

Autonomism, Class Composition, and Cultural Studies

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The publication of Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000) brought new attention to a previously ignored current of revolutionary theory and practice, namely that of autonomist Marxism, or more broadly, autonomism. While the work of Hardt and Negri has received quite a deal of attention within cultural studies research and writing since then, this has tended to neglect the vast wealth of engaged theoretical reflection contained within the history of autonomist thought and organizing, reducing it to the work of a few recent works by particular authors. For instance, the concept of class composition, or the ways in which class formations emerge from social contestation, and the primacy and determining role of social resistance, shares much in common with various strains of thought in cultural studies. Similarly, workers' inquiry as a method of investigating into the conditions of working class life to rethinking its ongoing subversive political potentiality, functions in similar ways to how early cultural studies shifted to an analysis of the everyday based on renewing and deepening radical politics.

Autonomist political analysis involves something very much like a form of cultural studies, exploring how the grounds for radical politics are constantly shifting in response to how capital and the state utilize social insurgencies and movements against themselves. How do cultural studies and autonomism converge and diverge over matters of power, the state, and subjectivity? These panels will explore the future behind our backs, focusing on how autonomist politics and analysis can inform cultural analysis and vice versa.

1. Antagonism & the Plurality of Social Struggles

Participants: Ben Trott, Tazio Mueller, Fiona Jeffries, Chris Hurl

2. Rekombinant Culture & Distributed Subjectivities

Participants: Marco Deseriis, Annette Wachholtz-Maguire, John Duda, Dalton Anthony Jones

3. Autonomism & Cognitive Labor

Participants: Verity Burgmann, Brian Brown, Michael Goddard

Stephen Shukaitis is an editor at Autonomedia and lecturer at the University of Essex. He is the author of *Imaginal Machines: Autonomy & Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Life* (Autonomedia, 2009) and editor (with Erika Biddle and David Graeber) of *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations // Collective Theorization* (AK Press, 2007). His research focuses on the emergence of collective imagination in social movements and the changing compositions of cultural and artistic labor.

Jack Z. Bratich is assistant professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Rutgers University. He is the author of *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture* (2008) and co-editor of *Foucault, Cultural Studies and Governmentality* (2003), and has written articles that apply autonomist thought to such topics as audience studies, reality TV, secession, and popular secrecy.

Panel 1. Antagonism & the Plurality of Social Struggles

Facilitator: Stephen Shukaitis

Autonomist politics places a strong emphasis on the primary and determining role of forms of social resistance. But this is not sufficient in itself for political analysis, which must understand both the emergence of struggles and the environments and political terrains in which they emerge. How are these terrains transformed by forms of social movement? How are affective, cultural and media environments altered? And what possibilities for new forms of social relations and compositions of common life are created by the plurality of struggles in motion? This panel explores past and contemporary autonomous strategies that rethink key concepts and practices composing social antagonism.

Defining the (Post-)Operaist Approach: Naming its Four Primary Elements

Ben Trott, Freie Universität Berlin

The final decades of the last Century saw the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of Western social democracy, neoliberalism's decomposition of the mass trade unions of Fordism/Keynesianism, and the defeat or co-optation of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements the world over. A context was provided in which a movement – the 'counter-globalisation movement' – emerged mostly outside and often against the various institutions of the established left. One important current within this 'movement of movements' has often been referred to as 'autonomist'. Although characterised by a relatively broad range of theoretical referents – from anarchism and marxism to social ecology and '*Zapatismo*' – foremost among them has been the primarily Italian tradition of heretic Marxism known as (post-)Operaismo.

This paper draws on this heterogeneous tradition – from its emergence in the pages of the journals *Quaderni Rossi* and *Classe Operaia* and the tumultuous struggles of 1960s and '70s Italy, to the more recent theorisation of post-Fordist production and resistance in the works of Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno and others – in order to set out its defining characteristics. The objective is not an unconditional defence of the tradition, but a critical reading that teases out four constituent elements to be offered up as tools for an analysis of contemporary capitalism and its overcoming.

