

## The teeth of the underdog's saw\*

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### 1. Foul imposition alone was the cause<sup>1</sup>

You must raise your right Hand over your right Eye – if there be another Luddite in the Company he will raise his left Hand over his left Eye – then you must raise the forefinger of your right Hand to the right Side of your Mouth – the other will raise the little finger of his left hand to the left Side of his Mouth & will say, What are you? The answer, Determined. He will say, What for? Your answer, Free Liberty.

– Police informer's letter supposedly describing Luddite password system, c.1812<sup>2</sup>

Wherever capitalism exists, 'labour-saving technology' will always mean more work done in less time, so that still more work can be imposed in the time left over. The machine-breakers of the industrial revolution understood this perfectly, although bloody state reprisals forced them to carry out their practical criticism in obscurity. Almost 200 years later Police attention has long since turned elsewhere, yet this basic axiom remains all but unspeakable, a public secret even as the effects of its application permeate social reality to an unprecedented degree. Attention to this apparently counter-intuitive premise will be essential to any attempt to grasp the mediations through which capital strives to integrate lived time into the circuit of value-production.

### 2. Bare life meets bare labour

Simultaneous quantitative and qualitative enclosure of social time may be as old as capitalist science and the factory. Today, however, it has advanced so far as to generate a diffuse, 'low level' manifestation of something corresponding to Giorgio Agamben's political-ontological category 'bare life'.<sup>3</sup> Agamben elaborates this concept with reference to the bodies in Nazi laboratories and concentration camps, and to 'experimental life' and overcoma patients in contemporary hospitals. Most recently he and others have used the term to describe the physical and juridical exposure of the 'unlawful combatants' held at Guantanamo Bay.<sup>4</sup> Alongside these limit cases, it is important to consider emergence of a less 'pure', more commonplace form of 'bare' working life for at least two reasons. Firstly, because 'bare life' is of little interest as a poetic image to be applied haphazardly to disparate phenomena: Agamben proposes it as a precisely situated term in a historical alignment of life, law and exception. Secondly, in order to reiterate that, within this 'biopolitical' conjunction, the concept of bare life is by no means incompatible with an understanding of history in terms of class conflict over value, work and time.

Agamben takes as a starting point the classical Greek distinction between two terms, elided in their single translation into Latin as *'vita'*, and in English as 'life'. The Greeks distinguished *'zoē'*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods) from *'bios'*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a

group.' Both Plato and Aristotle defined 'political', i.e. qualified, linguistic<sup>5</sup> life, susceptible to being called 'good' or 'bad', precisely by its difference from simple material subsistence. In the modern period, however, 'politics' has steadily made the administration of material, 'biological' life (corresponding, despite the latter appellation, to the Greek *zoē*) its object, as Foucault's writing on 'biopolitics' demonstrates. For Agamben it is crucial that this shift not be mistaken for an abrupt, unproblematic welcoming of 'biological life' into the realm of 'politics'. Rather, it bears belated witness to the complex tension in which the two forms of 'life' have always existed interdependently, notwithstanding the Greek philosophers' attempt to separate them. Undifferentiated material or 'bare' life (*zoē* has no plural) is absolutely excluded from the politically, linguistically qualified world, yet it is maintained in a relation to this world by this very fact of its (continuously renewed) expulsion, on which the possibility of political and linguistic qualification is itself founded. However vigorously politics concerns itself with biological 'life', meanwhile, the latter remains alien to it *as the object* of this concern. This undecideably liminal relation of inclusive-exclusion could also be expressed thus: the life designated as 'bare life' is not an original form of simple, natural life, but life actively and continuously alienated from political, linguistic or 'subjective' qualities.

The structure of life-time *occupied* by 'work', in the empirically dilated but logically restricted sense considered here, corresponds to that of 'bare life' in a specific way. This form of lived duration (i.e. activity) is alienated from particular qualities except through the mediation of (qualitatively indifferent) value. In other words, it is maintained in relation to the qualitatively differentiated world solely through the mechanism of its alienation from that world, whose present constitution depends on this inclusive exclusion. Or, alternatively, work-saturated life is alienated from 'subjective' temporality, except in the (continuous) present of its being transformed into object.

An obvious limit to this correlation seems to lie in the contrast between capital's obligation to foster labour-power's survival and reproduction (surplus-labour time is defined precisely by its excess over the labour necessary for this purpose) and the definition of bare life by its essential, unlimited exposure to death. For Agamben biopolitical bare life is identical to that of the *homo sacer* in Roman law, who is ineligible for sacrifice, but may be killed by any citizen at any time. The limit of Foucault's account of biopolitics, he suggests, is that it separates life-administration too sharply from the 'sovereign' decision over life and death, rather than recognizing each as the secret condition of the other. Or, as the SPK/PF(H) states more forcefully: 'The word "biopolitics" (from Greek *bios*, meaning life) turns the facts of the matter upside down. Wherever there is talk about "biopolitics", the real issue on stake is DEATHpolitics, the politics of extermination.'<sup>6</sup>

But employment's autonomy from Death should not be deduced too quickly from the fact that most of the working class is allowed to go on living most of the time. *Because* capital takes charge of the worker's survival, its fostering of life is a virtual decision over his or her death. The blackmail of starvation has always been the most reliable means of ensuring that workers not only accept gratefully but compete amongst themselves for whatever work happens to be offered.

