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# Reality check: Are We Living In An Immaterial World?

By Steve Wright

Immaterial Labour is seen by (post)Marxists and capitalists alike as the motor of the new economy. Steve Wright recovers Marx's theory of value from critics such as Antonio Negri to ask whether it is as 'immeasurably' productive as is claimed?

A priest once came across a Zen master and, seeking to embarrass him, challenged him as follows: 'Using neither sound nor silence, can you show me what is reality?'

The Zen master punched him in the face.<sup>1</sup>

Continued assertions that, today, we live in a knowledge economy or society raise many questions for reflection. In the next few pages, I want to discuss some aspects of these assertions, especially as they relate to the notion of immaterial labour. This term has developed within the camp of thought that is commonly labelled 'postworkerist', of which the best known exponent is undoubtedly Antonio Negri. While its roots lie in that branch of postwar Italian Marxism known as *operaismo* (workerism), this milieu has rethought and reworked many of the precepts developed during the Italian New Left's heyday of 1968-78. If anything, it was the very defeat of the social subjects with which *operaismo* had identified – first and foremost, the so-called 'mass worker' engaged in the production of consumer durables through repetitive, 'semi-skilled labour' – that led Negri and others to insist that we are embarked upon a new age beyond modernity.<sup>2</sup>

According to this view of the world, a quite different kind of labour is currently either hegemonic amongst those with nothing to sell but their ability to work – or, at the very least, is well on the way towards acquiring such hegemony. Secondly, capital's growing dependence upon this different – *immaterial* – labour has serious implications for the process of self-expanding abstract labour (value) that defines capital as a social relation. While Marx had held that the 'socially-necessary labour-time' associated with their production provided the means by which capital could measure the value of commodities (and so the mass of surplus value that it hoped to realise with their sale), Negri, on the other hand, is of the opinion that in a time of increasingly complex and skilled labour, and of a working day that more and more blurs the boundaries with (and ultimately colonises) the rest of our waking hours, value can no longer be calculated. As he put it a decade ago, in such circumstances the exploitation of labour still continues, but 'outside any economic measure: its economic reality is fixed exclusively in political terms.'<sup>3</sup>

This is pretty esoteric stuff, particularly the arguments over the measurability (or otherwise) of value. Should we care one way or the other? What I hope to show below is that for all their apparent obscurity, these debates matter. That is because they raise questions as to how we understand our immediate context, including how we interpret the possibilities latent within contemporary class composition. Is one sector of class composition likely to set the pace and tone in struggles against capital, or should we look instead towards the emergence of 'strange loops ... odd circuits and strange connections between and among various class sectors' (as Midnight Notes once suggested) as a necessary condition for moving beyond 'the present state of things'?

## Unpacking immaterial labour

Maurizio Lazzarato's discussion of 'Immaterial Labour' was perhaps the first extended treatment of the topic to appear in English. Part of an important anthology of Italian texts published in the mid '90s, Lazzarato's work defined the term immaterial labour as 'labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity.'<sup>4</sup> If the 'classic' forms of this labour were represented in fields like 'audiovisual production, advertising, fashion, the production of software, photography, cultural activities, and so forth', those who perform such work commonly found themselves in highly casualised, precarious and exploited circumstances, as part of what, more recently and in certain Western European radical circles, has come to be called the 'precariat'.<sup>5</sup>

The Taylorist approach to production that confronted the mass worker had decreed that 'you are not paid to think'. With immaterial labour, Lazzarato argued, management's project was different. In fact, it was even more totalitarian than the earlier rigid division between mental and manual labour (ideas and execution), because capitalism seeks to involve even the worker's personality within the production of value.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time this managerial approach carried real risks for capital, Lazzarato believed, since capital's very existence was placed in the hands of a labour force called upon to exercise its creativity through collective endeavours. And unlike a century ago, when a layer of skilled workers likewise stood at the centre of key industries, yet largely cut off from the unorganised 'masses', today 'immaterial labour' could not be understood as the distinctive attribute of one stratum within the workforce. Instead, skilled labour is present (even if only in latent form) amongst broad sectors of the labour market, starting with the young.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* – a book that has come to stand (rightly or wrongly) as the centrepiece of postworkerist thought – built upon and modified Lazzarato's work. Accepting the premise that immaterial labour was now central to capital's survival (and by extension, to projects that aimed at its extinction), Hardt and Negri identified three segments of immaterial labour:

- a) the reshaped instances of industrial production which had embraced communication as their lifeblood;
- b) the 'symbolic analysis and problem solving' undertaken by knowledge workers;
- c) the affective labour found above all within the service sector.<sup>7</sup>

