earlier work on this question of immaterial labour, we should underscore that he is very forthright about the role of power and antagonism in the configuration of immaterial labour as a tendentially hegemonic form of work and subjectivity

within contemporary capitalism. As he pointedly notes: 'Today's management thinking takes workers' subjectivity into consideration only in order to codify it in line with the requirements of production' (Lazzarato, 1996b: 136). Furthermore, by positing the *autonomy* of the cooperative capacities of living, immaterial labour from their expropriation and commoditization by informational capitalism, it could be argued that Lazzarato, far from dissolving the antagonism between labour and capital, potentially exacerbates it:

> My working hypothesis, then, is that the cycle of immaterial labour takes as its starting point a social labour power *that is independent and able to organize both its own work and its relations* with business entities. Industry does not form or create this new labour power, but simply takes it on board and adapts it. (1996b: 138)

4. Problems of Autonomy

One of the questions worth posing at this juncture is in what sense some variant of Bergsonism serves, in light of the putative limits of an all-too dialectical Marxism, to bolster the metaphysics of autonomy; how it might allow Lazzarato to think the ontological anteriority of a living, cooperative force – immaterial labour qua image, memory and affect – with regard to its capture by the capital-relation. After all, Marx's own understanding of the real subsumption of (living) labour by (dead) capital hardly seems the harbinger of much 'independence'! As has become far more evident in the texts following the publication of *Videofilosofia*, especially *Puissances de l'invention* (Lazzarato, 2002a), such a metaphysical or ontological autonomism, formulated via Bergson, Nietzsche, Tarde and Deleuze, ultimately involves a refusal of work (to resurrect Mario Tronti's workerist slogan), which is not just practical but theoretical. In this respect, the resolutely anti-dialectical tenor of Lazzarato's writings following his investigations of immaterial labour does lend some credence to Burgio's lapidary diagnosis: 'Inasmuch as it implies the negation of any specificity of the labouring condition, the extreme dilation of the concept of work is equivalent to the affirmation of its extinction' (Burgio, 1999: 84). In this sense, criticisms such as Burgio's identify a tendency that has led Lazzarato to abandon his attempt to redefine the concept of labour, overhauling the Marxian legacy for the sake of creatively embracing the traditions of spiritualism and the philosophy of difference – issuing, among other things, a demotion of labour in favour of a thinking of *invention* and *public opinion*, in the wake of Tarde. In this respect it could be said that from the perspective of a convergence between the political legacy of autonomism and the theoretical contribution of a principally French philosophy of difference (the Bergson–Tarde–Deleuze line), the autonomous, constructive power of a cooperative life, of a plural public of brains, obviates for Lazzarato the necessity of generating subjectivity via systemic conflict. Though refusal remains, it is no longer in the guise of a dialectical passage (Lazzarato, 2004: 197–260).

So is it the case that, as in the sundry utopian socialisms targeted by Marx, we could argue that in Lazzarato's work 'the foundation of liberation is identified in the *immediate realisation* of class autonomy' (Burgio, 1999: 85)? The problem with such a Hegelian critique of political immediacy is that it ignores the extent to which Lazzarato's concern with the technologies and indeed the media of communication, with the manner in which they transform the space–time of action and the parameters of politics, depends on the elaboration of a non-dialectical theory of mediation – whether by way of Bergson's theory of the image or Tarde's neo-monadological sociology. A broader critique, or rather metacritique, of this immaterial turn might prove more fruitful. I am thinking of the problematic connection, in the work of Lazzarato – but also, in rather different terms, of Negri or Virno – between, on the one hand, the methodological decision, crucial to their tradition, to analyse social transformations in terms of tendencies that can be registered at the level of a supposedly hegemonic advanced sector, and, on the other, the penchant for declaring that the present is characterized by metaphysical and anthropological revolutions best captured by theoretical means other than those of classical social theory. This accounts for both the boldness and the problematic character of a book such as Lazzarato's *Videofilosofia*, where the perception of time in post-Fordism, to quote the book's subtitle, is indexed to a set of very definite transformations in the compositions of class and of capital, on the one hand, and accorded a kind of timeless metaphysical (or anthropological) validity, on the other. There is a certain irony in the manner in which a profoundly anti-Hegelian tradition here finds itself depicting the capitalist present as the coming to light of the existential and aesthetic invariants of the species.[2]

As was noted above, Lazzarato's writings in the wake of the theses on immaterial labour have been increasingly marked by the dissolution (and critique) of the working class as subject of resistance and model of subjectivation on the one hand, and the concomitant emphasis on minoritarian struggles on the other. These minorities, echoing Agamben, are 'whatever subjectivities' that reveal the political stakes of struggles within a contemporary capitalism, whose profound truth is 'the putting to work of life, its exploitation and reduction to a source of valorisation'. In other words, minorities, as opposed to classes, are envisaged as the antagonistic subjects of a biopolitical capitalism, proposing forms of production of difference that counter those elicited and controlled by the imperatives of accumulation: 'The struggles of minorities tend to subordinate the universal to the expression of singularities and to unpredictable processes of subjectivation, thereby showing that the general interest is that of producing difference and heterogeneity' (Lazzarato, 1999: 157). Again, and despite the stubbornly anti-dialectical character of this line of research, what is carried over from the Marxian tradition is some notion of contradiction, albeit one that is here reconfigured as biopolitical: 'to develop the singularity of the product, of the service, but under the grip of the universality of the market and of money, this is the contradictory double injunction of contemporary capitalism'