The SPK/PF(H) goes further, making bare life's exposure to death the privileged instance of value-production. The 'neomorts' imagined by W. Gaylin, legally dead but kept 'warm, pulsating and urinating' as living storage for transplantable organs<sup>7</sup> lose the mystique of 'extreme' ethical crisis when considered as force of production. 'Closeness to the means of production continues to determine class antagonism', but 'in quite a different way... The earth with its "raw materials" is no longer the means of production. The new means of production is' human life and its 'body organs (100 billion brain cells each, the most valuable raw material). And the relations of the production are the medical norms, the doctors' norms, memorized and recorded in the computer programs.' In 'a great dialectical reversal... everyone is totally valuable, dead or alive... the process of alienation is being accelerated, concentrated, is made to reinforce itself (*die Entfremdung wird potenziert*). The valuable thing is no longer gold or a diamond, but the "biomatter man...".<sup>8</sup> In this alienated disposal (i.e. *work*, minus residual superstitions about 'utility') of the human body's attributes – organs, cells, thought, language – subject to sovereign medical decision, the bare life of proletarian/patient biomatter converges with 'means of production'. Calling the site of this indistinction 'bare working life' need not mean glibly proclaiming that work equals death. A more urgent problem would be: *how* does the zone of life-death indistinction (or, rather, capital's *indifference* to 'life' and 'death' as attributes of its objects) come to be integrated into the production of value? What does this vanishing point of living and dead labour, where availability and direction of worker/patient 'matter' suffice to bring forth surplus, mean for present and future conflict over labour-time?

The SPK/PF(H) statement dismisses the question, proclaiming that biomatter has superseded abstract labour time as measure of value. However, another conclusion (not necessarily incompatible with SPK/PF(H) practice) might be drawn, if all activity and matter itself are rigorously understood to be modes of duration, in Bergson's sense. Unbeknownst perhaps to Bergson and certainly to most 'Bergsonians', such a conception is coherent with Marx's demonstration that 'means of production' are nothing more than an 'objectified' or 'dead' concentration of formerly-living labour. In these terms, running a car factory and trading in human biomatter are both examples of the appropriation and accumulation of lived duration. The kinds of extraction administered by doctors, security biometrics and lifestyle technicians only penetrates bodies more deeply and more subtly.

To say this is not to conjure away the categorical distinction between labour and living duration in general. While all activity is duration, but not all duration need be work. 'Work' should be understood here as *whatever activity, whatever part of living*

*duration, is transformed into value* in the capitalist social relation. Historical conditions determine which activities, which forms-of-life, undergo this operation: if, until relatively recently, apparently 'inert' biomatter and some elements of sociality, language and thought appeared to be excluded, this was because 'productive forces' (in particular, science as capital's laboratory for class-struggle weapons), had not at that time provided conspicuous opportunities for their valorization.

### 3. Transforming value: the mother(s) of all machines

The production of 'bare' working life, or capital's struggle to occupy lived duration with production of value, takes place simultaneously in material contexts so different that the attempt to apply a single transversal concept immediately seems doubtful. Why belittle the specificity of what's endured or accomplished in a genomics database, a 'people-smuggling' operation, a Coltan mine or a 'basic skills' training centre? The logic that binds these cases, however, is not one of abstract co-incidence, but of reciprocal dependency. The global alignment of different concentrations of labour, capital and struggle is a singularity: change (or stability) at any point affects all others.

In his 1980 essay 'The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse', George Caffentzis uses the concept of *organic composition* to account for the dynamic linking production's apparent antipodes<sup>9</sup>. The organic composition of any one of capital's 'organs' (Caffentzis chooses as examples 'a nuclear plant, an auto plant and a local "greasy spoon" restaurant and bar') is the mixture of living and dead labour (or the proportion of variable to fixed capital) comprising it. The higher the value of the capital investment per worker, the higher the organic composition.

In Caffentzis' essay an exceptional upheaval of capital's functioning both illustrates and is explained by 'an essential aspect of capitalist rule', namely *the interdependence of different levels of organic composition*, or the axiom that profit from investment in capital-intensive, hi-tech industry must always be 'backed up' somewhere by correspondingly intensive, usually low-tech, appropriation of surplus labour. The upheaval in question in this case is the 'energy crisis' of the 1970s, during which the energy price index rose by more than 200 per cent, against a 100 per cent rise in the industrial price index. Caffentzis interprets the crisis as the effect of an upward shift in the composition of investment from manufacturing industries, in particular automobiles, into the energy sector, where the value of machinery exceeds that of labour power exponentially. This shift appears not as a spontaneous innovation on capital's part, but as its response to new forms of class delinquency.

To paraphrase an already schematic account, production based on the 'Keynesian home-factory circuit'<sup>10</sup> more or less contained class struggle in industrially 'advanced' areas for several decades in the mid-20th century, allowing wages and profits to rise simultaneously rather than each at the other's expense. This circuit had depended on two things. First, the rising wage must be bound to proportionately rising productivity. This law, kept in force through trade union and state mediation, imposed discipline on working class demands, while using the same demands to force particular capitalists to 'innovate', to invest in technology extracting more intensive work from a shorter working day ('relative surplus

value'). Second, the value ostensibly 'produced by' waged work done in factories was no less the product of a massive amount of mostly female unwaged labour: 'Housework... from raw to cooked... washing, fucking, cooling tempers, picking up after the bash, lipstick, thermostat, giving birth, kids, teaching them not to shit in the hall, curing the common cold, watching the cancer grow, even lyric poems for your schizophrenia...'. Without such 'reproductive' exertion, the waged workers' labour power might fail to appear at the factory in an exploitable condition. Women's payment for averting that catastrophe came through the husband's factory wage (the so-called 'Oedipal wage'), making the family structure a disciplinary tool, with husbands assuming the administrative burden of imposing work-discipline on wives (and children).

