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LABOUR AS COMMITMENT: TOWARDS A CRITIQUE OF THE AUTONOMIZATION OF WORK AFTER THE THIRD INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

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Abstract: Labour has, across culture, been an almost historical constant. While this may be affirmed, it is also true that the forms undertaken by it, as a social practice, have differed throughout historical periods. This metamorphosis of labour has not been a singular development—it has occurred materially, as part of a series of changes occurring within an ever-changing assemblage of interdependent social systems, effecting change upon them as well. Having said this, this essay will focus on the relationship between labour and identity, taken from a materialist angle. To begin, I will analyse the social character of labour as it appears in the wake of the third industrial revolution, with particular focus on the intensification of the autonomy of different fields of work, but also on the paradoxical way in which this autonomy supports itself by deferring to an apparently humanist discourse, by means of radical individualism—although the extent of this may be further discussed. As a response to this problem, I will outline the prolegomena of a theory on labour that follows the possibility of its own autopoiesis. This theory will follow a few conceptual lines, the most notable of which are the concept of the *full body without organs*, in the form that Deleuze and Guattari operate with, and the notion of *commitment* proposed by Negarestani in their *Labour of the Inhuman*.

Keywords: inhumanism, labour, capitalism, systems theory, identity, body without organs, third industrial revolution, surplus value, territorialization, materialism.

Munca drept "angajament": o critică a autonomizării muncii după cea de-a treia revoluție industrială

Rezumat: Munca a fost—și este—un fenomen constant de-a lungul istoriei. Cu toate acestea, formele pe care aceasta, în calitate de practică socială, le preia de-a lungul celei din urmă diferă radical de la o perioadă istorică sau alta. Această metamorfoză continuă nu este, de asemenea, singulară, ci face parte dintr-un ansamblu complex de dezvoltări în cadrul mai multor sisteme sociale interdependente—astfel, se poate considera faptul că munca, în evoluția ei, este strâns cuplată la numeroase alte sisteme, producând efecte și în acestea. Acestea fiind spuse, în acest eseu mă voi concentra pe relația dintre munca contemporană și identitate, abordând problema dintr-o perspectivă materialistă. În primă instanță, voi analiza caracterul social al muncii în urma celei de-a treia revoluții industriale, accentul fiind pus atât pe intensificarea autonomiei diverselor forme de muncă, cât și pe modul paradoxal în care această autonomie se întreține prin deferența fenomenului muncii spre o formă de discurs în aparență umanist, sub forma individualismului radical. Drept răspuns la această problemă voi propune o teorie a muncii orientată spre o proprie autonomie. Aceasta va înainta în liniile unei sinteze între conceptul de "corp fără organe", în forma înaintată de către Deleuze și Guattari, și noțiunea de "angajament" (commitment) propusă de Negarestani.

Cuvinte-cheie: inumanism, muncă, capitalism, teoria sistemelor, identitate, corp fără organe, a treia revoluție industrială, surplus valoric, teritorializare, materialism.

1. Introduction

There are a number of differences that one can identify when contrasting today's society and that of the 60s. Quite a few of these have emerged as a consequence of the third industrial revolution; as Krzywdzinski et. al.[1] note, digitalization and automatization (taken as constitutive elements of said revolution) have not primarily led to a technological explosion, but to a social one. Among other things, they have produced the intensification of already existing social inequities—or they have introduced brand new ones—and they have increasingly encouraged a number of surveillance practices employed in different social sectors of labour. This phenomenon is complementary to another change that is endemic to the third revolution, namely, that the latter has led to the general autonomization of diverse forms of production. The social body after the 60s was intensely characterised by both the emergence of new social systems, and their specialisation—intersystemic communication becoming more and more difficult. With these massive changes in structure, and particularly when it comes to labour, subjectivity (in a systemic sense) has, in turn, been intensely autonomized, the subject of labour becoming strictly individuated, divided, and isolated.

