

The General Illumination which Bathes all the Colours: Class Composition and Cognitive Capitalism for Dummies

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Abstract

For many years, the concept of cognitive capitalism has been an important subject for elaboration, discussions, and polemics. In this essay, we will not summarize the various theoretical details of the debate; instead, we will try to clarify the political nature of the concept and examine what is at stake from a theoretical point of view. Then, we will give some provisional and explorative answers to some of the central questions on cognitive capitalism: What does it mean? In what sense is it useful as a tool for the struggles? What kinds of class composition and antagonist subjectivity are embodied in this concept?

First, we will explain why cognitive labour does not identify a particular sector of the class composition. We will use the term ‘cognitization’ (becoming cognitive of labour) to elaborate on the process of redetermination of the whole class composition.

Secondly, we will summarize a genealogy of cognitive capitalism and its peculiarities. Based on our readings, it is not a stage of development, but the site of a new battlefield in the ongoing class struggle.

Thirdly, we will point out the tension underlying cognitive capitalism, i.e., the tension between cooperation and capture, autonomy and subordination.

Finally, we will point out the problem of re-thinking a central category from *operaismo*: the class composition.

Following this pathway, we can underline the main theoretical and political question: What are the points of rupture in cognitive capitalism?

Keywords: Cognitive capitalism, cognitive labour, *operaismo*, class composition, cooperation, capture, autonomy, revolution.

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For many years, the concept of cognitive capitalism has been an important subject for elaboration, discussions, and polemics. In the essay we¹ will not summarize the various theoretical details of the debate (see Vercellone 2006 or Roggero 2011); instead, we will try to clarify the political nature of the concept and examine what is at stake from a theoretical point of view. Then, we will give some provisional and explorative answers to some of the central questions on cognitive capitalism: What does it mean? In what sense is it useful as a tool for the struggle? What kinds of class composition and antagonist subjectivity are embodied in this concept?

It can be argued that a university is a good place to discuss cognitive capitalism but this is not dependent on its centrality as an institution of education. In fact, knowledge production is becoming more and more widespread via the ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ networks of social cooperation, and it is becoming less and less the monopoly of any institution. In addition, we cannot say that a university is a good place for discussion, because it is not. Instead, in the ‘global university’ (Ross 2009) we can observe the process of primitive accumulation of knowledge, the central commodity in contemporary capitalism. In the field of social cooperation, concepts are transformed into keywords in order for them to be appropriated and built into intellectual enclosures. After this, researchers who refer to those concepts pay a fee (at least a symbolic one, i.e., a reference) to the ‘owners’ of these concepts. Furthermore, in the academic writings, the collective research (the ‘we’) becomes individual property (the ‘I’). This is how the political economy of knowledge works.

The purpose of this short introduction is to make clear what the term ‘cognitive capitalism’ entails. This thesis rises from the struggles and political attempts to destroy the capitalist system. Mario Tronti gave a terrific explanation half a century ago:

We do not start from concepts. The starting point is the reality historically determined by the capitalist social-economic formation. For the Marxist, the object of the analysis is the capitalism. But the *concept* of capitalism presents itself at the same time as the concrete *historical reality* of the capitalist society. The object of study is at the same time the reality to fight. From here, from this positive contradiction, the *happy drama* of the Marxist theorist, who wants to destroy the object of its own study; even, he has to study the object just to destroy it: the object of his analysis is his own enemy. And this is the historically specific character of the Marxist theory: *its own tendentious objectivity*. This is the material situation of the worker, who has to fight against what he produces, and wants to eliminate the conditions of its own work, and to smash the social relation of its own production. (Tronti 1963: XXXV)

It is only by starting from the struggles and coming back to the struggles that the concepts can be embodied and become expressions of the creative *potentia* of the multitude. This means that there is no theoretical practice outside the political practice. From a revolutionary point of view, there is no production of knowledge

that is not immanent to the living labour composition and its historical determination. This is a methodological problem, but with an immediately political point.

