

The Multitude and the Kangaroo: A Critique of Hardt and Negri's Theory of Immaterial Labour

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Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000) was the most celebrated theoretical work associated with the global justice movement, although it was neither a product of the movement nor read by many of its activists, at least in North America. *Empire's* sequel, *Multitude* (2004) is, like its predecessor, a work of great ambition and scope that contains many themes and cites a wide range of scholarship in the social sciences and humanities. One theme which is significant in *Empire* and more central in *Multitude* is that of immaterial labour. Hardt and Negri's theory of immaterial labour plays a key role in providing a socio-economic foundation in the contemporary world for the philosophical and political elements of their thought. This adds to the credibility of their work in the minds of some readers, since much philosophical and theoretical writing today lacks any such grounding. Although there has been considerable engagement with Hardt and Negri's work, the socio-economic dimension of their thought has received little sustained attention.¹ This is certainly true of their theory of immaterial labour. The aim of this paper is to remedy this oversight.² Beginning with an explication of this theory, it scrutinizes Hardt and Negri's concept of immaterial labour and its putative hegemony. It then examines the depiction of the world of paid work in advanced capitalist societies with which the theory is associated and three alleged consequences of the rise of immaterial labour. I conclude that this dimension of Hardt and Negri's thought is profoundly flawed, and that immaterial labour cannot play the role they wish to assign it in their theory. In addition to demonstrating that the theoretical edifice of this pair of prominent left thinkers rests on a flimsy socio-economic foundation, this critique reminds us of the need for a different method of developing theory than that employed by Hardt and Negri, along with so many other contemporary writers.

Immaterial Labour and the Multitude

The concept of immaterial labour originates within the current of autonomist Marxism sometimes referred to as *postoperaismo*, specifically in the circle around the journal *Futur Antérieur* (1990-1998). This grouping included Negri, Paolo Virno and other Italian survivors of *autonomia*, but also Jean-Marie Vincent (a French Marxist of Trotskyist heritage) and the US academic Hardt.³ In the text on immaterial labour to which *Empire* refers readers,⁴ Maurizio

¹Recent exceptions are Thompson 2005 on *Empire* and Wright 2005 on immaterial labour.

²Although the notion of immaterial labour is not original to Hardt and Negri, and there are significant differences among theorists who employ it in some form, the scale of the international and multilingual circulation of their recent work has made it the most important conduit for the diffusion of the notion of immaterial labour; consequently, this article is devoted to immaterial labour in their most recent publications.

³Issues of *Futur Antérieur* can be found online at <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=117>. There is a useful discussion of some of the ideas of *Futur Antérieur* in Dyer-Witheford 1999, pp. 221-33. On the Italian currents of *operaismo* and *autonomia*, to which the ideas of *Futur Antérieur* and Hardt and Negri's recent work are related as one line of descent (but not the only one), see Wright 2002. On the contours of *postoperaismo*, see Wright 2006. Bowring 2004 looks at *Empire* in relation to the tradition out of which it emerges.

Lazzarato defines the concept as “the labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity.”⁵ Here immaterial labour is linked to a “great transformation” resulting from the emergence of mass intellectuality in the early 1970s. In the postindustrial economy of “post-Taylorist production,” “founded on the manipulation of information,” immaterial labour is anchored in “a social labor power that is independent and able to organize both its own work and its relations with business entities.”⁶ This form of labour is not “merely functional to a new historical phase of capitalism” but rather part of a radical change: “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.”⁷ While Lazzarato’s ideas here are not identical to the concept of immaterial labour in *Multitude*, there are certainly elements of continuity, as we shall see. In presenting Hardt and Negri’s theory, I will draw mainly on *Multitude*, referring to *Empire* only to note points where the more recent work departs from *Empire* or where the earlier work clarifies *Multitude*.

In *Multitude*, immaterial labour is defined as labour which “creates immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response.”⁸ Hardt and Negri note that there are two kinds of immaterial labour, although most jobs characterized by immaterial labour involve both. One is “primarily intellectual or linguistic, such as problem solving, symbolic and analytical tasks, and linguistic expressions.” The other is affective, involving both body and mind, “labor that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement or passion.”⁹ Jobs with a significant affective dimension, they point out, are predominantly filled by low-paid, low-status women workers who, unlike factory workers, are appropriately described as alienated.¹⁰ This two-fold notion of immaterial labour represents an unacknowledged shift from *Empire*, which identifies three forms of immaterial labour: the two mentioned in *Multitude* and also the kind “involved in an industrial production that has been informationalized and has incorporated communication technologies in a way that transforms the production process itself.” Here “manufacturing is regarded as a service, and the material labour of the production of durable goods mixes with and tends towards immaterial labour... These are the three types of labor that drive the postmodernization of the global economy.”¹¹

⁴Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 461 n. 17.

⁵Lazzarato 1996, p. 133. Lazzarato 1996 includes material from two *Futur Antérieur* articles, Lazzarato and Negri 1991 and Lazzarato 1992, without mentioning either.

⁶Lazzarato 1996, pp. 139, 140, 137.

⁷Lazzarato 1996, 139.

⁸Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 108; see also Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 290.