In the struggles of the 1960s and '70s, industrial capital was faced simultaneously with women's mass refusal of the 'natural' structures mediating this indirect but ruthless work-imposition, and with 'unreasonably' direct moves by line workers to appropriate time & income independently of productivity. 'Not only did the struggle in the factories, homes and streets force capital to pay more for factory work; increasingly, capital had to pay, through the state, *directly* for reproduction work that had previously come financed via the male, factory wage. Women and young people would no more "naturally" do what they used to do under the direction of husband and daddy. Thus, though there was an enormous increase of energy generated by the working class during that period, it proved especially resistant to the transformation into work. There was a precipitous drop in the work/energy ratio; this was translated into a "profits crisis" and a subversion of the axioms of Keynesianism.'

Under these conditions, a strategy of evacuating the worst sites of conflict, withdrawing into fortresses of extremely high organic composition, presents obvious 'political' advantages for capital. Perhaps the most immediately evident is the separation of the largest concentrations of capital from explosive concentrations of living labour, leading to the dispersal of the 'nodes of class power accumulated in the factories, mines and streets.' With longer, more complex chains of mediation from the origin of command to the scene of commanded activity, command itself comes to be experienced less as expropriation than as accidental, almost natural constraint, sometimes railed against but in the end adjusted to. This reorganization, says Caffentzis, 'centralizes the *accumulation* process while at the same time it enormously *decentralizes* the *exploitation* process.' Unlike factory workers in heavy industry, 'affective' and 'immaterial' labourers (say, phone sex line operators, or untenured assistant university teachers) don't seem to *see* their labour power as it crystallizes in the commodity and 'vanishes down the line': their activity barely seems 'productive' of a surplus at all, because the surplus is abstracted and absorbed elsewhere in the total social machine.

*The 'interdependence' of capital's heterogeneous organs lies in the necessity of this displacement of abstracted value from one organ to another.* Today, as everyone knows, enormous profits are routinely made in industries where the value of investment in machinery dwarfs that of the labour extracted. In this sense, the amount of surplus-value 'produced' by workers there is strictly speaking 'absolutely

minuscule'. Yet, as Caffentzis demonstrates, this fact by no means spells the end of 'the "law of value" (viz., that prices, profits, costs and the other numerology of accounting are rooted in (and explained by) the work-time gone into the production of commodities and the reproduction of the relevant workers)'. On the contrary, the apparent anomaly reveals the full, majestic scope and flexibility of the law's application. 'As Marx points out, social capital needs an *average rate of profit*, while individual capitalists must be rewarded differentially according to the amount invested in each organ. But each organ has a different amount of constant capital in it.' Profits made out of 'hi-tech' investment are directly dependent on a supplement of low-tech exploitation, inasmuch as *organs of capital with a high capital investment per worker, or organic composition, must be 'rewarded' with surplus value extracted elsewhere and 'transformed' into them.* This value is transferred by means of the divergence between the prices of particular commodities and the values embodied in them. 'Commodity prices in the High industries are always greater than their values. Low industry commodity prices are always below their value. High industries "suck up" the surplus value produced at the bottom of the system through this price structure.'

Thus, Caffentzis insists, raising the price of energy relative to that of other commodities (starting with labour) was the only rational way to move investment into the high sector in the 1970s, because energy commodities are what Piero Sraffa called 'basic commodities', indispensable to all forms of production as well as necessary to social 'reproduction'. Commodified energy traverses the entire field of human activity, ensuring that 'capital is able to exert its magnetic command and extract surplus from every "pore" of the social fabric; every coffee shop, every apartment, every sweat shop must pay for energy costs.' The consequent drop in real wages (i.e. the price of labour relative to other commodities) contributed directly to the imposition of the extra low-tech exploitation required, with the channeling of women's refusal of unwaged work as wives and mothers into a massive expansion of a low-organic composition, low-wage, 'service sector', extracting absolute surplus-value for 'upward' transfer. (In this sense, capital can be said to have responded to the anti-Oedipal revolt by displacing a large quantity of female labour from the domestic 'reproduction' of male labour-power to the indirect nurturing of machinery in capital-intensive 'high' industry.)

In fact, as Caffentzis notes, divergence of particular prices from values is nothing new to the late 20th century; it has always been essential to capital. 'Values (worktime) must be *transformed* into prices, and this transformation is *never* one-to-one'. All prices express a portion of the social totality of value; they are meaningless except in relation to it. However, there is no reason why the price of a *particular* commodity, the portion *commanded through it*, should coincide with the value embodied in it (the cost of reproducing it in terms of socially necessary labour time). In order to understand this, it must be remembered that the magnitude of value of a commodity is not the same thing as the actual amount of labour time 'incorporated' into it by the workers who produced it. As Harry Cleaver warns, this would be to lose sight of the immediately *social character of value*, 'to see it instead as some metaphysical substance that is

magically injected into the product by the worker's touch.<sup>11</sup> Labour time is value, but only when it is mediated via the social totality of abstract labour into a virtual, 'average' form, common to all commodities. A price does not simply reflect a given commodity's cost in terms of this 'average' value. Rather, the price announces the share of the totality of value laid claim to through the commodity by the contending subjects (classes and competing particular interests within classes) involved in its production.<sup>12</sup>