On this basis, we will only try to give some stenographic and introductive answers to the aforementioned questions, and to various points of criticism of the concepts that have been made over recent years. There is a central point in this debate: the notion of *class composition*. *Operaisti* elaborated the distinction between *technical composition*, based on the capitalistic articulation and hierarchization of the workforce, and the relation between workers and machines, and *political composition*, the constitution of class as an autonomous subject. *Operaismo* forged these categories in a very particular context, marked by the space-time coordinates of the Taylorist factory and Fordist society, and consequently a specific figure of the worker, i.e., the ‘mass worker’. When we talk of the deep changes in the forms of labour and production (summarized in the concept of cognitive capitalism), it is clear that we have to rethink the concept of class composition. In which ways? This is the question that we will try to pose at the end of this article: we have not yet precise answers, but our task is at least to provide some possible basis for this collective research.

1.

We will start by clarifying what we mean by cognitive capitalism and cognitive labour. These terms do not refer to a new stage in the historical process that is supposedly marching towards the transition beyond capital, its *Aufhebung* (in Hegel’s terms, the dialectical contradiction of overcoming and at the same time preserving). Therefore, cognitive capitalism is not a new stage in the historical process of moving beyond capitalism nor is it the final goal in overcoming capitalism despite the fact that some readings of contemporary capitalism risk arguing this (see for example Gorz 2003). Cognitive labour does not identify a sector of the technical composition of labour such as the ‘knowledge workers’ or the ‘creative class’, or the forms of labour in specific areas of the world. The cognitivization (becoming cognitive) of labour is a global process which implies a new quality of the capital relation, and the specific forms of contemporary exploitation and class antagonism. In this process, knowledge is not only a source (raw material) but also a means of production, and its mode of production can qualify the forms of accumulation and the contemporary class composition at a global level. To use Marx’s words in *Einleitung*: ‘In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it’ (Marx 1993: 107). Nowadays the cognitivization of labour is this ‘general illumination’, that explains all the specific elements, new or old, that are determined or re-determined by that process of exploitation and struggle.

Various scholars contest the idea of the passage to cognitive capitalism because there are still factory workers. On the one hand, talking of cognitive capitalism does not mean asserting the disappearance of factories and factory workers. The point is that factory work itself is changing in this new 'general illumination', when knowledge-as-commodity becomes central in the new paradigm of accumulation. That is to say, factory work is changing its role in the capitalist hierarchy of accumulation, and it is changing its forms of organization (the Taylorist technical division is no longer the dominant one). In fact, the underlying idea of this kind of analysis often risks arguing for the existence of a 'normal' work and a normal form of exploitation, coinciding with the industrial exploitation. On the other hand, to contest the passage to cognitive capitalism in this way means negating the possibility of a periodization, i.e., the historical determination of struggles and capitalist development. In the same way, one has to negate the passage to industrial capitalism because the artisanal or the agriculture workers do not disappear. In brief, talking of cognitive capitalism and labour does not entail imagining a unique form of work, but it points out the hegemonic lines of accumulation and exploitation. Of course, there is a co-presence of different times and forms of work, but they get their specific common physiognomy in the general illumination of the cognitization process.

There have been some scholars talking of 'plural capitals' (Chalcraft 2005), which is a suggestive but quite problematic concept. In fact, there are no plural capitals, because there is only one capital, i.e., a total (not at all totalitarian) social relationship that subordinates and hierarchizes the specific and peculiar relationships. We can say that talking of 'plural capitals' does not make sense, because the capital is constitutively plural in that it feeds on heterogeneous forms of labour and production. To be stenographic, capital is a mode of production that designates value to different forms of production. Moreover, the concept of plural capitals risks negating the possibility of a unification of the struggles within and against the capitalist social relationship, that is, *ab origine*, a global tendency.

2.

Capital is a social relation, or rather an antagonistic social relation. Many critics of the *operaismo* and *post-operaismo* revolutionary practices fail to see this antagonistic social relation. They see only a subject of the history, i.e., the capital; since it has the power, you cannot start from the living labour point of view. From this perspective, there are no struggles or autonomy, but only total dominium and heteronomy. This is a sociological rather than political point of view; it is the point of view of power, and not of the working class. It is the image of totality, and we know that this is pure ideology.