It is important to bear in mind that this state of the social body is not an artificial product, but the result of multiple converging historical factors. Pertaining to labour, one can perceive in it the intersection of multiple ideological and functional vectors, such as market liberalism and neoliberalism, technological accelerationism, and (anti)humanist individualism. These all act upon the body of labour in contemporary times, ultimately resulting (among other things) in the hyper-individuation of the subject of labour. A further few consequences of this consist of an increase in the general precarity of work[2], as well as the surfacing of new, highly

molecularized forms of labour, such as gig work, and, finally, the commodification of territories which had previously symbolically belonged to private life, personal identity being one such territory.

In light of all the above, this essay will follow two main lines of argumentation. On the one hand, I will attempt to analyse and deconstruct—by means of Luhmann's theory of social systems—part of the social paradigms mentioned so far, with particular attention given to the aspects that hold identity in relation to the autonomous fields of labour of today. On the other hand, I will describe the possibility of recovering these paradigms in the form of a communal or collective body of labour. For this, I will employ both Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the body without organs, as described in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia[34]*, as well as Negarestani's notion of "commitment", as it is developed in *The labour of the Inhuman[5]*.

2. Consequences of autonomization. The precarity of labour today

I have, so far, mentioned how the social structures that characterise labour have undergone radical transformations starting with the 60s. As Badiou[6] puts it, this point in history (marking the start of the third industrial revolution) is characterised by a series of changes at the level of general society, contrasted with what one could call the humanist project of the anterior century. Up to that point, the social body was the battlefield for a number of ideological projects that had as their aim the reconstruction of the human (for instance, the transformation of the human into the proletariat, under soviet communism). However, the cold war led to a paradigmatic change—the ideological nuclei had dismantled, and the aforementioned projects, lacking strong ideatic apparatus and being under the auspices of social and technological accelerationism, have become more and more fragmented and heterogenous. Following Badiou's reasoning, this phenomenon may be characterised as a historical dismantlement of humanism, or "antihumanism"—the deconstruction of the human along multiple lines, in a highly individuated form,

molecularly divided and reduced to empirically determinable properties, and lacking any common ideological project that would guide it.

This form of antihumanism has been a good descriptor for increasingly multiple social formations, amongst which lies labour as a hyper-individuated field. I may thus identify some observable qualities that pertain to the evolution of labour under this paradigm: on the one hand, labour has been less and less collectively structured; on the contrary, it has become proactively individuated (and privatised). So-called "classical" forms of work—such as full-time work—that have benefited from constructs such as social security mechanisms (state-subsidised healthcare, labour unions, legislation protecting the right of workers etc.) have been slowly, but surely, transformed into autonomous or nomadic forms of labour, such as gig work or freelancing[7]. Herein, the individual worker is mostly responsible for securing projects or general opportunities—at best through the use of some platform that will extract a proportion of their material gains—and for providing the necessary social securities for their own living situation.

On the other hand, alongside the transformation of existing areas, some territories exclusive with that of labour (such as spaces of recreation and personal development) have been overwritten with the new logic of work, in some sense being "assimilated". One is not witness to the appearance of bizarre new professions, such as that of the social media influencer[8] (one's profile, a space for personal expression and a vector of interpersonal communication, now commodified into a independent marketing position), or even the more recent phenomenon of pay-to-earn-games[9] (a precarious form of digital labour, wherein workers—players—gain highly volatile cryptocurrency for playing a video game, which they frequently have to buy their way into). The remarkable thing here is that a large proportion of these phenomena are confined to the digital space—a potential consequence of the increasing precarity of "physical" forms of work[10].

One of the consequences of labour taking this form—and one of the aspects which made possible its emergence—is the case-by-case employment of secondary systems, the function of which is constituted by the recording of individuated work, in parallel with the systems of labour which they record. If, under the industrialised capitalism from before the 60s, one could speak of a singular superstructure—in the form that, for instance, Althusser would describe as "state ideology"[11]—now we can observe the separation of said superstructure into multiple, heterogenous superstructures, which also have the function of "stabilising" individuated labour (which, as outlined before, is increasingly precarious), and also that of extracting new forms of surplus value, channelled in the form of surveillance capital.

