
HUMAN AUTONOMY AND THE OVERCOMING OF ALIENATION IN IMMATERIAL LABOR WITH REFERENCE TO ZEN BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT

This paper, will be a reflection on the changes in labor and alienation in the information age. It will focus specifically on the concept of immaterial labor and how this effects human autonomy and the consciousness of alienation. The paper will trace these concepts from the writings of Marx, to the approaches of Hardt and Negri and Franco “Bifo” Berardi. It will then show how the shortcomings of these theories which concern human autonomy in the face of the alienation of material labor can be complemented by the insights into practice developed by Zen Buddhism.

Keywords: Immaterial Labor, Semiocapitalism, Alienation, Zen Buddhism

Introduction

We are living in an age where information and communication over electronic networks has a great influence on our perception of reality and even on our perception of ourselves. Our activities, our work and our labor increasingly rely upon these networks. We are increasingly dependent upon the various kinds of media and social media with which we interact through our smart phones.

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Labor is an important term for understanding economics, history, and production and consumption since Hegel and Marx. And our present economic system in the information age involves the highest complexities of the flows of labor. In economic philosophy, labor has always been seen as something exploited by capital. When labor becomes commodified, we are alienated from ourselves. And the tradition from Marx to Lukacs and critical Theory developed theories of how alienation can be recognized to lead a way to a revolutionary consciousness which will liberate us from our oppressive system. But with the development of capitalism into the information and media age, our consciousness of reality and ourselves is increasingly shaped and a conscious of our alienation or of any outside alternative is more difficult.

This is especially the case with immaterial labor. Today our labor is deeply engaged with the creation of information which drives the system onward. We create a kind of artificial reality connected to capitalist production which both controls us and which makes it more and more difficult to recognize our alienation. This paper, will be a reflection on these developments of labor and alienation in this information age. We also discuss on how the system of Capital controls communication and the production of information and hence controls human awareness. It discusses possibilities of human autonomy and freedom in the face of this movement.

What is Alienation of Labor?

For Karl Marx, labor is the process in which man and nature are connected. Labor is the essence of human species-being. The labor-process begins when the worker extends his living creative activity into material form. The value of the products composed is the value of the material nature and the human labor activity put into it.¹

But in capitalism, once Labor is detached and separated from the worker, it can be exploited for profit. If the product of labor does not belong to the worker, man no longer expresses his essence in the products he creates. The worker sells his labor to the capitalist to make a living.

The worker's freedom and autonomy is diminished.² Labor as a creative living process is replaced by wages given by the factory owner.

Alienation therefore is the concept that used to explain the separation of the consciousness of the laborer from his or her own essence. Marx is influenced by Hegel's concept of alienation in his book "*The Phenomenology of Spirit*". There, in his discussion of the "unhappy consciousness" Hegel used the word to refer to the human subject who achieves a sense of individuality and freedom only by alienating himself from the absolute, of which he is a part, but which he projects as detached from himself in the form of God. However, Hegel's consciousness was based upon the spirit or mind while Marx's consciousness is based upon the material. Marx's alienation is the alienation of consciousness in the material world. Marx explained this in his work *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. There he showed that alienation is a result of the freezing of labor as a living process into commodities. The commodities created from labor process in turn confront him as alien objects. Marx called it an objectification of labor.³

So what is the impact of alienation? The worker feels a sense of bondage during his working time and feels himself free only in his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating, and only away from the work-place.⁴

The alienated worker fails to recognize his labor as his essence. And he begins to see himself and his fellow man as commodities.⁵ The consequences of alienation lead us to a "false consciousness" where the worker participates in the very system which oppresses him.

The Hegemony of Immaterial Labor

The term "immaterial labor" is first introduced by Maurizio Lazzarato. Lazzarato defined the immaterial labor as a new kind of labor dominant after the Fordist era which is involved in the production of goods which are not visible and material. This lead Lazzarato to think about the

different definitions of “work” and “workforce” because they combine the results of various types of skill: intellectual skills, which involve cultural-informational content; manual skills which combine creativity, imagination, with technical and manual labor; and entrepreneurial skills in the management of social relations and the structuring of that social cooperation. The size of immaterial labor is also different from the industrial worker. This leads to such notions as precariousness, hyperexploitation, mobility, and hierarchy as key characteristics of immaterial labor. This kind of labor can be sometimes work independently and might not be dependent on a typical work schedule. Lazzarato also used the term “self-employed” worker.