In practice, the possible divergence between prices and values increases as the social and technological organization of production gets more elaborate. Caffentzis refers to the claim that particular industries, particular jobs etc, have certain things naturally 'due' them, as the 'real illusion' of 'mineness', 'the deepest pettiness in the Maya of the system'. This illusion tends to break down as the number, complexity and obscurity of transactions 'transforming' value increases, so that the density of social interaction expressed in each commodity, the scope of qualitative difference between lived realities covered by the calculus of 'average' labour-time, outstrips social accountants' wildest algorithmic dreams. Thus, when 'the hand of capital' appears completely independent of 'its mouth and its asshole', when exploitation and accumulation seem to occur in parallel universes, the 'law of value' that binds them together not only stubbornly survives, but finds its purest expression.

#### 4. Ornamental anguish

Every lucid capitalist knows that the idea of self-sufficient bastions of 100 per cent organic composition is absurd. Only in the form of abstract labour can the surplus that congeals into capital reliably be supplied, and the supply must be abstracted from real, endured activity. The technologies of abundance envisioned by bourgeois futurists would poison the social organism they take for granted; capital would implode on attaining the refinement necessary to perpetuate itself independently of living labour. Instead it must stake everything on the more modest hope for an indefinitely sustainable synthesis of dead and 'barely' alive labour, approximating the Edenic solipsism of 'self-reproducing automata' as best it can in relative security, by draining the living of its wasteful, selfish qualities, leaving little more than the bare fact of its labour power. For the most part this 'draining' is undertaken as it always has been: by extending and intensifying the working day so that work-time all but exhausts life-time, begrudging a wretched minimum to 'reproduction'. In a few privileged (and feverishly theorized) instances, meanwhile, 'draining' has come to mean absorbing formerly heterogeneous social duration into the circuit of value.

A sufficient supply of 'barely living' labour demands not only what Agamben calls the expropriation of pure 'communicability' or 'language itself'<sup>13</sup>, but also the full deployment of these capacities as means of expropriation in every sense, including the most crudely material. If the history of the industrial-thermodynamic period is that of the creation of ubiquitous 'need' for the commodified forms of energy, the last 30 years of accelerated capitalist development, or class struggle, have engendered a comparably 'basic need' for commodities of 'communication' and 'information'. As with energy, it is not simply a matter of putting a price on what is most common and must naturally be consumed: *information and*

*communication commodities are 'producer goods' that qualitatively determine the global organization of work.* They include both physically tangible technology and so-called expertise – the mastery of valorized linguistic and habitual (or, in strictly Bergsonian terms, subjective) forms.

The presence everywhere of 'need' for certain commodities does not, of course, mean they are equally present wherever they are needed. On the contrary, the claim of capital's various organs to a share of value depends on their *existing* share of command over the commodities universally necessary for 'competitive' production. In practice, this power of price-command distributes qualities and quantities of human duration, channeling flows of unexpert, low-wage, time-intensive labour as required.

Capitalist development elevated thermodynamic energy commodities to basic status relatively slowly: a global productive system so complex that no organ could survive disconnected from the combustible fuel supply represents two centuries' accumulation, pushed forward by successive explosions of class and intra-class conflict. The modalities of need for basic energy commodities are by no means eternal, but they seem slow to change, locked with 200 years into hulks of heavy infrastructural investment. The supplementary<sup>14</sup> 'basic need' for communication and information commodities, however, is perpetually renewed, transformed, *inflated*, at a rate hitherto associated only with the most ephemeral consumer demand. This 'need' is able to mutate so fast because it manifests not in the implacable hunger and thirst of factories, but abstractly, in linguistic norms and technical specifications as condensed expressions of complex social imperatives. Inclusion in the circuit of value (and hence survival itself) depends everywhere on mastery of communication conventions (which are often but not always inseparable from particular pieces of technology). In a sense, of course, this has always been so, although a vast bulk of labour has traditionally required workers to understand little more than coercion by violence or starvation. In the last half century, however, the depth and complexity of dependence have increased, as linguistic and technical codes carry capital's imperatives directly into the subtlest fibres of subjective duration.

Mastery of, or capacity to conform to, communication standards is a special commodity of command and obedience, promising its possessor (whether a single waged worker or a multinational conglomerate) access to specific status in production, and thus the right to consume unspecified (though quantitatively limited) use values. These commodities may be spatially and temporally diffuse, but they are no less tightly wired into the mechanism of price for that reason. They are complex assemblages, effective 'possession' of which can only be maintained provisionally, by paying and paying again. (Consider, for example, the assemblage of technological hard- and software, financial instruments and linguistic operations employed by an 'old economy' company like Shell, directly and through various specialist proxies, in its attempt to acquire and maintain what is becoming an indispensable 'communication commodity': a marketing profile attuned to consumers' taste for the ethics of 'ecology'.) Certainly, no single communication or information commodity can lay claim to 'basic', transversally necessary status, any more than 'energy' should be

conceived as a single commodity, a homogeneous whole. Rather, a dense mesh of dependence-relations between particular commodities stretches so far as to engulf an entire social horizon. While *command* of communication standards is highly concentrated, dependence on them is radically democratized.