(p. 158). This figure of a biopolitical capitalism is of course the result of an approach that has its foundations in the workerist interpretation of Marx's theses on the *real subsumption* of a fully socialized labour to capital – theses which were primarily read in terms of a dislocation of capital, labour and struggle out of the factory and into a deterritorialized sphere of communication and reproduction (Toscano, 2004):

> The information economy, industry of the 'future', is here to show us how capitalism itself, in its most advanced forms, organises the relation between affects, desires and technological dispositifs without passing through factory discipline; how it captures, in an open space, each and every one's affects and desires (without distinguishing between productive and unproductive, worker subjectivity and whatever subjectivity), finalising them to the production of profit. (Lazzarato, 1999: 159)

5. The Centrality of Cooperation

We have already indicated how the work of Lazzarato, in parallel with a number of his comrades and associates, developed out of an innovative Marxian strain, the one first extracted by the writers in the journal *Quaderni Rossi* and later elaborated in, among numerous other texts and interventions, Negri's (1989) *Marx Beyond Marx* (one of the 'canonical' texts of the political project of *autonomia*, or 'autonomism') (Wright, 2002). It is nevertheless fair to say, especially given the polemical turn taken by his last two books, that he has since abandoned even that deeply heterodox Marxism, for the sake of an attempt to revitalize contemporary radical (possibly 'communist') thought via a turn to philosophers and sociologists such as Tarde and Bergson – thinkers who around 1900 laid the groundwork for a thinking of political subjectivity anchored in temporality, multiplicity and the publicity of media (in this respect, Lazzarato is not loath to sketch a vital thread between Tarde's newspapers and today's internet). The caesura with the Marxist tradition in particular, and with classical sociology and political thought in general – which Lazzarato sees as mired in the ontology of work – is best seen in terms of the concept of *cooperation*, the very point around which Lazzarato, at the beginning of the 1990s, and in collaboration with Toni Negri, had made some very important contributions to the aforementioned 'tradition':

> The Smithian form of cooperation is represented by the division of labour (the famous pin factory) and the active principle of production is represented by the concept of labour, understood as generic expenditure of activity (abstract labour). The coordination of productions – or, more in general, the form of socialisation of acting – is given by the market. What I wish to underline is the articulation of division of labour, labour and market. In these past few years, we have noticeably moved toward another concept of cooperation. Cooperation is thought here as a cooperation between brains, which is to say immediately as society. The latter is considered as a collective brain whose cerebral cells are constituted by individuals (the Marxian *general intellect*).

> The active principle of production is represented by the activity of mind (of the memory-brain) and attention constitutes the intensive force of the brain, whilst effort (*conatus*) is the intellectual desire of the memory-brain. The co-ordination of actions, in this new concept of cooperation, cannot be given by the market, whose emblematic image is the invisible hand, but by public opinion. (Lazzarato, 2002b: 101–2)

Thus, from the work on immaterial labour onwards – via the formulation of a theory of post-Fordist subjectivity based on the encounter with the 'spiritualist' tradition of Tarde, Bergson and Deleuze (as well as the cinematic thought of Dziga Vertov and the videophilosophy of Nam June Paik) – there is a marked shift from the attempt to recast the concept of class (along the lines of Italian *operaismo* and its pivotal notion of technical and political class composition) to that of elaborating the ontological and organizational underpinnings of a notion of *multitude*, or alternatively of a minoritarian politics, or politics of multiplicity (these seem to be the preferred terms in Lazzarato's latest work). In this regard, Lazzarato judges that Marx and his epigones remain too close to the ontology of political economy they wish to critique, and that the disjunction between labour, as classically conceived, and labour power is not sufficient to allow Marxism to break the metaphysics of the subject of work, a dialectical metaphysics of the realization of the possible, allegedly incapable of grasping what in his latest work, *Les révolutions du capitalisme* (2004), Lazzarato calls (echoing Deleuze and Guattari), 'the assemblage of difference and repetition'.