A good example of this comes in the form of the SCRUM Agile Development[12] shift in the field of Software Development. This model—at its roots a part-automatic micromanagement apparatus—is also split into multiple systemic components, of which one constitutes a peer review mechanism of sorts (called "code review"). In simple terms, a software developer is at all times responsible both for their own labour, and for the evaluation of the labour of other developers at the workplace. SCRUM essentially does this in order to make the development process more efficient (which has yet to be empirically proven[13]), but it also has the secondary objective of reproducing the management hierarchy at the level of the individual labourer, constituting a refined form of surveillance and disciplinary training. SCRUM in this form represents a very accurate picture of a contemporary "digital" labour system, doubling as hyper-divided hierarchization and surveillance capital machine.

Another example of a secondary system for recording the surplus value of labour—perhaps more relevant to general society—is given by Zuboff[14] in their work concerning surveillance capitalism. Their descriptions refer specifically to digital ecosystems such as Google and Facebook, which frequently gather and process personal data—resulting in the aforementioned surveillance capital. The data extraction is not limited to the feeding of digital information into

marketing systems, but it also backfeeds into various apparatus that produce discrimination within various fields of labour—one only needs to look towards the corporate practice of using one's digital footprint[15] to suppress or remove "problematic" employees from the work environment.

3. Second order observation and identity surplus in the field of labour

I have so far described the field of contemporary labour production as a series of social systems that are increasingly autonomous, and frequently coupled to secondary systems, the function of which is that of suppressing discontent (stabilisation) and of extracting another surplus (which falls back on surveillance). This description pairs well with the explanation that Luhmann gives, in their accounting of social systems theory. Specifically, the latter conceptualises the field of social production as a multiplicity of strictly autonomous, autopoietic and immanently hierarchized systems. These systems don't directly communicate with the medium (the general social body, the material base), but rather only ever defer to it[16]. At the same time, a social system also communicates with other social systems in a strictly differential way (i.e. not by reference)—if one is to phrase this in a materialist fashion, social systems merely appropriate other social systems in a negative fashion within their own structure, essentially over-writing their mechanisms of material production with their own, "claiming" their territories. In the case of the systems of contemporary labour, an individual (also conceived here as a social system) is either acceptable—in which case they become a literal surface of inscription for contemporary labour's hierarchy of production, or structure—or rejected, deemed a non-inscribable "territory".

Conceiving of the individual as a self-standing social system is necessary for the analysis here; this is due to the fact that the autonomy of the individual and that of the system are fundamentally incompatible in their inter-systemic communication. According to

systems theory, this communication can only be immanent to a system or another (it is intra-systemic, as opposed to inter-systemic). In other words, either the individual is fully over-inscribed by the logic of contemporary labour systems, or vice-versa. This fundamental point of contention sufficiently explains the historical apparition of systems of second-order observation, as Luhmann calls them[17]. These are, in short, parallel, secondary systems, to which other systems can defer to in order to evaluate their own productive efficiency. Since a system cannot both produce what it produces and an evaluation and efficientization of what it produces, second-order systems are necessary for the autopoiesis of the general "systemic organism"—one essentially finds that previous forms of "direct" material production are now complex networks of autonomous systems, centred around a single productive nucleus, which the peripheral systems attempt to make more efficient at every turn. In the case of labour, one can, for instance, observe the structure of contemporary corporations, wherein a central productive system (the network of individual workers) is perpetually reshaped by higher-up layers, such as management systems, performance evaluation systems, HR systems etc. The function of the latter takes not into account the autonomy of the former, but strictly reshapes its structure at its material core (an operation which is repeated at every layer of abstraction). The problem, essentially, is not that these systems are separate and heterogenous, but that they are rigidly hierarchized in a top-down form.