The first is the **Copernican inversion of perspective**, positing labour rather than capital as the active pole within the capital relation. Whereas Dialectical Materialism (Diamat) posited the inevitable unfolding of communism out of capitalism, (post-)Operaismo represents a form of Open Marxism which sees capitalist development as dependent on indeterminate human activity and struggle. Despite this indeterminacy, labour remains the primary pole within an internal relation between two opposites, with capital nothing other than congealed labour-power turned against itself.

The second is the analysis of **class composition, both technical and political**. Whilst technical composition describes something similar to what Marx calls 'the organic composition of capital' (the ratio between constant and variable capital) which partly determines the organisation of surplus extraction and the labour process at a particular point in space and time; political composition describes the organisational forms ('official' or otherwise) deployed by workers struggling ('consciously' or otherwise) against this process.

The third element is the notion of **cycles of struggle** in which the class passes through a movement of *composition, decomposition* and *recomposition*. For instance, the decomposition of the class of professional workers, such as those who made up the Russian soviets and German workers' councils of the early-19th Century – removing their power through de-skilling and reducing the intensity of labour struggles through wage increases and the introduction of the welfare state – led to a new (technical) composition of the class which in turn (politically) expressed itself in the struggles of the mass worker.

The fourth and final element is that of **autonomy**, defined (perhaps controversially) not as an ethico-political commitment to independence from political parties and trade unions, but as the struggle of the working class for its autonomy from the capital relation (*as well as* the autonomy of various areas of this class from one another) – which would, ultimately, be synonymous with its self-abolition. Whilst, on the basis of an historical-political assessment of a given conjuncture, adherents of (post-) *Operaismo* – from Mario Tronti and Romano Alquati, to Antonio Negri and the militants of Tute Bianche – at times argued for an exodus from the institutions of the left, at others each have re-entered or sought co-operation. In defining this final element, (post-) *Operaismo* will be disentangled from the traditions with which it only partly overlaps but has often been equated: anarchism, autonomous Marxism, and social movement ‘autonomism.’

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Another capitalism is possible? The Green New Deal, post-*Operaismo* and the biocrisis

Dr. Tazio Mueller, independent researcher, Berlin

The neoliberal phase of global capitalism seems to have come to an end, of sorts: the coincidence of an economic, a political and an energy crisis is producing a situation where neoliberal problem-solving strategies are no longer effective, and where there is a frantic search for ways out of the crisis that do not fundamentally threaten *business as usual*. Arguably, the only project that promises to deal with all these crises, as well as another one – the climate crisis -, in a way that would once again pull off the age-old trick of ‘changing everything so that everything can stay the same is that for a “green recovery”, or even more interestingly, for a *Green New Deal*. Social movements are now faced with a dilemma: will this new “green capitalism” really *solve* socio-ecological problems, or is it merely an exercise in ideological ‘greenwashing’?

This paper, a blend of theoretical analysis and strategic considerations, seeks to give a third answer to the question. It is inspired by *Operaist* and *post-Operaist* approaches, but also tries to address the glaring absence of the ‘ecological question’ in both the theoretical as well as the movement practices of *Operaismo* – an absence all too glaringly apparent in Hardt and Negri’s injunction to “push through Empire to come out the other side”, with all the socio-ecological devastation that this would entail. The central claims are as follows: firstly, that the ‘climate crisis’ is itself only an aspect of a wider socio-ecological ‘biocrisis’, which is in turn the result of an antagonism between the requirements of the expanded reproduction of capital, and those of a humanity living in relatively stable eco-social systems. Secondly, drawing on Negri’s early analyses of Fordism-Keynesianism, I suggest that a green-capitalist project would neither ignore nor resolve this antagonism, but rather *internalise* it and place it as the engine at the heart of a capitalist renovation project that would, at least temporarily, solve the political, economic and energy crises. Point of departure for this line of argument is the role that, in Negri’s analysis, the class antagonism played as the driving engine of the ‘golden age of capital’, and the thought is developed through a comparison between the 1930s *New Deal* and recent proposals for a *Green New Deal*. Thirdly, I will sketch the outlines of what an antagonistic, anticapitalist politics of movement might look like in such a constellation, focusing on the (potential) role of “climate justice” as a set of directional demands.