One might be excused here for discerning in the frontal attack on the ontology of work and its theory of the subject a repetition of some of the theses that lay at the source of the philosophy of postmodernity, in particular of the insidious critique of Marxism in Jean Baudrillard's work of the 1970s. There, Baudrillard flamboyantly declared 'the end of production' and consequently of the entire political and metaphysical apparatus founded on the centrality of labour within the accumulation of capital and the production of (surplus) value. With the catastrophe of classical capitalism effected at the start of the 1970s, Baudrillard confidently asserted that

> [L]abour is no longer a *force*. It has become a *sign* among other signs, produced and consumed like all the rest. [. . .] The process of labour itself has become interchangeable: a mobile, polyvalent, intermittent system of job placement, indifferent to every objective, and even to labour in the classical sense of the term. (Baudrillard, 1990: 100, 104)

Lazzarato nevertheless refuses this abdication of political subjectivity to the hegemony of the sign, this passage from production to seduction. One could even say that it is precisely in order to forestall the disappearance of the political subject together with the subject of work, in the belief that the 'sign form has seized upon labour and emptied it of all its historical and libidinal signification, absorbing it in the process of its own reproduction'

(Baudrillard, 1990: 101), that he turns to vitalism and spiritualism as alternative paths within, and out of, the postmodern.

This variant of vitalism, understood as the foregrounding of the affective or aesthetic characteristics of immaterial labour under contemporary capitalism, is thus meant to effect a break with the ontology of labour without plunging into the domain of derealized seduction and the sleek empire of self-replicating signs. Lazzarato's vitalism follows Deleuze in being a vitalism of signs and events (Deleuze, 1995) – signs and events which are not autonomous entities floating over a dimension of evacuated corporeality, but are instead entangled with the production of subjects and their assemblage into networks of communication and cooperation. Rather than an evacuation of the libidinal by the sign, this vitalism depends on an infusion of libido (or rather *desire*) into semiotics. If, following Deleuze and Guattari, production is first and foremost affective, desiring production, then, according to Lazzarato, what Marxism relegated to the superstructure must be reintroduced into the domain of the economy (whence the focus in *Puissances de l'invention* [Lazzarato, 2002a] on Tarde's concept of 'psychological economy'). What is coordinated in this new *general brain*, as it were, is not just abstract labour, but beliefs, desires and affects (or 'forces', to use a more Nietzschean parlance) – a dimension which, for all of Negri and Virno's efforts to enrich it, the Marxian concept of *general intellect* seems to ignore.

The idea of the cooperation between brains is in a sense an attempt to prolong the autonomist belief in the priority of productive or constructive resistance over its capture by the mechanisms of power and its reproduction, a way of thinking cooperation as prior to and relatively independent from capitalist self-valorization. The guiding thesis is that 'Language, art, science, public opinion are ontologically and historically a result of the interaction between brains and not of the socialization of the enterprise and the market' (Lazzarato, 2002a), which Lazzarato relegates to the restricted dialectic of capital and labour. We should note the importance of the focus, already at work in the 'tradition' of *Futuro Anteriore*, on the cutting-edge and tendentially hegemonic sectors of production. Having said that, Lazzarato's vitalist autonomism is far more extreme, in as much as it retroactively posits *the autonomy of a non-capitalist cooperation* and does not simply see it as a consequence of the real subsumption of labour within capital (in Negri, for instance, there is still a sense in which the collapse of the capital/labour dialectic can be accounted for dialectically). In other words, cooperation between brains becomes hegemonic (though not necessarily in a quantitative sense) over the kind of cooperation which was historically referred to the dialectic of capital and labour.

At this point, however, it might be worth pausing to question the almost unbridled optimism of this thesis of the primacy of cooperation, beginning with the acknowledgement – shared by Lazzarato in his essay 'Immaterial Labour' (1996b) – of the *forced* nature of much social and cognitive interaction, of the manner in which the imperative 'connect!' might be

experienced as a violent imposition on the part of capitalism rather than anything arising out of the desires of a putative multitude. Aside from the rather suspect historical aspect of the thesis, which might be falsified by such exemplary histories as that of the development of the internet, at the ontological level we may wonder whether there isn't a sizeable grain of truth in Baudrillard's profound pessimism about today's cooperative, communicational capitalism. As he notes:

> Socialisation by ritual, and by signs, is much more effective than socialisation by energies bound to production. All that is asked of you is not that you produce, nor that you strive to excel yourself (this classical ethic has become rather suspect), but that you be socialised. [. . .] You are no longer brutally snatched away from your daily life to be surrendered to machines; you are integrated in the system, along with your childhood, your habits, your human relations, your unconscious drives, even your rejection of work. [. . .] The important thing is that everyone be a terminal in the network, a lowly terminal, but a term nevertheless – above all, not an inarticulate cry, but a linguistic term, and at the terminus of the whole structural network of language. (Baudrillard, 1990: 101, 104–5)

For Lazzarato, on the contrary, the self-valorization of social forces becomes the logical and historical presupposition of capitalist reproduction. The sign, in this vitalist ontology, can never derealize differential production and cooperative assemblages, since it is their product. To coin a slogan: no sign without affect. It is in this primacy of cooperation, revisited through the lenses of the philosophy of difference, that, according to Lazzarato, lies the continuity, however tenuous, with the workerist tradition and the pioneering work of Mario Tronti: first class, then capital. In this schema, modern corporations like Nike, for instance, *begin* with the capture of the cooperation between brains – the logo – and only then may involve themselves in the production and reproduction of material goods. The question, though, 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-valorization, 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-valorization of capital?