So, what is the genealogy of cognitive capitalism? Didier Lebert and Carlo Vercellone trace it through the following three processes that determined the crisis in the Fordist regime of regulation: '1. The critique of the scientific management

of work [...]; 2. The expansion of welfare guarantees and collective services [...]; 3. The constitution of a diffuse intellectuality as a result of the “democratization of teaching” and of the elevation of the general standard of education’ (Lebert & Vercellone 2006: 29-30). Therefore, the transition to cognitive capitalism is not a result of the simple necessities of development that are internal to the system. On the contrary, it is the result of a fierce period of struggle that threw Fordism into crisis. Again, Lebert and Vercellone explain the conflictual relationship between the two terms that compose the concept of cognitive capitalism:

1) The term capitalism designates the permanence, within the metamorphosis, of the fundamental variables of the capitalist system: in particular, the guiding role of profit and of the wage relation, or more precisely the different forms of dependent labor from which surplus value is extracted; 2) the cognitive attribute brings into relief the new nature of labor, of the sources of valorization and the property structure upon which is founded the accumulation process and the contradictions which this mutation generates. From this perspective, what matters is to grasp the historicity of the knowledge phenomenon, identifying its polyhedral dimension and the contradictions that characterize its dynamic. (Lebert & Vercellone 2006: 22)

To assert the ontological primacy of class struggle over capital development means claiming the irreducible partiality of the point of view. It also means pointing out the character of the specific capitalist social relation: the working class is the *potentia* that wants to exercise power; capital, on the other hand, is the power that exploits *potentia*. The former is the master and the latter is the slave. However, there is no possible dialectical *Aufhebung* between them. In fact, the dialectic, which also necessitates the universal subject, dies in the irreducible partiality of the workers’ struggle. There is only the actuality of autonomy and the possibility of break and separation.

Cognitive capitalism is a reaction to the global working class insurgency of the 1960s and ‘70s. It is a reaction to the struggle and sabotage, the flight from the chains of the factory and waged labour. Does this mean that we have won and communism exists despite the appearance of a capitalist society? This is another current critical view of *operaista* and *post-operaista* thinking, the incurable optimism of the will. The problem is that often this critique risks losing sight of the Marxian concept of capital as a social relation, that is to say, the antagonist ambivalence of the processes of capitalist development. In fact, there is a constitutive duplicity in all Marxian concepts; they are also placed in a relation of force determined by resistance and command, cooperation and exploitation, living labour and dead labour. These abstractions are historically situated and embodied in specific collective subjects and power relations. In a famous chapter of *Capital* (Chapter 10: ‘The working day’; see also James 2009), Marx (1977) explains how the struggles over the length of the working day force the masters to innovate and restructure the productive organization. There is never a unilateral development. There is always the class struggle that moves the capitalist social relation.

The problem now is to strip this method of any possibility of a historicist reading, i.e., the idea of an objective arrow of historical development. We have underlined the idea that heterogeneity is a peculiarity of global capital, and a constitutive aspect of the contemporary living labour composition. However, within the capital's heterogeneity there are some hegemonic lines of force that recompose the process of accumulation and command, i.e., it is, following on from Marx, what we term the 'general illumination' or *tendency*. This is not a deterministic outcome of the history and its so-called 'stage of development', but a dependent variable of the class struggle. Indeed, we stated above that cognitive capitalism is not the last stage of capitalism; we should now say that the tendency is a set of differences becoming based on the present composition of forces. Therefore, its elements are continuously composed, decomposed and recomposed by a concatenation of points of continuity or discontinuity. Therefore, the tendency is to identify a field of non-progressivist possibilities within the framework of the heterogeneity of the composition of living labour and the differential temporalities that capital captures and translates in the empty and homogeneous language of value. The struggles and the relation of the forces decide the prevalence of one or another. The line of tendency, thus, does not indicate a plane of irenic or objective development; on the contrary, it is the identification of a battlefield and its antagonistic forces.

3.