Once this viewpoint comes to dominate within social production, we find that we have an interruption in the continuity of models of production. By this I mean that, unlike the position held by many theoreticians of post-Fordism, I do not believe that this new labor power is merely functional to a new historical phase of capitalism and its processes of accumulation and reproduction. This labor power is the product of a “silent revolution” taking place within the anthropological realities of work and within the reconfiguration of its meanings. Waged labor and direct subjugation (to organization) no longer constitute the principal form of the contractual relationship between capitalist and worker. A polymorphous self-employed autonomous work has emerged as the dominant form, a kind of “intellectual worker” who is him- or herself an entrepreneur, inserted within a market that is constantly shifting and within networks that are changeable in time and space.⁶

Hardt and Negri were inspired by Lazzarato’s concept of immaterial labor and provided a definition not much different from Lazzarato, that involves the production of information or other intangible products. They fine-tune the concept further by dividing it into two forms. The first is the

intellectual or linguistic labor. The second is affective labor.

The first form refers to labor that is primarily intellectual or linguistic, such as problem solving, symbolic and analytical tasks, and linguistic expressions. This kind of immaterial labor produces ideas, symbols, codes, texts, linguistic figures, images, and other such products. We call the other principle form of immaterial labor “affective labor.” Unlike emotions, which are mental phenomena, affects refer equally to body and mind. In fact, affects, such as joy and sadness, reveal the present state of life in the entire organism, expressing a certain state of the body along with a certain mode of thinking. Affective labor, then, is labor that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion. One can recognize affective labor, for example, in the work of legal assistants, flight attendants, and fast food workers (service with a smile). One indication of the rising importance of affective labor, at least in the dominant countries, is the tendency for employers to highlight education, attitude, character, and “prosocial” behavior as the primary skills employees need. A worker with a good attitude and social skills is another way of saying a worker adept at affective labor ⁷

Even though the material labor is still a major part of production around the world, especially in agriculture, immaterial labor has a more powerful influence. Hardt & Negri explained that the work of material production is dominated or interconnected to immaterial production. This is why they preferred the term “biopolitical labor” seemingly inspired by Foucault. For instance, the immaterial products of information are connected to the material production of agricultural products.

The labor involved in immaterial production, we should emphasize, remains material – it involves our bodies and brains as all labor does. What is immaterial is its product. We recognize that immaterial labor is a very ambiguous term in this regard. It might be better to understand the new hegemonic form as “biopolitical labor,” that is, labor that creates not only material goods but also relationships and ultimately social life itself. The term biopolitical thus indicates that the traditional distinctions between the economic, the political, the social, and the cultural become increasingly blurred.⁸

The hegemony of immaterial labor does not mean that the quantitative production of the world is dominated by immaterial goods. Hardt and Negri saw the hegemony of immaterial labor is in the terms of the qualitative. And this to a certain extent has always be the case. They give the example of the housewife. The “traditional woman’s work” in terms of reproductive labor and labor in the home demonstrates an open science of knowledges and intelligence closely tied to nature but also shows an affective labor central to immaterial production. The product of housewife is not the production of material goods but is a service to the needs of household.

The difference of immaterial labor, however, is that its products are themselves, in many respects, immediately social and common. Producing communication, affective relationships, and knowledges, in contrast to cars and typewriters, can directly expand the realm of what we share in common. This is not to say, we repeat, that the conditions of labor and production are becoming the same throughout the world or throughout the different sectors of the economy. The claim rather is that the many singular instances of labor processes, productive conditions, local situations, and lived experiences coexist with a “becoming common,” at a different level of abstraction, of the forms of labor and the general relations of production and exchange

and that there is no contradiction between this singularity and commonality. This becoming common, which tends to reduce the qualitative divisions within labor, is the biopolitical condition of the multitude.⁹

Notice that the solution for Hardt and Negri lies in this “commonality” which pervades not only the elite within Empire but also the poor, or what they call “the multitude.” This commonality unites and empowers and creates a possibility for change.