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Reading and Refusing Cultures of Fear/Terror with Autonomist Feminism

Fiona Jeffries, CUNY Center for Place, Culture and Politics

Drawing on the insights of Autonomist thought and practice, this paper will propose a renovation to contemporary debates on the pervasive “culture of fear”, one that has grown alongside spiraling planetary war and global capitalist crisis. The prevalence and problem of socio-

cultural fear has been the subject of much scholarly and popular debate in recent years. The extent to which it has come to be considered as a political problem, and not simply a psychological affliction, is evident in the burgeoning “fear studies” scholarship which sees fear as a dominant social relation of neoliberal capitalism (i.e. Glassner, 1999; Davis, 2001; Massumi, 2005; Bauman, 2007; Zizek, 2008). Other scholars take this even further, arguing that fear is the dominant emotion of modernity itself (Bourke, 2005; Zournazi, 2007). While this diverse body of critical research is indispensable for understanding the contemporary cultural diffusion and political uses of fear, evicted from these analyses is any sense of contestation to the allegedly fear-drenched social landscape of globalization. Instead, we find an overwhelming, unidirectional emphasis on the activities and aspirations of the fear mongers. As a result, the productive role of social struggle in the production, circulation and refusal of the contemporary authoritarian “culture of fear” have gone largely unrecognized.

Autonomist thought has analyzed capitalism's continuous struggle to liberate itself from the insubordination of those upon whom it exploits and inescapably relies. What immediately surfaces through this line of thought is capitalism's historic reliance on direct physical violence and the cultural elaboration of fear. From an Autonomist perspective, this political use of fear is capital's response to social struggles for autonomy. This “from below” approach that broadly characterizes the Autonomist tradition provides an alternative method for considering the question of fear politically. It also arguably has significant implications for both Cultural Studies and emancipatory social practices.

Through the lens of Autonomist feminism, this paper will propose an approach to the cultural study of fear that takes social struggle as its ontological starting point. More specifically, my discussion will draw on Silvia Federici's study of the role of the Witch Hunts in the production of capitalist modernity in order to consider how the cultural elaboration of fear may be a technology of enclosure and site of struggle in neoliberal capitalism. I will discuss how the political uses of fear at the turn of the 21st century can be read, as Federici reads the Witch Hunts, as expressions of ruling class fear of struggles for autonomy. To that end, I will explore some of the ways in which fear is the focus of diverse and dispersed forms of political confrontation to the increasingly weaponized and enclosed spaces of everyday life in the neoliberal metropolis.

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Thinking in the Conjuncture: Between Hegemonic and Post-hegemonic Strategies

Chris Hurl, Institute of Political Economy, Carleton University

Recent studies have come to challenge the concept of hegemony as a means of explaining the contemporary social order (Beasley-Murray, 2003; Lash, 2007; Arditì, 2007; Thoburn, 2007). Against the neo-Gramscian argument that there is no necessary relation between base and superstructure, an expanded understanding of production is put forward, which comes to be constituted through a heterogeneous assemblage of social, technical, economic and affective relations. While I am sympathetic to this position, I argue that it is predicated on an interpretation of hegemony that is largely derived from the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) who tend to overemphasize subjective contingency while failing to account for the relations of force through which strategic action is ‘spontaneously’ delimited. Against this position, I will examine how Gramsci sought to *think in the conjuncture*, looking to the prevailing relations of force in order to bring out the immanent possibilities for strategic action. Drawing from Althusser (1999) and Negri (1999), I will argue that Gramsci was, first and foremost, a theorist of beginnings. This is not a general beginning advanced by some overarching historical force; nor is it a theory of origins retroactively attributing a sense of finality to the historical process. Gramsci maintains no interest in the nature of things in general, but rather remains focused on the singularity of the case. This is not

simply a process of enumerating existing determinations, but hinges on the creation of new problems, advancing a line of action that is capable of taking on the force of circumstances. This emphasis on the relations of force, I argue, is derived from a notion of production that is in many ways congruent with the posthegemonic project.