Institutional anxiety to bridge a presumed 'digital divide', fulsomely expressed at the recent UN-sponsored World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), contains a kernel of pragmatic rationality in a global economy where information and communication commodities appear as 'basically' necessary as those of energy. Neither state and supra-state actors' commitment nor the private sector's missionary zeal need be dismissed as ethical posturing if *what* they propose providing universally is clearly understood. Universal 'access to' a commodity does not mean its 'availability' will affect the lives of everyone encountering it the same way. As Harry Cleaver writes of thermodynamic energy, the same commodity may have different use-values for labour and for capital<sup>15</sup>. The quantitative concept of a 'digital divide' obscures something the information missionaries cannot fail to be aware of, namely that a subject's possible interaction with a new technology, *how* s/he commands and/or is commanded by it, is determined by the ensemble of the material conditions of his or her existence. (An obvious analogy could be sought in the drastically different experiences of 'access to' the power loom in early 19th-century England among, say, large and small textile capitalists, artisan weavers, 'unskilled' female factory hands and itinerant Irish labourers, not to speak of all the social strata involved in the Indian textile industry.) In this sense, keepers of the faith that 'there are no "have-nots", only "have-laters"' not only display breathtaking obliviousness to the fact of death (other people's at least), they pretend not to notice the way the meaning of the verb 'to have' varies according to its object, as in the difference between 'having' a diamond ring and 'having' cancer. Regardless of whether or not new PCs fall from the sky into rapturous African villages, what becomes universal as 'digital divides' disappear is dependence of one kind or another on communication commodities, integration into a productive system structured by them, and certainly not the command of and through these commodities enjoyed by a few 'expert' subjects in 'advanced' centres.

Capital's ability to administer 'inequality' by making the same commodities universally 'available' is evident both on the level of technological specification itself and on that of the juridical superstructure regulating it. 'Information wants to be free', sing the missionaries, but 'rhizomatic' information flows themselves continuously reproduce and distribute the form of private ownership. In national and trans-national law, neo-enlightenment schemes for informatic democracy like those aired at WSIS are inextricably entangled with mechanisms restricting access to the privileged forms of *relation* to information commodities. Thus the expansionist intellectual property laws that have accompanied the 'informatization' of society, most significantly the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) annex to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trades (GATTs), have effectively reversed the notional role of IP legislation from the promotion to the limitation of techno-scientific and cultural production and experiment. Intellectual property now serves primarily to fix relations between concentrations of

high-organic composition capital (primarily though not exclusively in post-industrial states) on one hand and 'third worlds' (old and new) on the other. Post-industrial states compel others to observe laws disallowing practices likely to offer 'competitive advantage'. Copyright monopolies concentrate ownership, push up costs of entry into markets, and keep independent actors from functioning effectively. Strict control over invention and information limits workers to a role as factors in the system of global production still dominated by concentrations of capital, i.e. of the power to command, built up in the 'North' in the course of its Imperial centuries.

A model of production mediated by communication commodities greatly increases the range and flexibility of the assemblages of capital and labour possible under the law of value. Hence the importance of remembering that value-transformation, or the administration of 'inequality', is by no means primarily a question of relations between 'rich' and 'poor' *places*, as some discourses on 'globalization' imply. Writing in 1980, Caffentzis presented the high/low-organic composition circuit in terms of the heavily capitalized 'energy/information' sector and the sweat-intensive service job, two poles that necessarily co-exist within the same metropolis. A little more than 20 years later, the technological management of social life is so far deterritorialized that the high & low poles of organic composition are almost indistinguishably intermingled in space, without generating anything like a Fordist-Keynesian 'average', in which concentrations of fixed capital would depend on correspondingly powerful concentrations of labour subjectivity. In today's ineffably subtle admixture of technological investment and time-intensive waged and unwaged labour, 'service work' (with all its classical characteristics – precariousness, atomization, a disproportionately female & young workforce, etc) is extracted at the very epicentres of concentrated capital. The massive quantity of value 'transferred' here may seem to cover only a minimal physical distance (from the bodies of the workers to that of constant capital), but still it crosses the vast gulf between duration and accumulation, quality and quantity, the living and the dead.

The stereotypical example of this technologically saturated form of service work is the call centre. Research by the German workers' inquiry group Kolinko<sup>16</sup> shows how automatic smoothness of communication, an essential component of the commodities traded by businesses such as telecoms companies or banks, becomes dependent at this nexus on highly intensive *and* extensive transformation of subjective duration into work. '[T]he team leader-hyena comes sneaking up from behind, smiling charmingly, and the stats from yesterday's work slide onto your keyboard: amount of calls, duration of each single call, total idle-time, total time in 'ready' mode, total time in 'after-call work' mode, time used between ringing and picking up... The control takes place on two levels: they collect all data to be able to quantify your work achievements. The software is timing all work-steps and delivers nice stats at any chosen moment. The other level of control tackles the 'quality' of your work. They sit next to you and annoy you with test calls (so-called 'mystery calls') in order to come back at you afterwards by going on about your mistakes, your stammering, the missing smile in your voice...' Minimal as the cost of this labour may be

compared to the value embedded in its technological prosthetics, call centre work is in no way peripheral to the enterprises it serves. It is central in that the whole process would lose its 'automatic' essence without it; moreover, the workers are literally plugged into the constant capital. Kolinko found that 'almost all' call centres use the Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) machine, which 'determines the rhythm of work based on incoming calls and serves as a supreme instrument of control. It stores all the data: breaks, post call processing, 'missed' calls, average duration of call, number of internal and external calls...'