The concept of *capture* needs some explanation. Our hypothesis is that capital is less and less able to organize the cycle of productive cooperation 'upstream,' and increasingly it has to capture the value 'downstream'. In fact, when knowledge becomes central as a source and means of production, there is a transformation in the forms of accumulation, and there is a change in the relationship between living labour and dead labour. Of course, according to Marx, knowledge was crucial too, but due to its objectification in capital, it became completely separated from the worker. The incorporation of the knowledge of living labour into the automatized system of machines entailed the subtraction of labour's capacity or its 'know-how' and expertise (Marx 1993, see the famous 'Fragment on machine'). Today the classical relationship between living labour and dead labour tends to become a relationship between *living knowledge* and *dead knowledge* (Roggero 2011). In other words, the category of living knowledge refers not only to the central role of science and knowledge in the productive process but also to their immediate socialization and incorporation in living labour. Romano Alquati (1976) had already anticipated this process in the 1970s, thereby prefiguring the rise of a new intellectual proletariat. On the one hand, the cognitive worker is reduced to the condition of the productive worker, and, on the other hand, he tends to become *partially* autonomous from the automatized system of machines. This leads to a situation in which the general intellect is no longer objectified in dead labour (at least in a

stable temporal process). That is, knowledge can no longer be completely transferred to the machines and separated from the worker. The previous process of objectification is now overturned as the worker incorporates many of the aspects of fixed capital. He incessantly produces and reproduces, vivifies and regenerates the machine. At the same time, a permanent excess of social and living knowledge continuously escapes dead labour/knowledge.

In this framework, there is a necessity to reduce living labour/knowledge to abstract labour/knowledge, that is, the imperative to measure work despite the objective crisis of the law of value (see Negri 1979, and Vercellone 2010), forces capital to impose completely artificial units of time. To use Marx's words, it is a '*question de vie et de mort*'. The law of value does not disappear, but it becomes an immediately naked measure of exploitation, that is, a law of surplus value. It has to *capture* the value of the production of subjectivity. As Read argues, this is 'in both senses of the genitive: the constitution of subjectivity, of a particular subjective comportment (a working class which is both skilled and docile), and in turn the productive power of subjectivity, its capacity to produce wealth' (Read 2003: 102).

Therefore, the political problem is not to explain the truth of Marx's words, but to re-think Marx's analysis in the context of the contemporary transformations of labour and production. Indeed, in Marx's time, the general intellect was really fixed in the automatic system of machines. Since the 1960s and 1970s, there has been a process of subjectivation of general intellect, and a continuous re-appropriation of the dead labour from the living labour.

4.

The traditional Marxists urge us to pay attention because cooperation is not something that takes place autonomously. In fact, there is a long tradition of what Rosa Luxemburg (2003) called the 'Marxism of the universities chairs', that is to say, the attempt to reduce the reading of Marx to philology, disembodied from the struggle and the class compositions. Nowadays, as noted at the beginning of this essay, this tradition takes the form of enclosures of knowledge (the Marxist school, the French thought, the Italian theory, etc.), makes their claim as private property and earning rent. On the contrary, they see exclusively the heteronomy of living labour and the autonomy of capital, the only and invincible master of history. However, these critics miss the target. When we say that there is a *partial* autonomy of living labour/knowledge (i.e., the autonomy within and against the capital social relation), we are stressing the changing of the socialization of the forms of production. In the collective study and co-research in the Olivetti industry at the beginning of the 1960s, Romano Alquati (1975) pointed out the emergence of a new definition of unproductive labour: this category is no longer useful from a technical point of view, but it is from a political one. Unproductive labour is a function of control and means of capturing of living labour. In fact, facing the

socialization of production, the company has to multiply its hierarchical roles, they are useless in the organization of the productive cycle but they have the political goal of creating divisions and segmentation within the working class. This is the autonomy of living labour. Of course, it is relative (the capital command does not disappear), but it reveals the consequence of overthrowing the process of accumulation and the loss of ability to organize the productive cycle. Mainly, it reveals how production is *becoming common* of production; production is currently entirely based on the process of social cooperation that capital has to capture but is less and less able to organize.

When we talk of the common we are not referring to a natural good; it is always a matter of production. More precisely, it is concerned with substance and that which is at stake in production relations. On the other hand, talking of the common does not mean celebrating the incipient coming liberation. In fact, the common has a double status (Roggero 2010). It is both the form of production and the source of new social relations; it is what living labour/knowledge produces and what capital exploits. This tension between autonomy and subordination, between self-valorisation and expropriation, draws the lines of the battlefield of class antagonism nowadays. In other words, suggesting that production is becoming common does not coincide with an objective process of liberation from the exploitation because the capture of the common is the new form of capitalist exploitation of living labour. To use these categories in a provisional way, we could say that there is partial autonomy in the technical composition of class, but the problem of the autonomy of the political composition of class remains. Moreover, this autonomy cannot exist in a strong sense without destruction of the capitalist apparatuses of capture.