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Panel 2. Rekombinant Culture & Distributed Subjectivities

Facilitator: Jack Z. Bratich

Social creativity and the recomposition of social struggles do not occur within particular bounded spheres or workplaces, but are general processes of recombination taking place all through out the social field. Forms of rekombinant culture make possible the emergence of new and unanticipated forms of collective subjects, shifting between aesthetic, political, economic and cultural domains. This panel will explore the shifting and moving between different planes of creativity and subjectification.

Com-dividuals: An Excursus on Collective Pseudonyms, Multiple-Use Names, and Distributed Subjectivities

Marco Deseriis, NYU Department of Media, Culture, and Communication

In one of the sub-plots of his best-selling science fiction novel *Hyperion*, Dan Simmons tells the story of the Bikura, a population formed of seventy immortal genderless idiots. Nested in a remote village on a mountain top, the Bikura have been regenerated over 800 years by a ‘cruciform’ parasite encrusted into their chest, which store their information in digital format and retrieves it to reconstruct each body after its death. Thus, a resurrected Bikura retains its memory, but information is progressively lost and, after a number of cycles, the individual becomes sexless and retarded.

The story of the Bikura is an extreme and dystopian example of what I would term “a con-dividual,” a form of distributed subjectivity which is born from the cooperation and commixture of several individuals, who give up their individual identity to take on a collective one. The paper traces the emergence of the con-dividual to modern times by briefly reviewing the formation of nineteenth-century folk heroes of the English working classes such as Captain Swing and Ned Ludd. It moves then to the twentieth century by selecting a few examples from artistic avant-gardes such as dada (Raoul Hausman’s Jesus Christ Ltd.) and the mail art network (Monty Cantsin). It finally focuses on a number of contemporary cases including fictitious film director Alan Smithee, the multiple-use name Luther Blissett, and the open source fashion brands YoMango! and Serpica Naro, in which collective pseudonyms are adopted by immaterial workers both as organizing tools and to increase their cultural capital.

On a theoretical level, this genealogy of the “con-dividual” is traced by combining autonomist political analysis with other theories of subjectivation. In social movements, the use of collective pseudonyms is on the one hand a byproduct of a contingent antagonistic relationship whereby social subjects are on the one hand negatively constituted from without, i.e. in opposition to an external power, which flattens their internal differences and sets in motion a unifying process. This is particularly visible in Luddism where General Ludd stands as an empty signifier [Laclau, 1996] for the anticapitalist and anti-government demands of different segments of the English working classes.

On the other hand, though, the invention and adoption of a collective pseudonym by different components of the working class expresses their ability to positively recompose their previous fragmentation through a linguistically productive effort. This is particularly evident if we shift the focus from the analysis of collective pseudonyms under industrial capitalism (when the name functions mostly as an organizing tool) to the use of collective pseudonyms and multiple-use

names under late capitalism, when a certain cultural and social capital is attached to proper names. “Alan Smithee,” a collective pseudonym employed since 1968 by Hollywood film directors whose work has been openly manipulated by a production company, bears witness to this evolution.

But while Smithee still absolves a negative function, namely subtracting one’s birth name to an inappropriate exposure, since the late 1970s a new set of collective pseudonyms emerge whose function is to decouple the subject from the individual (thus undermining bourgeois notions of individuality and authorship) while symbolizing the process of self-valorization and “becoming common” of immaterial labor.

However, because the internet accelerates the decoupling of the subject from an individual body, but also of the body from a physical context in which he/she can look for a micropolitical recomposition of daily life, the con-dividuals of the new millennium face unprecedented challenges. In fact, if subjectivity is already, in Foucauldian terms, a discursive site for the negotiation of differences, a site in a state of constant flux characterized by multiplicity, contingency, and contradiction, *a distributed subjectivity or “con-dividual” seeks a composition, perhaps unstable and fleeting, of those contradictions and multiplicities that split the subject on the inside (his/her multiple selves) on the outside, (as a “-dividual” subjected to what Deleuze called the “control society”) and from the need of having a physical body.*

Thus in order to manifest itself in the public sphere without disintegrating a distributed subjectivity needs to establish a set of negotiable rules that allows it to define its own domain, be rooted, at least occasionally, in a physical context, and maintain a minimal internal coherency. The last part of the paper analyzes the role that collective narratives and participatory storytelling play in drafting such rules, and in becoming a possible cohesive factor for the autonomous constitution of immaterial labor.