With the spread of dependence on communication commodities, capital has found new ways to extract large volumes of unwaged labour *within* waged jobs<sup>17</sup>. The example of call centres is no more than a conveniently simple case study: the drastically increased imposition of 'free' work within wage-labour is the most distinctive characteristic of the 'immaterial' and 'affective' forms of exploitation. Unwaged labour, in this particular sense, takes place where such 'intangible assets' as workers' capacities for social co-operation and linguistic improvisation – 'communicativity itself', says Agamben – contribute to production of potentially exchangeable use-values. This can be thought of as happening on two superimposed levels; in both cases this work is unwaged in that the wage does not vary according to volume of it extracted<sup>18</sup>.

First, social activity contributes directly and decisively to the production of the particular commodities traded by the employing enterprise. Thus, as already noted, automatic procedural smoothness in many parts of the communication, technology and logistical sectors rests at a critical point on call centre workers' ability to 'adapt flexibly' – on an individual and a collective basis – to unpredictable combinations of system imperatives and callers' 'communicative capabilities or incapacities'<sup>19</sup>. Such applications of linguistic and social 'virtuosity' tend to fall outside wage claims: Kolinko found that 'communication with other workers is not seen as "work". But it is a necessary precondition of the work process...'

Second, unwaged social duration (on as well as off the job) contributes 'indirectly' to the totality of exchangeable value in fostering workers' subjective adaptation to the basic needs of the commodity-form. This is not only a matter of the grassroots improvisation of consumer desire so well documented by the cultural studies corpus: the stakes of enclosure are perhaps nowhere as evident as where sociality and language are experienced and cultivated as 'social and communication skills'. Here as in the Keynesian-Oedipal family home, exploitable labour power itself, the most basic commodity of all, appears to be produced 'naturally' because it is never directly paid for.

The extraction of communicative labour as the unwaged 'double' of work time may be the one attribute common to millions of hours of precarious, intensively commanded 'immaterial' & 'affective' work on one hand and the few 'creative' and technically expert activities most often invoked as emblematic of these sectors on the other. What Caffentzis observed of nuclear power plant employees is obviously also true of 'symbolic-analytical service' professionals engaged in certain 'problem-solving, problem-identifying, and

strategic brokering activities'<sup>20</sup>: the amount of surplus labour they perform as part of their jobs is 'absolutely miniscule' in proportion to the profits that accrue. In one sense, the rhetoric of 'human resources' can be taken literally (and the SPK/PF(H)'s stark equation between bare human life and 'means of production' is borne out): 'expert' bodies function less as labour power than as part of constant capital, organic hardware storing valorized expertise. These elite occupations appear ornamental: they 'produce' less surplus value than is invested in them. Yet 'productivity' should not be understood too narrowly. A fraction of the value that bankrolls the 'experts' status as human capital could even be said to be extracted from the unwaged element of their own activity. Just like any other unwaged 'social reproduction', their ornamental 'worktime' contributes indirectly to the expansion of the total social 'bottom line'. Once again, the contribution comes from the re/production of sociality and language as 'interpersonal and communication skills', the cultivation of a subjectivity serviceable to value's 'direct' increase.

The 'form'<sup>21</sup> of some of capital's most charmed lives also seems 'ornamental' in its fragility, its vertiginous dependence on particular commodities: communications infrastructure, prescription drugs, asset management, local and global policing, etc. Perhaps these subjects' anguish is most acutely exacerbated by the inevitable isolation of the struggle to preserve such private blessings. The 'expert' can entrust salvation to one commodity alone: his or her own social/communicative/technical virtuosity. Yet the rugged individualist's virtuosity consists of nothing other than perpetual receptivity and adaptation to capital's enigmatically shifting protocols. The discovery that 'flexibility' means life-time saturated by command may contain ornamental professionals' only chance of solidarity with the numerically overwhelming 'remainder' of the world's proletariat. The latter, of course, are also forced into continuous self-adaptation, but for the sake of physical rather than 'formal' survival; for a little more time to 'invest' in a future claim to the fat of capital, whether that is imagined as something to be 'earned' individually or collectively seized.

## 5. Disaster monitoring constellation

In his essay *Bergson: time-crystallizing machines*<sup>22</sup> Maurizio Lazzarato refers to 'video' and 'digital technologies' as machines whose function is to *conserve time*. This characterization should be taken absolutely literally, on two levels. As Lazzarato acknowledges, these technologies' 'time-conserving' action cannot be considered independently of their historical emergence as products of late 20th century capital. Therefore, in an almost truistic sense, they participate in the abstraction or 'conservation' and accumulation of labour time, especially inasmuch as digital communication commodities currently constitute an important category of producer goods.

Less immediately evident, perhaps, is what Caffentzis identifies as the crucial role of information and communication commodities in 'conserving' the captured, abstracted form of time – i.e. capital – in the sense of protecting it, securing it from the damage it's exposed to by the need to incorporate the irreducibly antagonistic or 'entropic' force of living labour. 'Capital's contradiction is that the very agents that create the "fuck up" possess the energies it needs.

Only we are in perpetual motion: eternally energetic, crafty, obedient, cowardly, insolent, revolting, but always in a motion that is the only source of work, development, *surplus*<sup>23</sup>. The entropic time of living labour overflows every apparatus that ever captured it, making 'security' a perpetually receding goal like 'health', requiring endless upgrading of the machines that 'conserve time' in its dead form.