This question of cooperation and its capture is intimately linked for Lazzarato to the centrality of the problem of invention (or innovation) in capitalism. In other words, the conundrum of contemporary capitalism is how to capture the invention of a difference and insert it into the cycles of production and reproduction. Whence the focus on forms of life, feeling and behaviour as indispensable categories for the analysis of today's 'psychological economy'. This is indeed another reason adduced for the need of a vitalist overcoming of the Marxian tradition: allegedly, there is no explanation in Marx of the production of science, or indeed of innovation. According to Lazzarato, political economy and its critique merely *presuppose* the fact of invention, something which simply cannot be done today, when we

are dealing with the exploitation not of a general intellect organized by 'scientific' means in a social factory, but the exploitation of the cooperation among brains themselves – whence the significance of the debates on the legal and social forms to be taken by intellectual property, the other forms of capture of this cooperation being media and money.

6. Videophilosophy

Lazzarato's theoretical gambit then is to look in the philosophy of difference for the metaphysical resources to confront the centrality of invention to contemporary capitalism and to reframe the question of autonomy, no longer grasped in terms of labour power and proletarian needs but in terms of a power of invention. In this regard, *Videofilosofia*, Lazzarato's most philosophical work to date, serves a crucial purpose: to lay out the transcendental aesthetic, i.e. the experiential and spatio-temporal co-ordinates, of post-Fordist capitalism. Of course, the term transcendental aesthetic, used here as shorthand, demands considerable qualification. First, the term transcendental should be understood in light of Deleuze's proposals of a 'transcendental empiricism' or 'transcendental materialism', which is to say denoting the sub-representational and pre-individual dimension of intensity and productivity. Second, and yet again echoing Deleuze, aesthetic is not to be grasped in terms of the formal and invariant spatio-temporal parameters of a cognizing subject, but in terms of the construction and modulation of space-times generated by specific technical and artistic devices or machines. Indeed, contemporary capitalism is characterized by the tendency for hitherto separable domains of artistic production, mechanization and natural perception to merge – and it is no accident that Lazzarato wishes to thematize such a convergence via those theorists who registered the first shocks of these technical and aesthetic revolutions of capitalism: Bergson, Benjamin, Tarde, Nietzsche (whom Kittler tellingly dubs 'the first mechanized philosopher' [Kittler, 1999: 205]).

Video is thus singled out by Lazzarato as that domain, indiscernibly artistic and commercial, where the effects on subjectivity of a new form of informational, digital capitalism can be registered with the greatest accuracy, where we can perceive the manner in which technical operations are redolent with political and metaphysical consequences. Furthermore, the attention to video serves as a polemical tool for questioning the anthropological penchant of other theorizations of an emergent immaterial economy in terms of language and linguistic capacities. *Videofilosofia* thus conceives itself, among other things, as a Nietzschean attack on the primacy of the concept and the fetishism of language, turning to new media and technologies in order to extract the multiplicities which are occulted by a monolithic subject, much as workerism sought to unearth those subjectivities of living labour occulted by capitalist self-valorization understood as *causa sui*. Lazzarato's book is thus driven by the aim to think *Marx avec Nietzsche*, albeit in terms which set him aside from the many analogous attempts that have marked the fate of critical theory:

> We think that contemporary capitalism forces us to weave together the critique of the concept of 'labour' as the concealment of the subjectivity of 'living labour' and the critique of the 'concept' and of 'language' as the concealment of the form of production of subjectivity in general. (Lazzarato, 1996a: 9)

Countering possible misunderstandings of a discourse so focused on the digital and the immaterial, this production of subjectivity, albeit (or rather because it is) shot through with artifice and technology, must be thought of, according to Lazzarato, in primarily corporeal terms. The fetishism of language must be undermined to shift theoretical attention to '*the multiplicity of semantics, modes of expression, polyphony and ambivalence of the signs of the body*' (Lazzarato, 1996a: 8; italics in original). The Nietzschean body demystifies the key antinomy of modern thought, between intellectual labour and manual labour: '*the body is a multiplicity which is directly connected to the social multiplicity*' (1996a: 181). The problem which the Nietzschean philosophy of corporeality and simulation is deemed to resolve is that of the reversibility between individual bodies and social practices in postmodern capitalism, the collective within (the body qua internally conflictive multiplicity) and the collective without (1996a: 182). In this regard Nietzsche is elevated to the status of media theorist *avant la lettre*, allowing us to formulate how the chrono-technological *dispositifs* of video and information technology arrange the productive short-circuit between the pre- and supra-individual forms of multiplicity (body and society, neither of which are any longer thought of as integral organisms).