These experiences, it was conceded, could be quite disparate: knowledge workers, for example, were divided between high-end practitioners with considerable control over their working conditions, while others engaged in 'low-value and low-skill jobs of routine symbol manipulation'.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless a common thread did exist between the three elements. As instances of service work, none of them produced a 'material or durable good'. Moreover, since the output was physically intangible as a discrete object, so the labour that produced it could be designated as 'immaterial'.<sup>9</sup>

How can we make sense of such arguments? Doug Henwood, who praised *Empire* for the verve and optimism of its vision, was nonetheless moved to add:

Hardt and Negri are often uncritical and credulous in the face of orthodox propaganda about globalization and immateriality ... They assert that immaterial labour – service work, basically – now prevails over the old-fashioned material kind, but they don't cite any statistics: you'd never expect that far more Americans are truck drivers than are computer professionals. Nor would you have much of an inkling that three billion of us, half the earth's population, live in the rural Third World, where the major occupation remains tilling the soil.<sup>10</sup>

Nick Dyer-Witheford has likewise registered a number of concerns with Hardt and Negri's account of class composition.<sup>11</sup> To his mind, *Empire* glosses over the tensions between the three class fragments it identifies, while ultimately reading immaterial labour only through the lenses of its high-end manifestations. And was all of this really as new as Hardt and Negri intimated? It's not as if 'affective labour', for instance, was anything but fundamental to social reproduction in the past, even if it did go unnoticed – because of its largely gendered composition perhaps – in many social analyses.

Another issue concerns *Empire*'s insistence that 'the cooperative aspect of immaterial labour is not imposed or organised from the outside'.<sup>12</sup> Again, perhaps this is true for some work at the high-end. But does the obligation to ask 'Do you want fries with that?' really represent a break with Fordist work regimes? Or might many of the McJobs that are prevalent in the lower depths of so-called immaterial production be better characterised as 'the Taylorised, deskilled descendants of earlier forms of office' and other service work?<sup>13</sup>

More recently, Hardt and Negri have attempted to address some of their critics in *Multitude*, the 2004 sequel to *Empire*. The first thing to note here is that while immaterial labour remains a central pivot within the book's arguments, it is presented in a rather more cautious and qualified form than before. Indeed, Hardt and Negri are at pains to state that:

- a) 'When we claim that immaterial labour is tending towards the hegemonic position we are not saying that most of the workers in the world today are producing primarily immaterial goods';
- b) 'The labour involved in all immaterial production, we should emphasise, remains material – it involves our bodies and brains as all labour does. What is immaterial is its product.'<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, much like the ascendance of the multitude itself, here the hegemony of immaterial labour as the reference point, or even vanguard, for 'most of the workers in the world today' is flagged as a tendency, albeit one that is inexorable. Towards the end of *Multitude*'s discussion of immaterial labour, Hardt and Negri insist upon what they call a 'reality check' – 'what evidence do we have to substantiate our claim of a hegemony of immaterial labour?'<sup>15</sup> It's the moment we've all been waiting for, and unfortunately the half a page of discussion they proffer is something of a damp squib: an allusion to US Bureau of Statistics figures which indicate that service work is on the rise; the relocation of industrial production 'to subordinate parts of the world', said to signal the privileging of immaterial production at the heart of the Empire; the rising importance of 'immaterial forms of property'; and, finally, the spread of network forms of organisation particular to immaterial labour.<sup>16</sup> Call me old-fashioned, but something more than this is needed in a book of 400 plus pages dedicated to understanding their claims regarding latest manifestation of the proletariat as a revolutionary subject...

womenboat

Image > Anja Kirschner

Their reference to the growth in service sector activity is interesting for a number of reasons. Huws argues that the unrelenting rise in service work within the West might be cast in a different light if the domestic employment so common 100 years ago was factored into the equation.<sup>17</sup> Writing a decade earlier, Sergio Bologna suggested that certain forms of work only came to be designated as 'services' within national statistics *after* they had been outsourced; previously, when they had been performed 'in house', they had counted as 'manufacturing'.<sup>18</sup> Neither author is seeking to deny that important shifts have occurred within the global economy, starting with countries like Britain, Australia, Canada and the United States. Yet they urge caution in how we interpret the changes, and care in the categories used to explain them. Bologna – a one-time collaborator with Negri in a variety of political projects back in the '60s and '70s – is particularly caustic about the notion of immaterial labour,

labelling it a ‘myth’ that more than anything else obscures the lengthening of the working day.<sup>19</sup>