Another consequence of this loss of autonomy is the transmutation of the identity of the individual labourer into what Moeller and D'Ambrosio call "profilicity"[18]. In simple terms, given that the individual is frequently part of multiple productive structures, each with its own complementary second-order systems, their identity (or performance of it) necessarily splits in order to accede to these different fields of production. In essence, the labourer takes on multiple identities, which are nothing more than the reproduction of each system's internal hierarchy, thus becoming a nexus wherein these structures overtake each other. This is perhaps best exemplified

in the contemporary quality of being a gig worker—such an individual is perpetually engaged in the production of multiple systems, and frequently has to perform their identity in such a manner that these systems will not "reject" them. This is, ultimately, a material process— that is to say, this identity is not merely a description of who they are, but a direct rendition of the course of their day-to-day life, their capacity to exist (in the field of labour and otherwise), etc. Fundamentally, the gig worker is defined and constructed in terms of their involvement in multiple labour structures that fight for dominion over them, and therefore by their precarious material condition.

Such an account almost provides the illusion that the relationship between an individual labourer and the systems they labour under is one-sided, or deterministic—however, it can be argued that that is not the case. Namely, as iterated on before, a worker takes on a profilic identity as part of this interwoven mesh of structures—furthermore, they will, in many a case, identify with this profile, internalising and reproducing its plural structure within the medium they are in and within other systems. In other words, the individual labourer becomes a territory, or vector, in which different structures perform autopoiesis by means of "hammering" (inscribing) their structural hierarchy into the former. As Deleuze and Guattari point out, the individual is defined by the structural "share" that they embody from the system they are embroiled in. However, this share is not merely a deterministic mechanism, but also an object of consumption[19]—the individual, in a way, comes to derive a sort of identity as residuum from within this apparatus. Labour, paradoxically, becomes something akin to other commodities centred around personal expression, such as clothes, music, etc., in the sense that the labourer comes to define themselves as their profile of their own volition. Otherwise said, the latter now performs two different strata of labour—that of direct production, and that of the recording of said production. One need only look towards social phenomena such as the "grindset" or the "girlboss", in which the autonomization, individuation and precarization of labour is dissimulated[20] into a symbolic descriptor for

personal emancipation, despite being a systemic vector directly oriented against it[21].

I have thus far outlined how, through the historical heterogenization and autonomization of labour into systemic, individuated forms of work, the labourer comes to be split apart into multiple "labour personas", coagulated into a profile. I have also described how this phenomenon results in two complementary effects: on the one hand the individual labourer becomes the territory wherein multiple labour systems perform autopoiesis, through the mediation of second-order observations apparatus. On the other hand, the former comes to identify with this logic, deriving a kind of identity surplus of their own, in the form of a simulacrum of individual emancipation (or authenticity). Both of these ensure the perpetuation of contemporary labour paradigms as they have been described so far, at the expense of the productive "core", labour itself. The question becomes—how do we orient production so that this ceases to be the case?

4. The possibility of a full body of labour, in the form of a collective "commitment"

I will, for the purposes of producing a few characteristics of a possible answer to the above question, return to the problem as it was phrased by Badiou. As outlined in the beginning of the first section, this turn can be traced back to the shifts in the structure of society after the 60s, wherein labour was mapped onto the historic-functional frame that was antihumanism (in its positivist determination). Here, labour would come to be intensely individuated, forming a double-bind relationship with the diverse social systems that characterise contemporary forms of work. The crux of the problem, it seems, lies in the individuation and autonomization of labour, or, in simple terms, its antihumanist framework.

It then perhaps becomes useful that I rephrase these relationships between labour and its systems along a more radically materialist line (that is nonetheless consistent with Luhmann's

systems theory)—I will, specifically, refer to Deluze and Guattari's notion of the body without organs[22], with particular care given to the distinction of bodies without organs into the three types: the empty, the full and the cancerous.

In order to proceed with this point, I here refer to Holland's account of this distinction[23]. To start off, the empty body without organs is a strictly unstructured (unstratified) body. Lacking any preexisting strata to fundament its own development, it is only capable of serving as a surface for the reproduction of another body, and it is at the same time too flexible (open to being changed) and lacking any productive power of its own. This form of the body without organs characterises phenomena such as substance addiction, or radically anarchic movements which dismantle under their internal heterogeneity. In terms of labour, it would also accurately depict (albeit to a lesser extent) the condition of the individuated worker in their appropriation by labour structures, such as that of gig economy workers.