Now, when there is a deep changing of the relation between constant and variable capital, a sort of partial re-appropriation of the machine from the workers, and knowledge becomes central in the socialization of production, is it still possible to use the concepts of technical and political class composition? Our answer is: yes, but we have to revise them. The embodiment of a growing part of constant capital in the living labour/knowledge certainly does not mean a deterministic line of liberation. It produces terrific ambiguous effects, for which the sufferance goes with the *potentia*; the pathologies created by the internalization of the command continuously segment the social cooperation. In a certain way, based on the centrality of subjectivity in the contemporary forms of production and capture/accumulation, the political composition comes before the technical composition. To put it another way, the technical composition sustains the mechanisms of segmentation of the workforce and its differential inclusion in the labour market within a context in which the general intellect is embodied in the cooperation of living labour/knowledge.

The goal is to understand how the stratification within the technical class composition becomes a *dispositif* of the production of subjectivity. From this point of

view, concepts such as ‘knowledge workers’ or ‘creative class’ are not only sociological, but also political. They aim to produce a process of identification of the workers in competitive sectors, and a segmentation of a common composition. The main problem that needs to be addressed is how collective processes of dis-identification from this sectorial belonging, and identification in a common composition can be created. We also need to re-think the relationship between technical and political class composition, or the production of a common composition against the capitalist segmentation and exploitation. This is not a matter of consciousness, but a material process of the struggle.

5.

Finally, the question that we must ask is what is the material base of the break with capital, that is to say, the revolution? The base is precisely the materiality of class composition, in the tension between autonomous subjectivation and capitalist command. The problems of the revolutionary organization are entirely within this antagonistic tension. The base is the relation between forces of production and relations of production. This is not, as some critics have suggested, a re-edition of a dogmatic Marxist argument confusing historical materialism with historical determinism. To accuse the Marxian concept of modes of production of being a form of ‘economism’ means abandoning the materiality of the social relations. It means having an ‘economistic’ interpretation of the concept of production. According to this point of view, the capital is no more a social relation, but only one among the many actors that society must control. We must ask where the non-capitalist relations come from if they do not germinate within and against the social relationship. Is it from a metaphysical event, from the abstract consciousness of the intellectual, or from a secret reason of history? We are completely in the reign of utopia. Nevertheless, the flipside of utopia is the image of a totalitarian capital; there is no autonomy but only heteronomy, there is no resistance but only command. *Adieu* revolution!

In fact, production is radically changing and is more and more based on, and innervated by, the common. As underlined above, the relation between forces of production and relations of production is a non-dialectical one: it is a relation between *potentia* of the common and capture, a relation of force without the possibility of synthesis and mediation. This is the material basis of the actuality of revolution. This will not happen following the spontaneous line of the forces of production, but it depends of the capacity of organizations and the living labour’s struggle. It will not be a peaceful development of class composition, but the collective break from the capital apparatuses of capture. It is a problem of class re-composition and rupture with the command.

At this stage, the two critical stances of my analysis should be quite clear. On one side, there is a reading of global capital through the re-propositioning of the dialectic between the centre and the periphery. The former shows the image of its

own future, according to a progressive line of development. The second stance is a critique of this historicist idea and considers heterogeneity as a constitutive element of the contemporary living labour composition. Coming from this critical approach, there is a risk of concluding that what we call a *common composition* is impossible. In this way, talking of heterogeneity becomes a trap. This risk coincides with the simple description of the class stratification, that is to say, a sociology of the capitalist segmentation. Therefore, the differences are certainly irreducible to homogeneity, but they can find the space of their *potentia* and freedom in their common composition. There is, thus, a radical difference between universalism and the common; the common is the base and the product of differences and multiplicity, it is never the starting point as imaged by the Enlightenment and socialist traditions. It remains, however, what is always at stake in the struggle.

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Notes

- ¹ In the text I use the plural first person because the contents of the article are part of a collective research and common theoretical and political debate. This collective research has precise names: UniNomade (www.uninomade.org), Commonware (www.commonware.org), and edu-factory (www.edu-factory.org). This is just a methodological and political point: the production of knowledge is never individual, but is always immanent to a process of cooperation.

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