### **Goodbye to value as measure?**

As stated earlier, one of the distinguishing features of postworkerism is the rejection of Marx’s so-called ‘law of value’. George Caffentzis reminds us that Marx himself rarely spoke of such a law, but there is also no doubt of his opinion that, under the rule of capital, the amount of labour time socially necessary to produce commodities ultimately determined their value.<sup>20</sup> In breaking with Marx in this regard, postworkerists draw some of their inspiration instead from a passage in the *Grundrisse* known as the ‘Fragment on Machines’. This envisages a situation, in line with capital’s perennial attempt to free itself from dependence upon labour, where knowledge has become the lifeblood of fixed capital, and the direct input of labour to production is merely incidental. In these circumstances, Marx argues, capital effectively cuts the ground from under its own feet, for ‘As soon as labour in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth, labour time ceases and must cease to be its measure, and hence exchange value [must cease to be the measure] of use value’.<sup>21</sup>

Negri, among others, has insisted for many years, and in a variety of ways, that capital has now reached this stage. Therefore, nothing but sheer domination keeps its rule in place: ‘the logic of capital is no longer functional to development, but is simply command for its own reproduction’.<sup>22</sup> In fact a range of social commentators have evoked the ‘Fragment on Machines’ in recent times – apart from anything else, it has held a certain popularity amongst those (like reactionary futurologist Jeremy Rifkin) who tell us that we live in an increasingly work-free society. It’s a pity, then, that few of these writers follow the logic of Marx’s argument in the *Grundrisse* to its conclusions. For while he indicates that capital does indeed seek ‘to reduce labour time to a minimum’, Marx also reminds us that capital is itself nothing other than accumulated labour time (abstract labour as value).<sup>23</sup> In other words, capital is obliged by its very nature, and for as long as we are stuck with it, to pose ‘labour time ... as sole measure and source of wealth.’

In its efforts to escape from labour, capital attempts a number of things that, each in their own way, fuel arguments that make labour time appear as irrelevant as the measure of capital’s development. Looked at more carefully, however, each can be seen in a somewhat different light. To begin with, capital tries as much as possible to externalise its labour costs: to take a banal example (although not so banal if you are a former bank employee), by encouraging online and teller machine banking and discouraging over-the-counter customer service. As for our own work regimes, many of us find ourselves bringing more and more work home (or on the train, or in the car). More and more of us also seem to be on stand-by, accessible through the net or by phone. Added together, such strategies (which, to add to the messiness of it all, may well intersect with our own individual aspirations for greater flexibility) go a long way to help explain that blurring of the line between the ‘work’ and ‘non work’ components of our day that Negri decries. On the other hand, they also cast that boundary in light other than that of the collapse of labour time as the measure of value, one in which – precisely because the quantity of labour time is crucial to capital’s existence – as much labour as possible comes to be performed in its unpaid form.

Secondly, in seeking to decrease labour costs within individual organisations, capital also reshapes the process through which profits are distributed on a sectoral and global scale. In a number of essays over the past 15 years, George Caffentzis has outlined the idea, first elaborated at some length in the third volume of Marx’s *Capital*, that average rates of profit suck surplus value from labour-intensive sectors towards those with much greater investment in fixed capital:

In order for there to be an average rate of profit throughout the capitalist system, branches of industry that employ very little labour but a lot of machinery must be able to have the right to call on the pool of value that high-labour, low-tech branches create. If there were no such branches or no such right, then the average rate of profit would be so low in the high-tech, low-labour industries that all investment would stop and the system would terminate. Consequently, 'new enclosures' in the countryside must accompany the rise of 'automatic processes' in industry, the computer requires the sweat shop, and the cyborg's existence is premised on the slave.<sup>24</sup>

In this instance, if there *appears* to be no immediate correlation between the value of an individual commodity and the profit that it returns in the market, the answer may well be that there is none: the puzzle can only be solved by examining the sector as a whole, in a sweep that reaches far beyond the horizons of immaterial labour. Here too, it's a matter of which parameters we choose to frame our enquiry.