Lazzarato's metaphysical decision is, of course, congruent with the estimation that capitalist exploitation, rather than finding its operative fulcrum in the factory, is spread in a capillary manner throughout the life process, such that capitalism has become 'biopolitical' (Toscano, 2007). Though initially paradoxical, Lazzarato's argument rests on the claim that the informational and immaterial turn of contemporary capitalism is matched by an unprecedented investment of the biological dimension, so that we could speak of a biotechnological or bioinformational capitalism in which subjectivity can no longer be thought of in terms of the dialectical or oppositional activity of the (factory) worker, but must be reframed in terms both of its (increasingly capitalized) sub-representational, bodily and biological dimension and of its abstract participation in machinic assemblages of enunciation, technological dispositifs and informational circuits. It is this diagnosis of capitalism that motivates the turn to Bergson and Nietzsche and the judgment that

> *[T]he 'production' of subjectivity must not be sought in the first place in the concept and in language, but rather in duration (time) and in the body.* To carry out this programme we will need to de-subjectivise subjectivity and de-objectify the world, because these are the conditions to recover the plastic and creative forces that allow one to construct differently the genealogy of the 'real' and of subjectivity. (Lazzarato, 1996a: 11)

The attempt to forge the metaphysical tools for a transformative grasp of contemporary capitalism also determines the particular way in which Lazzarato revisits the tradition of difference. We could say that the project of *Videofilosofia* depends on a technical *operationalization* of Nietzscheanism and Bergsonism, such that force and vitality are always led back to definite social and technical devices. Note, for instance, Lazzarato's penchant for the *crystallization* of time over its far more spiritual *intuition*, accompanied by a revaluation or transvaluation of Bergson's concept of perception. In part this is because the technological determinants of capitalism make it so that the Bergsonian opposition between a utilitarian perception and a free intuition are rendered inoperative. Lazzarato follows Leroi-Gourhan, as well as later theorists of the emancipatory potential of automation, in arguing that the 'manual regression' that accompanies technical development has emancipated the brain (and the cooperation among brains) from physiology, laying the groundwork for the priority of informational, cerebral production over the famous metabolism of man with nature via manual labour. Following Deleuze and Guattari's last work, but immersing it into the investigation of contemporary communicative media, we could even say that Lazzarato seeks to move the philosophy of difference from the spirit to the brain, conceiving the latter in terms which, once again in line with *What is Philosophy?*, exceed the domains of neurology or cognitive science.

Video, as the strategic object and medium of this metaphysical investigation of contemporary capitalism, is prioritized because of the manner in which it can be seen to affect the brain without necessarily passing through explicit forms of representation; in other words, modulating the brain without necessarily functioning as an object for the mind. It is thus as an operative interface between the subrepresentational and the representational, between affect and cognition, that video techniques are seen by Lazzarato to make the philosophy of intuition essentially obsolete. Obsolete, in as much as video technologies, working in real time on the matter of perception – delaying, contracting, accelerating – translate fluxes inaccessible to human perception into images, but in turn also allow human agents access to aesthetic dimension hitherto unavailable for manipulation. Video is reconceived as an aesthetic practice of the preindividual, providing a technological perspective into the formulation of a materialism of the event, of the incorporeal, of time.

7. The Political Economy of Time

Time – a lived, albeit inhuman, modulated time, pitted against the abstract time of mere measurement – is indeed the primary focus of *Videofilosofia*. It is in the temporal dimension that the political function of techniques of time such as video is individuated. Not only do video technologies allow a translation of asignifying space-times into forms of political collectivity and communication, they lay open a time of multiplicity in which delays for action and decision can be opened up. Lazzarato thus conceives political

action not in terms of the coming to the fore of the fundamental political and communicational capacities of the socialized human animal, but, echoing Bergson, by focusing on the manner in which the techniques of postmodern capitalism reframe choice and indeterminacy, by thinking how political subjectivities are articulated with the sensory and temporal transformation effected by the new media, how the accumulation and interpolation of time – of image and memory as cuts in the continuous flux of becoming – permit subjects to act 'freely', by creating intervals and delays within the fabric of the present (Lazzarato, 1996a: 61).[3] Resonating with the historical and philosophical theses of Alliez's (1996) *Capital Times* and Negri's (2003) *Time for Revolution* (especially the early text on the constitution of time), Lazzarato poses time as the terrain of contemporary political engagement, where we encounter the protracted guerrilla warfare of a plural time of constituent power against the empty time of capitalist self-valorization. But the condition for this warfare is again the real subsumption of time to capital, the inexistence of any separate dimension of temporal experience: 'Capitalist deterritorialisation and class struggle have "freed" the hidden foundation of time from the repetition of the present (habit/custom) and from the repetition of the past (memory/tradition)' (Lazzarato, 1996a: 113).