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Hip Hop Autonomia

Annette Wachholtz-Maguire

I wish to investigate to what extent Autonomist conceptual tools can be deployed towards gaining an accurate appreciation of both the emergence of hip hop culture and its uses. I am interested in the birth of the culture itself, at a certain historical moment during the mid-to late 1970’s in the South Bronx of New York. I understand this birth as a moment of ‘self-valorisation’ of a particular section of the working class. A moment in the cycle of class composition-decomposition-recomposition. A moment of refusal of abject and extremely adverse living conditions; refusal of being relegated to a ‘surplus population’ condemned to near-total unemployment, government neglect and social invisibility. Here I draw on theoretical work connected to the social struggles known as *autonomia* or the ‘area of Autonomy’ in 1970’s Italy. Alongside the refusal of restructuring articulated in action by the mass factory occupations, there arose a series of struggles theorised as the ‘refusal of work.’ This encompassed both a rejection of factory discipline, and a desire for the direct satisfaction of needs and the development of new collective desires. There was a huge expansion in squatted housing and the generalising of the tactic of self-reducing prices.

While there is evidence of such strategies being practiced in New York at a similar time, I am specifically interested in hip hop as ‘self-valorisation’ in the sense of forming an exuberant shared subjectivity. A refusal of the dictates of material deprivation and its concomitant subjective misery. A direct satisfaction of the need and right to create culture that speaks to a shared experience “from below”, without waiting for official recognition or support. Projects of self-valorisation can be understood as experiments in new ways of living, so that although they are in no way pure and often recomposed by capital through strategies of commodification, incorporation or outright repression

they push forward boundaries and provide the basis of future experiments in self-valorisation (Cleaver, 1992).

The new social subjects that came to the fore in autnomia in the late 70's - the precarious workers, the students, the marginalised, those without the traditional point of collectivity in the mass factories - had to find new expressions of their collectivity. They had to recompose in denial of their material conditions (Negri, 1979). For instance, it wasn't just students that occupied the universities but also those who had nowhere else to physically assemble. In a similar way, hip hop opened a social space for the expression of collectivity. This space has now become a global one, subject to all the commodifying processes that reign under capitalism.

However, as a historical moment of 'collective genius', it is an example of the power of specific sections of the hierarchically divided working class to act collectively on their own behalf, autonomously of other sections of the class. This resonates with the theoretical work within the Autonomist perspective by CLR James looking at the black struggle in the USA, and the self-reduction movement and later Wages for Housework campaigns in 1970's Italy, and the work of Selma James and Mariarosa Dalla Costa in relation to these.

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A Workers' Cultural Inquiry: *Correspondence* and blogging in the 1950's

John Duda, Humanities Center, Johns Hopkins University

While much work has been done on the impact of the mimeograph in helping create the worlds of SF fanzines and small magazines for underground poetry, practically none of this work has considered the innovative strategies developed by the Correspondence Publishing Committee, the independent successor to C.L.R. James', Raya Dunayevskaya's, and Grace Lee Boggs' Johnson-Forest Tendency within the Socialist Workers Party, which, in publishing the newsletter *Correspondence* from 1951 until 1962, experimented with many of the techniques we today commonly associate with horizontally-oriented communication over electronic networks. *Correspondence* was a kind of "open-publishing" platform *avant la lettre* – encouraging its readers to become active participants in the production of the content of the newsletter. In doing so, *Correspondence* helped articulate a new, innovative mission for the Marxist newspaper and the organization behind it: rather than promulgate the party line, this new kind of newspaper would facilitate communication *between workers* (and not just *to them*), allowing the community around the publication to elaborate the contours of "the invading socialist society" in a collaborative fashion.