In contrast with the empty body without organs stands the cancerous one, which is far too structured and inflexible. Rigid in the face of change, the cancerous body cannot adapt to its environment, and frequently collapses under its own weight. A good example of such a body would be authoritarian or even fascist forms of government, which all too quickly excise structurally incompatible systems from themselves, even if such an act directly leads to their collapse. And when looking at the problem discussed here, quite a few of the contemporary structures of labour are characterised by this type of organisation, fully expending their material core (the labour force) in the pursuit of structurally unchanging capital production.

As somewhat of a qualitatively distinct middle ground, one can refer to the full body without organs. This determination can be described as partially structured—and thus both stable enough so as not to collapse, but open to new structural couplings that would enable it to ensure its own perpetuation without being fully assimilated by the other bodies it couples itself to. A good example of the full body without organs is given in the form of capitalism itself—

that is to say, capital (here taken as the diffuse and well differentiated assemblage of social systems related to labour production) may well be capable of collapsing ancillary systems (bodies) and appropriating new territories from the (exterior) medium, but it itself is rather stable in its existence—perhaps as a direct consequence of the aforementioned flexibility. Negarestani outlines this point very well in their critique of the Landian notion of capital as a "planetary singularity toward utter dissipation", rather arguing that capital is perfectly capable of out-pacing its own collapsing constituents, and thus is more than likely to maintain itself into existence indefinitely under its current material conditions[24]. This is, furthermore, consistent with the account provided by Deleuze and Guattari[25].

It is here important to note that the full body is not necessarily always "good", nor really does it carry much of a moral valuation—rather, as Deleuze and Guattari note, it is "not a problem of ideology, but of pure matter"[26]. In some sense, the full body is always oriented towards its own perpetuation, with sufficient regard to the territory that it appropriates so as not to completely exhaust it—such as is the case with capital. Nonetheless, it is perhaps useful to look at the full body without organs as an abstract guideline for the formation of materially resilient systems, ones that are capable of both survival and expansion, of territorialization without collapse. I here suggest that, if labour is to be reclaimed from being completely overwritten and assimilated into the totalizing assemblage of systems that employ it, then it could possibly organise itself along the lines of a full body.

It becomes necessary to discuss one obstacle that has been mentioned a number of times so far, and that could potentially short-circuit the formation of such a body. As noted by both Badiou and Negarestani, the mechanism by which labour has become increasingly subordinated to its appropriative structures (the assemblage of which can be identified as the body of capital) fundamentally hinges on a positivist rendition of antihumanism[27].

The dissolution of the great pre-60s humanist projects have produced a negative determination of the human, as a merely empirical category, a quantitative distinction within the sciences, and

nothing more. This concept of the human, however, is highly complementary with the structures produced alongside the social and technological acceleration of capital, mapping directly unto the second-order systems that have been orienting production since the third industrial revolution. For instance, it should be evident why personal data collection in digital workplaces has become so commonplace, with little to no protest (or veny neutralised forms of resistance)—it is simply because the digital has been, since its inception, territorialized along antihumanist lines to anticipate this transformation of the digital user into a "quantitative" human. In addition, vestiges of humanism are still functionally present in the current labour systems, but nonetheless transformed, in order to fit into this new productive order. One such vestige, described in the previous section, lies in the form of the individualist ethic, through which the (anti)human labourer can be completely assimilated into a system of labour, but still experience this state of affairs as if it were an act of their own will. Or, otherwise put, capital thrives on individualism specifically due to the fact that it is much more capable of reorienting the individuated desire of the labourer within a field that is immanent to it, than it is to perpetually reterritorialize a field that is immanent to collective labour.