A significant corollary to this thesis is that capitalist command and exploitation tend to invest the temporal directly, and to do so in a way which no longer depends on the mere measurement of labour time within the confines of the factory. Following a situationist inspiration, Lazzarato can thus identify the political function of television as the neutralization of political events, and of the duration of political subjectivities, in a repetitive spectacle of voided novelties. More importantly, it is a different capitalist use of time which defines the new regime of accumulation and its technologies of time:

> What we call the post-Fordist mode of production is a strategic *dispositif* for subordinating, controlling, and making productive whatever time [*tempo qualunque*]. *Capital no longer needs to subject it to labour time*, but captures it and exploits it qua whatever time. (Lazzarato, 1996a: 117)

In other words, the purported crisis of a Marxist analysis of labour-time in terms of the value of labour, which Negri has lavished so much attention upon, demands the full deployment of an ontology of time, capable of identifying the temporal resources necessary to offset the capitalist use and exploitation of time. We might ask at this juncture what the relationship is between such an ontology of time as power, rather than measure, and any conception of history. Whilst the focus of Lazzarato's analysis is certainly aimed at the plural conduits and circuits of a multiple and productive time, it is in some notion of *tendency* that the method touches, at least tangentially, on a philosophy of history. This was clear in the analyses of immaterial labour, where the latter is conceived of precisely as a tendency, borne out by certain technologies

(financial, media, digital) and subjectivities, which, whilst not amounting to a quantitative majority, is in some sense the hegemonic cutting edge of capital. In such a line of inquiry, the priority of tendencies over entities or preconceived contradictions, so central to Negri's heterodox reading of Marx, is endowed with something like a Bergsonian ontological armature.

Indeed, though the terms seem alien to Lazzarato and his heretical tradition, we could argue that, in the wake of Benjamin (one of the salient references in *Videofilosofia*), he is engaging in an impressive attempt to *historicize* Bergson – demonstrating, after Deleuze, how the technical dispositifs and abstract machines of modernity and 'postmodernity' allow the realization and expansion of those operations that Bergson had entrusted to the exquisitely philosophical method of *intuition*. According to Lazzarato, and contrary to readings of Bergson that regard him as an ahistorical thinker and a sceptic regarding technology (including the cinematograph), his writings, even more than those of Benjamin, allow us to grasp the specificity of capitalism when it comes to the production of images – an 'inhuman' production which is operated by technological dispositifs, where movement and duration are ontologically primary. *Videofilosofia* thus works in terms of a twofold movement, 'subsuming' Bergson's philosophy under contemporary capitalism on the one hand, and thinking capital *sub specie durationis* on the other. This historicization of spiritualism and the philosophy of difference in terms of post-Fordist capitalism simultaneously entails reading Bergson as a prophetic figure and breaking with the continuity of his thought, as we said, by laying out an operationalized, machinic Bergsonism. The technologies of time allow the exteriorization of intelligence, of the 'speed' of the brain (Alliez, 2004), 'giving to thought and action the "twofold nature" of the time of capitalism (measure-time and power-time). To be more precise, they install it in time, in the plurality of temporalities proper to post-Fordist capitalism' (Lazzarato, 1996a: 177). Bergsonian duration is thereby immersed into the transcendental aesthetic of post-Fordist capitalism, where continuity is rent asunder by the event: 'Multiplicity has the event as its correlate. And thought as multiplicity can only find its temporality in non-chronological time, conceived as the temporality of the event' (p. 179). Accordingly, Bergson's philosophy of time is forced from the deep time of tradition and involuntary memory, to a confrontation with the empty time of capitalism (thus following Deleuze's movement from the 2nd to the 3rd synthesis of time). Bergson becomes an indispensable reference for Lazzarato to the extent that he provides a model of the organization and constitution of subjectivities which is founded not on the primacy of human cognition, but on time-matter and image-matter (p. 56). Moreover, he allegedly functions as a privileged analyst of contemporary capitalism in as much as he indicates how our representationally available existence is subtended by a pure perception and a pure memory of which we have no direct conscious awareness, but which can be accessed and manipulated by technological dispositifs, moving us, as Deleuze noted, from the individual to the dividual, from disciplinary societies to societies of control. Here the

key question becomes that of how the time of capitalist abstraction is both sustained and subverted by a potent multiple time of creation and invention. At this limit of a transformed Bergsonism, the logic of his argument compels Lazzarato to invoke a veritable time of revolution: the Benjaminian *Jetztzeit* as a rupture with the sensory-motor habits of capitalism. '*Destruction* anticipating *constitution*, the reversal of *measure-time* into *power-time*'.