In encouraging open-ended discussions on whatever seemed personally relevant to its readers according to *their* conception of what counted as political struggle, *Correspondence* uncannily prefigured much of the content and style of blogs and other forms of contemporary electronic communication. And like these newer forms of networked interaction, *Correspondence* served as a platform for a kind of participatory cultural inquiry. C.L.R. James' writings on culture from below are of course very well known, especially 1963's *Beyond a Boundary*, but what we see in the mimeographed pages of *Correspondence* is potentially more exciting – it is less the reflections of a critic than a dialogical research project into the cultural sphere, itself taking place at the grassroots level. These conversations offer not just a unique glimpse into cultural class composition in the 1950's, but a model for how to effectively "do" cultural studies within or alongside autonomist marxism, a model that goes beyond critical reflection and towards self-organized collective knowledge production and cultural intervention.

My presentation will examine some of the highlights of *Correspondence's* bottom-up investigations of culture – for instance the wonderful and theoretically sophisticated discussions that took place between the reader/contributors around the new medium of television and especially the early sitcom *I Love Lucy*. Special attention will be paid to how the newsletter's broad conception of

radical politics – which, unlike most of the Marxist tradition, did not focus exclusively on workers as the subject of politics, but rather understood and encouraged the autonomy of the struggles of women, African-Americans, and youth – deepened the range and the stakes of the cultural investigation carried out in its pages.

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The Courage of Refusal: Affective Autonomy and Cultural Disarticulation

Dalton Anthony Jones, Department of Ethnic Studies, Bowling Green State University

In one of many astute passages from Mario Tronti's "The Strategy of Refusal," itself a section from his longer classic *Workers and Capital (Operai e Capitale)*, he offers a startling theoretical reinterpretation of the traditional Marxian analysis of class and political relations: "The capitalist class does not exist independently of the formal political institutions, through which...they exercise their political domination: for this very reason, smashing the bourgeois State does mean destroying the power of the capitalists, and by the same token, one could only hope to destroy that power by smashing the state." This passage offers a persuasive invitation; its power implicitly resting on a call to refuse the dual temptations of institutionalized labor and the seductive workings of the state apparatus. It also implicitly begs for a cultural turn in how we conceive and practice radical politics, a turn that promises to extend the critical foundations laid by Antonio Gramsci (Subalternity, Hegemony), Raymond Williams (Structures of Feeling) and the Frankfurt School's wide-ranging critiques of worker culture and its persistent "techno-pessimism." If Tronti, and indeed the entire *Operaismo* and *Autonomist* tradition – today best exemplified by the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri – has managed to mount a formidable assault on the intellectual status-quo of any number of theoretical traditions, Marxist, so-called post-modernist and multiple strains of academic discourse on the left, pushing them towards the frontiers of Anarchist thought and practice, they have only recently begun to probe the deeper *cultural* implications of what is turning out to be a lynchpin to understanding the extended apparatus of the capitalist system and its firm hold on the labor process: that is, the theory of Immaterial, Emotional and Affective Labor.

Insisting on an analysis of how the very act of articulation has become subject to intensifying forms of alienation and exploitation will comprise the first argument in my presentation. I will argue that the commoditization of voice has effectively impeded our ability to reconfigure a politics of resistance and collective re-imagination under this era in which capital is so clearly in crisis and on the verge, indeed in the very process of, forming a counter-attack against the political and emotional strategies of evasion which, if we are to follow the logic of the *Autonomism*, have triggered this moment of global economic instability.

The second part of my presentation will address what I perceive to be a crisis within Cultural Studies. On the one hand the field, particularly that segment able and willing to consider histories of colonial and ethnic domination, has been able to fluently elaborate the deadened effectiveness of art and the artist under the growing one-dimensionality of a commercially encoded, technology governed, commodity driven, spectacle oriented mass-culture. With few exceptions, however, this culturally oriented analysis has been lacking the political courage, or perhaps vision, to announce a direct call of refusal to either the state as an *institution* or incorporation within the myriad entanglements of the commercial market economy – instead preferring to document its pathological consequences without anything like a call to arms or coherent strategy of disarticulation in face of a shifting neo-liberal, globalized political economy.