Thirdly, and following on from above, the division of labour in many organisations, industries and firms has reached the point where it is difficult – and probably pointless – to determine the contribution of an individual employee to the mass of commodities that they help to produce.<sup>25</sup> Again, this can foster the sense that the labour time involved in producing such commodities (whether tangible or not) is irrelevant to the value they contain. Marx, for his part, argued that the central question in making sense of all this was one of perspective:

If we consider the aggregate *worker*, i.e. if we take all the members comprising the workshop together, then we see that their *combined activity* results materially in an *aggregate* product which is at the same time a *quantity of goods*. And here it is quite immaterial whether the job of a particular worker, who is merely a limb of this aggregate worker, is at a greater or smaller distance from the actual manual labour.<sup>26</sup>

In this regard, Ursula Huws' critique of notions of 'the weightless economy' deserves careful attention. Like Doug Henwood in his fierce deconstruction of the 'new economy',<sup>27</sup> Huws draws our attention back not only to the massive infrastructure that underpins 'the knowledge economy', but also to 'the fact that real people with real bodies have contributed real time to the development of these "weightless" commodities.'<sup>28</sup> As for determining the contribution of human labour within the production of immaterial products, Huws argues, that while this might 'be difficult to model, that 'does not render the task impossible'. Or, in David Harvie's words, 'every day the personifications of capital – whether private or state – make judgements regarding value and its measure' in their efforts 'to reinforce the connection between value and work'; He adds:

Hardt and Negri may believe in the 'impossibility of power's calculating and ordering production at a global level', but 'power' hasn't stopped trying and the 'impossibility' of its project derives directly from our own struggles against the reduction of life to measure.<sup>29</sup>

### **Other leads?**

Not long ago, Dr Woo pointed me to a presentation by Brian Holmes entitled 'Continental Drift Or, The Other Side of Neoliberal Globalisation'.<sup>30</sup> In large part, his talk is a reflection upon the arguments in Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, taking advantage of the hindsight provided by five years of events since the book's publication. For Holmes, many of the arguments advanced in *Empire* were important for challenging commonplace assumptions about how to make sense of the 'big picture' of global power relations, forcing a reconsideration of terms such as globalisation and imperialism. But if the book helped in clearing away certain misconceptions, it has not been nearly so successful in supplanting them with more adequate ways of seeing.

'Continental Drift' addresses a host of issues, but Holmes makes three points which have great relevance for our current discussion. First, a privileged focus upon 'immaterial labour' is increasingly unsatisfactory for efforts to understand what is happening within contemporary class composition. Second, global events since the publication of *Empire* cast doubt upon the usefulness of seeing capital's domination as a smooth space that lacks centre(s). And third, more attention has to be paid to the reasons why the world of finance has become such a crucial aspect of capital's rule in our time. Regarding the first point, Holmes offers some similar criticisms to those made by Dyer-Witheford. If the concept of immaterial labour is important for analysing certain kinds of work 'in the so-called tertiary or service sectors of the developed economies', talk of its hegemony can obscure not only 'the global division of labour' and thus 'the precise conditions under which people work and reproduce themselves', but also how 'they conceive their subordination and their possible agency, or their desires for change.' As for the second point, Holmes argues that global capitalism is better understood through the analysis of 'regional blocs' such as the European Union or the increasing engagement between China, Japan, and Southeast Asia. Finally, he believes that a far better understanding is needed of the role of money – and of finance above all – in capital's efforts to maintain its control at both the international and individual level (on this score, see also Loren Goldner's writings on fictitious capital).<sup>31</sup>

The richest explorations of regional blocs that I have encountered are those developed by 'world systems' analysts such as Immanuel Wallerstein, Giovanni Arrighi and Beverly Silver. Interestingly enough, their efforts to explain the emergence of a new cycle of global accumulation with its epicentre in Asia is intimately bound up with their attempt to understand why the expansion of money as capital has come so much to the fore over the past thirty years or so. For them, the predominance of financial expansion is symptomatic of a necessary phase in the cycle of accumulation when, as doubts mount concerning the profitability to be found within production, industries are relocated, unemployed capital and labour pile up, and 'a sharp acceleration of economic polarisation [occurs] both globally and within states'.<sup>32</sup> In recent times, Arrighi (who also penned one of the more considered reviews of *Empire*) has devoted much of his efforts to understanding the waning fortunes of the US state and capital within this process,<sup>33</sup> while Silver has concentrated upon the prospects facing contemporary labour in an age of capital flight.<sup>34</sup> The work of these authors (much of which is on the net) is well worth a look: in part for the challenges they offer to a number of radical orthodoxies, but also for the depth of analysis that they bring to their account of the conflicts between and within the forces of labour and capital today.

There is still a great deal to unravel in the issues touched upon here. All the same, there are some useful leads as to where to go next. For example, the current centrality of money as capital, with all the peculiarities that it entails, may offer another reason why it might appear that socially necessary labour time no longer has any bearing upon capital's existence as value in search of greater value. Speculative ventures – of which the past decade has been rife – seem to make money out of thin air. But in actuality, they do nothing to increase the total pool of value generated by capital. At best, they redistribute what already exists. More uncertainly, they seek to sidestep the sphere of production and instead make money 'from betting on the future exploitation of labour'.<sup>35</sup> In the meantime, debt continues to balloon, from the micro scale of individual and family credit cards, to the macro level of public sector budgets and current account deficits. Whatever the ingenious ways through which the burden of such debt is redistributed, the terms of the wager cannot be forestalled forever. When it is finally called in, things will become very interesting indeed. If nothing else, we may then find out at last whether, as Madonna sang:

The boy with the cold hard cash  
Is always Mister Right, 'cause we are  
Living in a material world.



## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Hobo for telling me this story. Thanks too to Angela Mitropoulos and Nate Holdren for their helpful suggestions with this piece. All mistakes my own, etc.

<sup>2</sup> For the best introduction to postworkerism see the Generation Online website <http://www.generation-online.org>

<sup>3</sup> Negri, A. (1994) 'Oltre la legge di valore', *DeriveApprodi* 5-6, Winter

<sup>4</sup> Lazzarato, M. (1996) 'Immaterial Labour', in P. Virno & M. Hardt (eds.) *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p.133

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.137

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.136

<sup>7</sup> Hardt, M. & Negri, A. (2000) *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p.30

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.292

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.290

<sup>10</sup> Henwood, D. (2003) *After the New Economy*. New York: New Press, pp.184-5

<sup>11</sup> Dyer-Witheford, N. (2005) 'Cyber-Negri: General Intellect and Immaterial Labour', in Murphy, T. & Mustapha, A. (eds.) *Resistance in Practice: The Philosophy of Antonio Negri*. London: Pluto Press, pp.151-55

<sup>12</sup> Hardt & Negri (2000), op. cit., p294

<sup>13</sup> Huws, U. (2003) *The Making of a Cybertariat*. New York: Monthly Review Press, p.138

<sup>14</sup> Hardt, M. & Negri, A. (2004) *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin, p.109

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.114

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.115

<sup>17</sup> Huws, op. cit, p.130

<sup>18</sup> Bologna, S. (1992) 'Problematiche del lavoro autonomo in Italia (I)', *Altreragioni* 1, June, pp.20-1

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, pp.22-4

<sup>20</sup> Caffentzis, G. (2005) 'Immeasurable Value?: An Essay on Marx's Legacy', *The Commoner* 10, Spring/Summer

<sup>21</sup> Marx, K. (1973) *Grundrisse*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, p.705

<sup>22</sup> Negri, (1994), op. cit., 28

<sup>23</sup> Marx, op. cit., 706

<sup>24</sup> Caffentzis, G. (1997) 'Why Machines Cannot Create Value or, Marx's Theory of Machines', in J. Davis, T. Hirschl & M. Stack (eds.) *Cutting Edge: Technology, Information, Capitalism and Social Revolution*. London: Verso

<sup>25</sup> Harvie, D. (2005) 'All Labour is Productive and Unproductive', *The Commoner* 10, Spring/Summer

<sup>26</sup> Marx, K. (1976) 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production', now in *Capital* Vol. I. Harmondsworth: Penguin, quoted in H. Cleaver, H. Cleaver (2001) *Reading Capital Politically*. Second Edition. Antithesis

<sup>27</sup> Henwood, op. cit.

<sup>28</sup> Huws, op. cit., pp.142-3

<sup>29</sup> Harvie, op. cit., pp.151-154

<sup>30</sup> Holmes, B. (2005) 'Continental Drift Or, The Other Side of Neoliberal Globalization', <http://info.interactivist.net/article.pl?sid=05/09/27/131214&mode=nocomment&tid=90>

<sup>31</sup> Goldner, L. (2005) 'China In the Contemporary World Dynamic of Accumulation and Class Struggle', <http://home.earthlink.net/~lrgoldner/china.html>, and L. Goldner (2005) 'Fictitious Capital and the Transition out of Capitalism', <http://home.earthlink.net/%7Elrgoldner/program.html>

<sup>32</sup> Wallerstein, I. (2003) *The Decline of American Power*. New York: The New Press, p.275

<sup>33</sup> Arrighi, G. (2005a) 'Hegemony Unravelling – 1', *New Left Review* 32, March-April, and, Arrighi, G. (2005b) 'Hegemony Unravelling – 2', *New Left Review* 33, May-June

<sup>34</sup> Silver, B. (2002) *Forces of Labour*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

<sup>35</sup> Bonefeld, W. & Holloway, J. (1995) 'Conclusion: Money and Class Struggle', in Bonefeld, W. & Holloway, J. (eds.) *Global Capital, National State, and the Politics of Money*. New York: St. Martin's Press, pp.213-4

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