8. Collective Perception, or the Mirage of Postmodernity

It is indeed Benjamin who allows Lazzarato to move beyond Bergson, in the understanding that collective perception poses problems that can only be collectively resolved. As Lazzarato comments, the 'revolution, from this point of view, is the attempt to innervate the collective with the "organs" that these new technologies of "mechanical reproducibility" produce' (Lazzarato, 1996a: 201). The notion of collective perception allows Lazzarato to return to the philosophical problem of television, which he initially had seemed to dismiss as an apparatus for the elimination of events. The centrality of real time to television meant a passage from the separation between the possible and the real, ideation and realization, which still belonged to the cinema, to a regime of doubling and simulation (or virtualization). With television, understood as an indispensable relay in the reproduction of capitalism, we really enter the domain which, following Debord, takes the name of *spectacle*. Having said that, and despite his situationist sympathies, Lazzarato wishes to give greater metaphysical wealth and plasticity to this spectacular technology, to grasp it in terms of the passage from the *choc* of cinema to the television *flux*. World and image become indistinguishable, but it is precisely because of such a real subsumption of the image to capital that the seemingly hegemonic spectacle can be turned into the domain of invention and struggle, in the minoritarian, revolutionary passage from measure-time to power-time. It is interesting in this regard that Lazzarato is compelled to state that the '*cinema is an adventure of perception, but television is an adventure of time*' (p. 204): images are no longer representative, but genetically constitutive of the world. One intervenes into the video-image, uses it, manipulates it, edits it in order to generate situations, instead of contemplating or merely watching it. Aesthetic assemblages, as exemplified by the video arts, are regarded by Lazzarato as the possible paradigm for new institutions that would be capable of subtracting themselves from the dominion of the economy of information, conceived of as the forcible imposition of measure-time on the power-time of invention. In these aesthetic techniques, he discerns a new model of production which is not simply the invention of new commodities, but the invention, capture or configuration of new worlds (of affects, beliefs, perceptions, memories, habits, etc.) into which these commodities are inserted. The resistance to commodification is supposed to function on the same terrain, then, as that of branding and such post-Fordist practices, a different use of the technologies of time and affect that would actualize

Guattari's project of the creation of 'new existential territories'.

On the basis of these arguments, Lazzarato proposes a historicizing critique of the postmodern ideology of the disappearance or simulation of the world generally associated with the name of Jean Baudrillard (Lazzarato, 1996a: 207). Postmodernism was merely reacting to the subjection, in the televisual paradigm, of the virtual-actual circuit to the molar time of measurement; with digital technologies (video *against* television), power-time breaks through the spectacle, in a temporal monism that reveals new possibilities for invention, new modalities of subjectivation. Underlying this hopeful, if monstrous, horizon is the postulate that there is no separation between the *dispositifs* of collective production and those of collective perception. In this sense, we remain within the ambit of the metaphysics of immaterial labour, based, as we saw, on a similar destruction of the gap between production and reception (and on the concomitant elevation of consumption to the centre stage of capitalism). Again, the anchoring of this immaterial ontology in the becoming of contemporary capitalism is intended as a counter to the derealizing penchant of postmodernism. The 'real has not disappeared, it has become more temporal (more artificial); the social is not already given, but must "crystallize" itself each and every time' (Lazzarato, 1996a: 208). Again, we might be excused for wondering whether this grafting of capitalism onto the most intimate and imperceptible temporal dynamics really does warrant the considerable existential and political optimism evinced by Lazzarato's work. Even more, we may wonder why, if post-Fordist capitalism really is involved in a constant modulation of time, practices of resistance should accept its terrain. More specifically, we should ask whether the becoming productive of aesthetic practices, or the aestheticization of production, is to be regarded as the potentially emancipatory challenge of generating new worlds, through collective uses of art that attack measure-time with power-time, or whether it reinstates, in a far more potent form, the expansion of the reductive dominion of the commodity form.

9. Critique of Vitalist Reason

From a more historical standpoint, I wonder if it is possible to discount the specific roots of vitalism and spiritualism in the reaction to the rise of Marxism and the labour movement. The fact that the philosophies of Nietzsche, Bergson and Tarde were in many respects *reactions* to working class mobilization and conflict is no secret, and the 'post-socialism' of the likes of Lazzarato is not an obvious reason for relying on their concepts. Lukács, in an inquisitional vein, referred to *Lebensphilosophie* as 'a general product of the imperialist period . . . an attempt philosophically to solve from the standpoint of the imperialist bourgeoisie and its parasitic intelligentsia the questions raised by social evolution, by the class struggle's new forms' (Lukács, 1980: 404). Even more brutally, he concluded: 'In fine: the essence of vitalism lies in a conversion of agnosticism into mysticism, of subjective idealism into the pseudo-objectivity of myth' (p. 414). From this orthodox vantage point, vitalism represents a false positivity borne out of

the needs of crisis, a supposed deepening of concrete problems which generates diversions from the urgencies of social conflict and transformation, whose origins, according to Lukács, lie 'in the (general) identity of imperialist economies' (Lukács, 1980: 18). While Lukács's condemnations, even if we accept his polemical methodology, cannot easily be transposed into a phase where the new imperialism is wreaking its havoc in a very different ideological context from the old, it is still worth reflecting on whether a new political vitalism may really serve as a critical and analytical instrument today.[4]