I will illustrate this perceived crisis by providing an analysis of popular cultural criticism as found in the mainstream press, paying particular attention to black and subaltern music from hip hop, to urban soul to reggeaton.

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Panel 3. Autonomism & Cognitive Labor

Facilitator: Marco Deseriis

Recent strains of autonomist thought have focused greatly on forms of immaterial labor and the emergence of cognitive capitalism, understood as a particular mutation of post-Fordist models of culture and production. The rise of the post-Fordist networked economy might attempt to subsume ever-increasing aspects of social life into forms of value production, but thus also provides new avenues for struggle and social recomposition. This panel will explore the struggles over and within the fields of cognitive labor and communication.

The subversive political potentiality of information technology workers: an autonomist analysis

Professor Verity Burgmann, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne

This paper examines the information technology (IT) worker as the quintessential example of the ‘socialised worker’ and analyses his/her potential to resist capital. Negri and other autonomist theorists, especially Nick Dyer-Witheford, have devoted much attention to the vast informational apparatus of contemporary capitalism, perceiving the new forms of knowledge and communication not only as instruments of capitalist domination, but also as potential resources for struggle against capital. Workers’ knowledge of new production systems can yield, not partnership with management, but new ways to challenge managerial command, and new ways in which emergent media networks are made to circulate struggles rather than commodities. As Hardt and Negri suggest in *Empire*, the creative forces of the multitude that sustain global capitalism are also capable of autonomously constructing an alternative political organization of global flows and exchanges.

This paper suggests that this potential power of IT workers is strikingly borne out, firstly, in their capacity to cause chaos through viruses, and, secondly, in the practice of hacking. Viruses remind us that capital at each and every stage creates new forms of labor upon which it is particularly dependent, and that its capacity to control this labor is only ever partial. Hackers are not usually associated with the formal expressions of the labor movement, yet their activities can be understood as an emergent form of resistance by labor to globalizing capital, akin, like virus writing, to the instances of industrial sabotage that signaled the early stages of development of the nineteenth-century labor movement.

IT workers’ organic relationship to technoscience enables them to express sabotage’s dialectical partner of “invention power.” Although Negri wrote about invention power [*forza-invenzione*] as early as 1971 in *Crisis of the Planner-State*, it seems well suited as comment on these more mischievous activities of IT workers. He argued that invention-power, insofar as it is the perfecting of labor-power, is the term we give to the insubordinate presence of the working class within the formal capitalist suppression of labor; freeing this invention-power is a moment and an aspect of the struggle for appropriation. For Negri, “appropriation” involves an ability to understand the workers’ behaviour as tending to bring about a direct relationship with the social wealth that is produced. The proletariat, he argues, can only recompose itself through the agency of a material will to reappropriate to itself in real terms what capital has formally reconfigured. This paper examines empirical research relating to virus-writing and hacking on the part of IT workers to explore this aspect of autonomist theory.

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Net-Work: Class Composition & Web 2.0

Brian Brown, Faculty of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario

Nowhere is the autonomy of labor in relation to capital more evident than in the unwaged, immaterial, and highly cooperative ‘free’ labor that takes place over the distributed networks of Web 2.0. The production processes responsible for creating all of the content on Web 2.0 sites and services are almost entirely self-organized by the self-motivated and collaborative labor of users themselves. Significantly, these self-organizing and cooperative activities have received scant scholarly attention from autonomist Marxist theory. This is surprising due to the overt exploitation of labor that occurs within these highly profitable virtual domains. Websites such as Flickr and YouTube and social networks such as Facebook and MySpace have been valued or sold for millions of dollars and would simply not exist without the unwaged, ‘free’ labor of their misnomic ‘users.’