In 1980, the role of information technology in conserving capital, locking down time, lay primarily in monitoring and analysing work processes, distinguishing efficient elements from entropic ones to be disposed of. 'While the feminine service worker is to provide the emotional surplus labor necessary for accumulation in the high tech sector, the computer programmer is to be the eternally vigilant Charon, identifying the stable worker, the stable situation, the stable machine: separating the quick from the dead.'<sup>24</sup> As Kolinko's experience in call centres demonstrated, this quantifying function is far from obsolete. However, the current deployment of time-conserving communication-machines seeks to go beyond isolating productive work from entropic surges of subjectivity *after the fact*: it aspires to create spontaneously stable workers, a minimally-entropic, 'barely'-living labour subjectivity.

Caffentzis articulated the 'secret thought' haunting boardrooms now and immemorially: '*Time is on their side. Time is them.*' With every failure to flee this apocalyptic truth or screen it out, capital has been forced closer to confronting it, and has more and more frantically sought harmless ways to integrate its consequences. Writing in *Mute*, Sebastian Olma realistically assesses the advanced stage this fatal process has reached: 'The biopolitical machinery of unmediated appropriation is already successfully operating on the virtual flows of social creativity... capital has well understood time as highly productive virtuality, as qualitative duration'<sup>25</sup>. Perhaps for the first time, we live within a global socio-technical apparatus of accumulation consistently attuned to the fact that it cannot be sure of excluding any part of labour's heterogeneous life, but only enclose it and preserve it within the enclosure. Of course this kind of enclosure has always been the essence of accumulation. But enclosure no longer simply means regulation through the 'disciplinary' division of unruly social time. Only with capital's realization that 'there is no alternative', no final way to expel toxic temporal waste, has so much been staked on the enclosure's ability to determine the qualitative 'nature' of the life, the 'subjective' duration enclosed.

For Kolinko the physical and procedural partitioning of call centre work reveals capitalists' need to 'disguise' their reliance on potentially subversive co-operation between workers. But by reducing the partitions' function to 'disguise', the critique obscures the *positive* power of this particular enclosure to *constitute* norms of co-operation precisely corresponding to the needs of the enterprise. If Kolinko momentarily seem to forget the difference between potential and actual subversion here, Hardt and Negri build a towering monument to the same error in *Empire*. In a notorious passage, they suggest that the 'immanence' of co-operation to immaterial labour means labour power is no longer variable capital at all. Labour floats free of its former dependence on capital because its 'cooperative powers' allow it to valorize itself<sup>26</sup>. 'Brains and bodies

still need others to produce value<sup>27</sup> but the others they need are not necessarily provided by capital and its capacities to orchestrate production.' Thus immaterial labour's 'creative energies' tend towards 'a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism'. This account is exemplary in its failure to contemplate the possibility that the 'Multitude's' own deepest desire, the most intimate 'linguistic, communicational and affective' habits of its 'cooperative interactivity', might be determined by its genesis and subsistence within capital, so that it could only extricate itself, if at all, at the cost of irreversible disfigurement.

The capitalism 'of control' is not, as Hardt and Negri imagine it, an unproductive, almost ephemeral parasitism. Rather, it seeks to occupy all life through the synthesis of a working class subjectivity, a multitude's duration, always already conditioned by the requirements of value. Everywhere and on an unprecedented scale, this means the quantitative flooding of time with work: the reduction of 'life' measured in years, days, seconds to the 'bare' obligation to labour and survive. In a supplementary sense, capital occupies and determines duration by laying 'bare' to the imperatives (the protocol) of production the most 'ineffably' qualitative lived continuity, the most intractable social singularities, the most 'abstract' biomass.

The conditioning of subjective duration *as* work brings with it a special kind of blackmail. When life is *pre-emptively* transformed into labour, the worker cannot withhold that labour without mutilating his or her subjectivity. For this reason, a Marxist proverb acquires a new urgency: *the proletariat is the class that strives for its own abolition*. What that means has never been clearer than in a situation where subjectivity itself appears as labour power that cannot be withdrawn, but only sabotaged by *deforming* itself. (In fact the reflex of self-deformation may be older than its explicit proposition as tactic or the historical conjuncture that demands it. Once again, E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* suggests a precedent, describing how the centuries-old popular self-consciousness of the 1790s – that of the 'Free-Born-Englishman' of Church & King mobs and the Gordon Riots – tore itself to pieces in the first decades of the 19th century, in order to emerge recomposed in a formidable industrial proletariat<sup>28</sup>.) Another Marxist proverb says that theory follows from praxis, not the other way round; this one applies here too. The social subject-object of deformation cannot rationally plan the counter-adaptation that would wreck 'self' for valorizing. If it hopes to turn illness into a weapon against capitalist 'evolution' it must live by its defective wits.

coda

We are things, say like a quantum of action  
Defined product of energy and time, now  
In these words which rhyme now how song's exaction  
Forces abstraction to turn from equated  
Values to labor we have approximated.

– Louis Zukofsky, A 9

## Notes

This text is one of the many heads of a Hydraic and continuing collaboration with J.J. King. Material on intellectual property and WSIS is based on research by Alan Toner.