Berardi On Mental Alienation

While immaterial labor is hegemonic it is the starting point for a power that can work outside of the flows of Capital. Its very hegemony makes it possible to break this hegemony and lead to something new. Hardt and Negri have a hope that immaterial labor could release us from Capital’s control. However, Franco “Bifo” Berardi, an Italian Workerist, has pointed out that the hegemony of immaterial labor is not perfect. Communication and immaterial production might not be sufficient to allow for true autonomy and an escape from Capital’s control. In the book *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, Berardi uses the analogy of soul to represent the core value of labor which is connected to the body of a worker. With Semiocapitalism which goes beyond Fordist capitalism, the worker engaged in immaterial labor cannot separate working time from leisure time. Their alienation cannot be seen as being the result of the control of the means of production by the capitalist as in earlier theories. They are not toiling in some factory, for small wages. Their work and life is connected, the control of their mind is all encompassing. Most of workers engaged in immaterial labor work on his or her laptop whether in their office or at home. There is no sense in which they feel completely forced. Berardi called this kind of production Semiocapitalism, as the technological stage after the Fordist production. It is more reliant on semiotic production rather than the old ideas of producing material objects.

The soul I intend to discuss does not have much to do with the spirit. It is rather the vital breath that converts biological matter into an animated body. I want to discuss the soul in a materialistic way. What the body can do, that is its soul, as Spinoza said.... The rise of post-Fordist modes of production, which I will call Semiocapitalism, takes the mind, language and creativity as its primary tools for the production of value. In the sphere of digital production, exploitation is exerted essentially on the semiotic flux produced by human time at work.¹⁰

Berardi describes how the mind is alienated as the soul is enslaved to others. In the digital era, the content of labor turns to be mental. The wages earned are not based upon the exchange of goods but on the time that immaterial labor spends producing social interactions within semiocapitalism. For instance, in network communication, semiocapitalism stresses the products of immaterial labor available through the networks and smart-phones. In contrast to factory workers,

Info-workers, instead constantly move all along the length, breath and depth of cyberspace. They move to find signs, to elaborate experience, or simply to follow the paths of their existence. But at every moment and place they are reachable and can be called back to perform a productive function that will be reinserted into the global cycle of production. In a certain sense cellular phones realize the dream of capital; that of absorbing every possible atom of time at the exact moment the productive cycle needs it. In this way, workers offer their entire day to capital and are paid only for the moments when their time is made cellular. Info-producers can be seen as neuro-workers. They prepare their nervous system as an active receiving terminal for as much time as possible. The entire lived day becomes subject to a semiotic activation which becomes directly productive only when necessary.¹¹

One example are the advertisements for the happy life. They produce both illusions of happiness and illusions of inadequacy.¹² The individual life dedicated to immaterial labor is also a factor for the increase of depression. Depression, in according to Berardi, begins with panic. The panic is the action that someone needs to react on the certain situation. The increase in panic results from being faced with uncontrollable events. The excessive panic leads to depression. One loses their motivation and their soul could not follow their will.¹³

The alienation of soul happens when the soul is alienated in its intangible form, as immaterial production. Language, relations, thought and cognitive activities are separated from one's soul. The soul is put to work and becomes another object or commodity. We could see the difference from earlier forms of alienation. The alienation of physical labor forces the worker to do the same physical activities to contribute to material production according to factory hours. It is possible that the worker can become conscious of their alienation separate from their physical labor. But in the alienation of the soul consciousness is trapped in its immaterial production. Consciousness is occupied by its work. There is little chance for the thought of resistance or liberation. The complexity in communication and production of immaterial labor provides an overload. Berardi writes concerning the hyper-stimulation of present society:

Permanent electrocution is the normal condition of a system where network communicative technologies are used in a competitive social situation, projecting the organism in an infinite, hyper-fast flow of economically relevant signs.¹⁴

Recognizing Mental Alienation

Mental alienation, as discussed in the above section, is different from traditional alienation where the worker labors in a factory but his mind can still reflect on their situation leading to resistance or revolution. In the situation of immaterial labor, we are more embedded within the flows of communication and information which alienates us. So how do

we, who are involved in material labor, know that we are alienated? Hardt and Negri did not deal with this. But Berardi suggests that consciousness of our alienation can emerge out of the very depression generated by immaterial labor. Berardi did not go in detail about the steps for treatment, but he speaks of dealing with stress and panic. The reaction to the alienation of late capitalism must come from within capitalism itself. Communism cannot provide a new principle of totalization. So capitalism will not be replaced in the global landscape. However, it will lose its pervasive role in semiotization. Berardi believed that the autonomy could still be realized within late capitalism by moving beyond connection of income and work.

Now we need to allow people to release their knowledge, intelligence, affect. This is today's wealth, not compulsive useless labor. Until the majority of mankind is free from the connection between income and work, misery and war will be the norm of the social relationship.¹⁵

Autonomy would be in this view a process without the end. Mental alienation is the result of our mind's embeddedness in our systems of communication, and yet, our mind or Soul, is not completely controlled by the system itself. There is still a level of freedom or autonomy which can provide a space of resistance, even as we are bound within our immaterial labor.

In his famous book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau spoke of the use of "tactics" and its difference from "strategies." Tactics, due to their unproductiveness and unpredictability, provide a kind of resistance to the social order. But how can tactics be used to disguise yourself from the control of capital and achieve a kind of autonomy? A key to this can be found in the tradition of Zen Buddhism and the concept of Ikigai.

In Buddhist theory in general, the key concept is detachment which frees us from the dependent origination and causality of the world.

To attain the Nirvana, one must achieve this based upon the use of their own thought. For Zen Buddhism in particular, enlightenment is not a pure achievement that allows for transcendence of the world. Zen is not a system, a concept nor a religion. Zen is a constant discipline and practice of the mind. Detachment is also a process which needs to be constantly exercised. Suzuki writes:

If Zen is to be called a form of naturalism, then it is so with a rigorous discipline at the back of it. It is in that sense, and not as it is understood by libertines, that Zen may be designated naturalism. The libertines have no freedom of will, they are bound hands and feet by external agencies before which they are utterly helpless. Zen, on the contrary, enjoys perfect freedom; that is, it is master of itself. Zen has no “abiding place”, to use a favourite expression in the *Prajnaparamita Sutras*. When a thing has its fixed abode, it is fettered, it is no more absolute.¹⁶

If we compared this Zen practice and Berardi’s recommendations for self-autonomy, we would find that they are quite complimentary. First, the process is subjective and dependent on the activity of the self. Secondly, we are not eliminating or opposing the surrounding technological world, but we are maintaining the true value of the self. Thirdly, autonomy is never purely achieved, it is a continuous process without end. There is always the chance that we can fall under the Capital’s control if we are lacking of our determination. This determination is a mindfulness of our actions and should not become a mere habit. Once it is the habit, we are in danger of falling back under the spell of the system.

Once we practice on how we see the truth through our social communication which is animated by Capital and for the purposes of Capital, our mind still has possibilities for maintaining some forms of autonomy.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 130.
- ² Ibid, 127.
- ³ Karl Marx *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, 29.
- ⁴ Ibid, p.30.
- ⁵ Ibid, 29.
- ⁶ Maurizio Lazzarato, *Immaterial Labor*, 138.
- ⁷ Hardt, Michael & Negri, Antonio. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, 108.
- ⁸ Ibid, 108.
- ⁹ Ibid, 114.
- ¹⁰ Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *The Soul at Work from Alienation to Autonomy*, 21.
- ¹¹ Ibid, 90.
- ¹² Ibid, 92.
- ¹³ Ibid, 102.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, 115-116.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, 214-221.
- ¹⁶ D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, 86.

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