Beginning on the virtual ‘shop floor,’ this paper redresses this oversight in autonomist theory by examining the self-organized production processes carried out by the cooperative activities of users as a primary instance of labor’s autonomy from capital. While the majority of the critical scholarly work focusing on the ‘free’ labor of Web 2.0 approaches the issue from a political economic perspective, this paper acknowledges the importance of this perspective but takes the autonomist’s ‘Copernican Inversion’ to heart and begins from below with the activities of the laboring individuals themselves. The logic that guides these activities is often based on sharing and cooperation and is fundamentally different from the instrumental rationality characteristic of the capitalist relation. Does this difference in logic signal an ontological shift that autonomist theory would be remiss not to explore?

When the globalized context in which this immaterial labor occurs is considered, the bottom-up perspective necessitates certain methodological adaptations and innovations. For instance, one of the central questions addressed throughout this paper is how to conduct militant research in the spirit of Marx’s ‘Workers’ Inquiry’ and autonomist ‘Co-Research’ within a social factory that is quite literally dispersed around the globe. More significantly, is there evidence of struggle and therefore nascent class recomposition on these self-organized yet highly dispersed digitized assembly lines? These hermeneutic queries are made concrete by examining the highly cooperative production processes responsible for constructing one of the largest photo-sharing websites in the world – Flickr.com. The unwaged and immaterial labor that goes into the construction of specific applications within Flickr provides further evidence which underscores the contemporary importance and relevance of autonomist theory to Web 2.0. While predominantly theoretical, this paper concretizes its conclusions by projecting them through the exemplar of Flickr. In so doing, it contributes to a more thorough understanding of the autonomy of ‘free’ labor in its relation to high-technology capitalism by reevaluating the methodologies used to assess this autonomy, and by taking seriously the potential for radicalizing the subjectivities responsible for this highly cooperative and inherently exploitative form of immaterial production.

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Autonomist Communications versus the Videocracy: From Free Radios to Rekombinant Cyberculture

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Since the 1970s the media has been a key focus for some parts of the Italian autonomy and post-autonomy movements, beginning with the Bologna creative autonomy movement and its articulation via the free radio station Radio Alice. While sometimes dismissed as the ‘soft’ side of the Autonomy movement, this paper will argue that the media interventions of Creative Autonomy were oriented towards a future cultural politics beyond the impasses of neo-Leninism and terrorism that haunted the ‘organised autonomy’ movement throughout the 1970s. The turn toward various forms of media on the part of creative autonomy demonstrated a prescient awareness of the crucial role of media forms in the production of subjectivity in the post-fordist neo-liberal capitalism that

was on the verge of being consolidated and at the same time the powers of these same technologies for mutant and aberrant productions and expressions of subjectivity beyond the limits of capitalist normativity. The continuation of this focus on the terrain of communications is clearly evident in the recent translation of *Ethereal Shadows* by Berardi et al that contrasts these media interventions with the rise of the Berlusconi Videocracy, while also drawing attention to more recent forms of media activism ranging from the Teletreet movement of the early 2000s to experiments in Rekombinant cyberculture that are continuing into the present.

Given the key position of the media in cultural studies, an examination of this tendency within Autonomism is crucial for bringing out the resonances between autonomist and post-autonomist thought and practice and the fields of cultural studies; more than this, this 'creative' tendency within autonomist and post-autonomist thought serves to critically illuminate the limits of the more well known post-autonomism of Hardt and Negri, which precisely fails to fully take into account the crucial role of communications in the constitution of contemporary forms of subjectivity and politics, hence rendering its account of class composition inadequate to the complexities of the current dynamics of political control and resistance. As such the relations between Creative Autonomy and the thought of French post-structuralist thinkers such as Deleuze, Foucault and Guattari is in fact more direct and more indicative of a future post-political politics than that contained within Hardt and Negri's project which remains haunted by a disavowed Leninism.

This paper will therefore depart from the mapping of communications and power in *Ethereal Shadows* and other recent work of Berardi such as *La fabbrica de l'infelicità* and *Il Sapiente, Il Mercante, Il Guerriero* in order to sketch out the potential contributions of this tendency of autonomism both for the field of cultural studies and to contemporary forms of political practice.

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