1. *General Ludd's Triumph*, machine breakers' anthem, quoted in E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968
2. Also quoted by Thompson
3. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press
4. Agamben, *Stato d'eccezione*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2002
5. '...human politics is distinguished from that of other living beings in that it is founded, through a supplement of politicity [politicità] tied to language, on a community not simply of the pleasant and the painful but of the good and the evil and the just and the unjust.' *Homo Sacer*, p.3
6. SPK/PF(H): *Stop the medical doctors' iatrobionitic warfare against all people! Make front against it!* [http://www.spkpfh.de/Against\\_Iatrobionitic\\_warfare.htm](http://www.spkpfh.de/Against_Iatrobionitic_warfare.htm)
7. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p.164
8. SPK/PF(H): *The Communist Manifesto for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium* <http://www.spkpfh.de/GENOZIDengl.html>
9. George Caffentzis, 'The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse', in *Midnight Oil*, New York, Autonomedia, 1992
10. Although Keynes' name has come to function has shorthand for it, the home-factory circuit did not suddenly appear with the so-called 'Keynesian' model of economic planning, (introduced in the USA with the New Deal and expanded after the war), as Caffentzis is careful to note. 'Keynesianism' represented an advanced phase of the alignment of wage and productivity, 'productive' and 'reproductive' labour first formulated by economics in terms of 'Marginal Theory' 'at the very time of the explosion and slaughter of the Paris Commune', and applied with spectacular success by Henry Ford.
11. Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*, Brighton, Harvester Press, 1979
12. Contrary to a claim made by *Aufheben*, Caffentzis is not ascribing the ability to determine prices at will to a unified, all-powerful capitalist cabal. Rather it is through the mediation of price that the 'anarchy' of intra-capitalist competition produces something like a 'strategy'. Marx wrote: 'The vulgar economist has not the faintest idea that the actual everyday exchange relations cannot be directly identical with the magnitudes of value. The essence of bourgeois society consists precisely in this, that *a priori* there is no conscious social regulation of production. The rational and naturally necessary asserts itself only as a blindly working average.' ('Letter to Kugelmann, July 11 1868). It should be noted here that the history of the last century has also established beyond question that 'price' in this sense functions as something like metonym for all paper or abstract claims, backed by state violence, on real future value, *however* that is to be embodied. Other examples, such as stocks, rent and debt, perhaps express more dramatically the logic *always present in the money-form*: namely the 'looting' of the future by *existing* accumulations of wealth (dead labour). For an account of this arrangement see Loren Goldner, *Once Again, on Fictitious Capital: Further Reply to Aufheben and Other Critics*. <http://home.earthlink.net/~lrgoldner/onceagain.html>
13. Agamben, *Mezzi Senza Fine*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1996.
14. It must be insisted emphatically that the emerging 'basic' status of information and communication commodities in no way supersedes that of energy commodities, but rather complements it.
15. Thanks to Laura L. Sullivan for drawing attention to this advertising trope.
16. Kolinko, *Hotlines*, Oberhausen, 2002. [www.prol-position.net](http://www.prol-position.net)
17. 'Waged jobs' in this sense also includes freelance and self-employed labour, piecework etc: it refers to activity explicitly recognized by capital as work through payment in money.
18. At least, workers cannot choose to appropriate more income by intensifying co-operation. However, 'social' labour's opacity to quantitative measure may be useful to management in downward wage blackmail, as in the appraisal of individually competing workers. Bosses are free to measure qualitative factors according to subjective interests – ('the smile is missing from your voice' etc). 'Performance-based' pay schemes establish on a systematic basis this 'sovereign decision' exercised by employers over the work-wage relation.
19. Kolinko also discovered that the introduction of voice simulation computers, intended to reduce the cost and volatility of human labour, depended on intensive harvesting of existing workers' knowledge of vocal and eccentricities (speech defects, local dialects etc.)
20. Clinton's labour secretary Robert Reich, cited with telling approval by Michael Hardt & Toni Negri in *Empire*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2000
21. Agamben, *Mezzi Senza Fine*
22. Maurizio Lazzarato, 'Bergson: time crystallizing machines', apparently not forthcoming.
23. Or, as Loren Goldner (op. cit.) writes: 'Underneath everything else, the fundamental contradiction of capital is its need to mix with living labor to expand as capital, and the simultaneous tendency to expel living labor power from the production process.' Benedict Seymour (in a privately circulated annotation to Goldner's text, 2004) has formulated this contradiction in the terminology of Agamben's *Homo Sacer*: 'Its [i.e. capital's] contradiction is to expel what it must include, and to include by expulsion – the 'sovereign ban' of capitalist valorization.' (For a further rotation of this formula, see section 2 above.)
24. With some success, management of the destructive potential of proletarian 'entropy' has recently been devolved onto the proletariat itself in the form of responsibility for controlling 'risk'. Thus, for example, class antagonism may be displaced into fear of imminent 'environmental' apocalypse, to be resisted by individual renunciation (less consumption) and ultimately by more work.
25. Sebastian Olma, 'Physics Unbound', *Mute* 27, p.27
26. As Hardt and Negri unhesitatingly go on to state, 'valorization' means 'producing value'. They are less forthright in recalling that 'value' equals use value *plus exchange value*, so that 'valorization', 'self-' or otherwise, must always mean reproducing the commodity form.
27. It might also be suggested the fact of its not having done so already implies either that labour cannot be able to brush off parasitic capital quite so easily, or, alternatively, if the Multitude is really so self-sufficient, that it must have chosen freely to leave things the way they are.
28. Thompson pp. 9-939

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**Matthew Hyland subsists in East London, where his hotel room is a trespass order.**