This coupling between the social systems of contemporary labour production and antihumanism, as Negarestani emphasises[28], betrays the essential relationship between capital and the conservation of the human (even in its negative territorialization at the hand of antihumanism). It then follows that, in contrast with "kitsch" Marxism and the individuated forms of resistance that currently permeate the social field—while fully beholden to its structural rules—the body of labour should ultimately position itself much more critically towards the notion of the human (either in the positive, humanist determination, or the negative, antihumanist one). This, of course, would mean that a full body of labour would have to also reject individual emancipation—an essential quality of the post 60s antihumanism—as a valid form. Ultimately, the only possible determination for such a body is one that could be fully characterised

by its embodiment of inhumanist praxis in a revisionist form (as opposed to a positivist one), both capable of resisting the appropriative force of the systems of capital, and capable of self-critique and evolution—one that would also be strictly collective, as opposed to individual.

To better explain the above, I will appeal to another of Negarestani's operational concepts, that of the commitment. Developed in both parts of their essay "The Labour of the Inhuman", "commitment" there refers to inhumanism as a revision of the notion of human[29]. Extended to the problem at hand, a commitment of the body of labour to itself would imply the employment of a vector of perpetual revision, one that would constantly iterate on labour's relation to both itself and the systems of production that it couples to.

Commitment in this sense is defined by two necessary dimensions: on the one hand, a descriptive one, that has at its core the analysis and decodification of both current and historical forms that labour has taken on, and, on the other hand, a prescriptive dimension, which has the function of producing an active direction for the praxis of the body of labour (as determined based on the anterior dimension). To better explain, labour essentially needs to restructure itself with a greater degree of autonomy, alongside its own second-order system, one that is capable of critiquing its current functional and intersystemic shortcomings, identify new potentialities of development and resistance, and reorient the former towards these possibilities in an active manner. In this sense, a commitment of labour to itself is more so a self-perpetuating methodology, as opposed to a final structuring.

A good part of the establishment of such a commitment has already been somewhat addressed—that is to say, historically, a critique of the failures of labour to regain its own territory has been formulated multiple times (to a rather exhaustive degree). A few examples of such formulations are present in the current piece as well—especially concerning its relationship to antihumanism, its reliance on the individuation of the labour force, and the heterogenization of the various systems concerning labour. However,

in terms of a commitment of labour to itself , that is not sufficient—further work needs to be done towards the dissemination and employment of these critical vectors in an active, transformative way; and, finally, the body of labour should ultimately embody the practical resolutions derived from these vectors, as well as remaining open to new territories that it can critically embody in its commitments (without defaulting to foreclosure). A good example of such a territory is the collection of systems that make up artificial intelligence. A kitsch-marxist perspective would deem AI as simple automatization, a means to further accelerate the division of labour and introduce more precarity into its basal strata[30]. In contrast, a full body of labour should position itself in an open, but critical relation to AI, ready to territorialize its field if advantageous to itself, but also vigilant to being overwritten by it.

5. Conclusions

One can appreciate how, today, some of the aforementioned challenges have become active territories that a body of labour can orient itself towards in the way of a commitment. Of course, in order to perform such an active shift, labour needs to regain its autonomy, which implies that its first move should be that of critically disentangling itself from the systemic mesh that it is currently assimilated into. This, in turn, implies a generalised shift away from the antihumanism-defined, hyper-autonomized and individuated spaces of work (and, importantly, from individuated spaces of resistance as well). Such a shift could come in multiple ways—one possibility would foresee the establishment of a collective structure for orienting resistance in relation to overbearing (or cancerous) systems of labour production; a sort of labour union revitalisation project, one that would make full use of contemporary concepts and apparatus to enable the autopoiesis of the body of labour that it pertains to.

Unfortunately, such a movement, in this stage, belongs solely to the realm of speculation. Despite the fact that a large body of critical

theory exists in relation to labour, one can presently be witness to the ever-increasing precarity of the latter. And, despite the fact that a clear distinction between the production of critique and its employment in terms of praxis is frequently a point of contention, it would nonetheless seem that, if we are to enable the autopoiesis of labour along self-stable and autonomous lines, then perhaps it is paramount that we reorient our efforts towards the embodiment of this critique into a labour structure that is oriented towards itself (and not towards capital), both in abstract and practical terms.

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