In as much as it foregrounds the political effects of singularity and invention, such vitalism does indeed have some justification in claiming to open up a dimension of thought absent from much of Marxism and classical social theory – indeed, even Gramsci himself (Gramsci, 1919) felt compelled to allude to the Bergsonian concept of invention when accounting for the emergence of the Soviet State! However, even though this vitalism might provide a persuasive phenomenology of the contemporary strategies of both certain 'minoritarian' struggles and, perhaps more importantly, of the 'revolutions of capitalism' themselves, it remains unclear whether the kinds of abstractions (or, more accurately, diagrams and virtualities) it proposes really do have that much critical purchase on the systemic transformations of capitalism, both politically and economically. The pertinence of such vitalism – and especially of Lazzarato's recent neo-monadological theory of publics – to the analysis of informational capitalism is considerable: this is no surprise, in a way, given that Tarde's very theories contributed, via figures such as Edward Bernays and Walter Lippmann, to the genealogy of public relations and the technical refinement of the manufacture of consent. The deeper question has to do with its apparent attempt to supplant the 'molar' abstractions of Marxism and political economy with the 'molecular' abstractions of a philosophy of difference. As Lazzarato himself reminds us, Marx considered capitalism to constitute a practically existing idealism (Lazzarato, 1996a: 8) and there is much to favour the argument that, under such conditions, an escape from abstractions is an abdication of intellectual and political probity. As Peter Osborne notes, 'the ontology of the value form is that of an *objective ideality* which is nonetheless immanent to a *social materialism*' (Osborne, 2004: 27). Isn't a molecular revolution in theory, of the kind proposed by Lazzarato, in danger of ignoring the continued relevance and capillary extension of what Osborne calls '*actual* abstractions'? Is there not a fine line between dramatizing the attack on the abstract time of measurement by a subjective time of power and invention and wishing away the continued, and indeed increasing, force of the molar over the molecular? After all, if capitalism really is practically existing idealism, then the most idealist stance might be the one which tries to promote the practical existence of a living materialism. In this regard, the phenomenological virtues of vitalism might be considerably greater than its critical or ontological ones.

Notes

1. It is telling in this respect that one of the few works which systematically tries to articulate the respective contribution of Deleuze's historico-philosophical monographs to the construction of his philosophy of immanence, 'to discern a powerful line of development, a progressive evolution' (Hardt, 1993: 112), depicts Deleuze's Bergsonism as the first (critical and ontological) moment in the epigenesis of Deleuzism – a creative destruction of the dialectic of negativity which, through the intercession of Nietzsche's theory of forces, will permit Deleuze's philosophy to issue into a full-blown Spinozist practice, configured as a revolutionary political ethology.

2. To give Virno due credit, in his most recent work he explicitly theorizes this conundrum in terms of a non-Hegelian usage of the categories of *natural history* and *revelation*, taking his cue from the ground-breaking anthropological writings of Ernesto De Martino, as well as from Peirce, Wittgenstein and the unresolved questions in the Foucault–Chomsky debate of 1971 (Virno, 2003: 143–84). I have sought to investigate this issue at greater length in Toscano (2007).

3. To prevent accusations of determinism, it is worth reproducing Lazzarato's crucial proviso: 'It is the social machine which explains the technological machine, not the other way around' (Lazzarato, 1996a: 121). Though Lazzarato is not exactly unequivocal on this matter, it seems that the transformation in the social processes of production, conservation and accumulation of time takes precedence here over the specific operations of the technological *dispositifs*.

4. Though its prominence is somewhat recent, the debate over the politics of vitalism was not absent from the events in which autonomist (rather than strictly workerist) ideas really burst on to the scene: events crystallized in the so-called Movement of '77. Two examples – one subjective, the other objective – may give us an inkling of this genealogy of political vitalism. In an almost instant chronicle of Italy's red decade (1968–1978), specifically focused on the then recent events, a journalist made the following remark about the rise of the so-called 'metropolitan Indians' (*indiani metropolitani*), an eclectic and ludic, if confrontational, tendency on the far left:

> To define all of this, like some have done, as degenerate vitalism [. . .] regression to disengagement, virtual depoliticisation does not seem right. [. . .] Nevertheless, we should say straightaway that if there is something that is profoundly alien to the tradition of the labour movement (but not, Dario Fo argues, to the popular tradition), that thing is without doubt 'creative' vitalism. (Monicelli, 1978: 98–9)

The second example comes from Negri's militant tract 'Proletarians and the State' (Negri, 2005), a key theoretical reference for the political area of 'organized Autonomy' (*Autonomia organizzata*):

> The capitalist process imposes increasingly elevated levels of fluidity – to the point of configuring constant capital as a 'form' (organisation of fluidity, its calculation and control) – in a direct relation to the force and overall power [*potenza*] of the working class (which presents itself on the immediate plane as rigidity that is local, inter-sector, international, etc.). Let us be clear – we are speaking in code, but this does not necessarily mean vague allusions: this

> Bergsonian capital is called Kissinger and the sheiks, MIT and IBM. (Negri, 2005: 132, translation modified)

Between creative vitalism and Bergsonian capitalism, we could say, lie both the wealth and the limitations of Lazzarato's work.

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