⁹Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 108.

¹⁰Hardt and Negri (2004, p. 111) write that “alienation was always a poor concept for understanding the exploitation of factory workers.”

¹¹Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 293.

The authors make it clear that immaterial labour itself is material; it is the products of this labour that are immaterial. Acknowledging the ambiguity of the term, they suggest “biopolitical labor” as an alternative way of naming the reality with which they are concerned, while observing that the concept of biopolitics brings with it other complications that make the term immaterial labour both “easier to grasp initially and better at indicating the general tendency of economic transformation.”¹² However, when Hardt and Negri describe biopolitical labour as “labor that creates *not only* material goods but also relationships and ultimately social life itself,”¹³ a conceptual slippage occurs. This definition expands the concept to encompass labour that produces material as well as immaterial products.¹⁴ While Hardt and Negri note that immaterial and material forms of labour are “almost always”¹⁵ mixed together, citing the example of health care workers who both clean bedpans and generate affective and intellectual products, their description of immaterial labour as biopolitical labour that is both materially and immaterially productive, creating “ultimately social life itself,” in fact dissolves the distinction between immaterial and material labour. This all-encompassing notion contradicts their definition of immaterial labour as labour that produces immaterial products.

Hardt and Negri do not suggest that most workers in the world perform immaterial labour. On a world scale, agricultural labour remains the largest category, and the absolute number of what they call industrial workers has not shrunk. Nor does immaterial labour reduce workplace hierarchy or labour market polarization, or improve everyone’s work experience.¹⁶ Their contention is that in every era there is “one figure of labor”¹⁷ that slowly causes the others to adopt its main qualities, and that in the current era of “economic postmodernization”¹⁸ or “informatization”¹⁹ immaterial labour “has become *hegemonic in qualitative terms* and has

¹²Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 109.

¹³Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 109 (emphasis added).

¹⁴This broader definition is also present elsewhere (2004, p. 94).

¹⁵Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 109.

¹⁶Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 111.

¹⁷Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 107.

¹⁸Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 114.

¹⁹Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 280. *Empire* offers a conventional view of economic history since the medieval era as involving three paradigms: agricultural and extractive (primary), industry (secondary) and services (tertiary). Modernization is the shift from the first to the second, and postmodernization or informatization is the transition from the second to the third (p. 280). Both *Empire* and *Multitude* are organized by a model of economic historical sociology centred on agricultural, industrial and immaterial work, each defined by the nature of its products. This model is closer to the 18th century liberal materialist schema of hunting, pastoral, agricultural and commercial societies (Comninel 1987, pp. 64-74) than it is to any Marxist theory of modes of production characterized by distinctive relations of production (e.g. Banaji 1977).

imposed a tendency on other forms of labor and society itself.” These must now “informationalize, become intelligent, become communicative, become affective.”²⁰ Immaterial labour’s dominance replaces that of industrial labour, which in the middle of the 1800s became hegemonic and began to put its stamp on work and society even though it was still the basis for only a minor share of total production in a limited geographic space.²¹

To support this argument, they write that immaterial labour characterizes the “fastest-growing occupations” in “dominant countries,” citing as examples “food servers, salespersons, computer engineers, teachers, and health workers.”²² The hegemony of immaterial labour is also demonstrated by the adoption by other kinds of labour of its features: more and more jobs are being changed by “communication mechanisms, information, knowledges, and affect”²³ as well as the spread of computers. Immaterial labour’s increasing importance underpins the growth of “immaterial forms of property,” while its distinctive form, the distributed network, is now “the way to understand everything from neural functions to terrorist organizations.”²⁴ In post-Fordist production, the linear form of industrial labour’s assembly lines is giving way to the distributed network form.²⁵ Ultimately, the tendency of immaterial labour is shown by “the becoming biopolitical of production.”²⁶

The rise of immaterial labour has profound consequences. One is the breaking down of the division of time between work and non-work or leisure. This split was clear-cut in the age of the factory, but under the hegemony of immaterial labour “an idea or an image comes to you not only in the office but also in the shower or in your dreams.”²⁷ To grasp this change, Hardt and Negri suggest, we would do well to remember that the work/leisure split had no meaning for women traditionally engaged full-time in unpaid domestic labour, and that agricultural labourers may work all the day long. They also give the examples of companies like Microsoft, which attempt to keep their employees in the office for as much time as possible by offering free food and exercise, and the phenomenon of multiple job-holding by low-waged workers in precarious employment.²⁸ They conclude that “at both the high and low ends of the labor market the new

²⁰Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 109.

²¹Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 109.

²²Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 114.

²³Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 115.

²⁴Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 115. The rise of the distributed network form, which has no centre and which erodes boundaries from within and without, is a prominent theme in *Multitude*’s discussions of the evolution of war (pp. 54-62) and the character of the global justice movement or movement of movements and the multitude (pp. 86-87, 217).

²⁵Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 113.

²⁶ Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 115.

²⁷Hardt and Negri 2004, pp. 111-2.

²⁸Hardt and Negri 2004, pp. 112, 145.

paradigm undermines the division between work time and the time of life.”²⁹

The hegemony of immaterial labour also has the effect of creating a higher degree of commonality among disparate groups of people. In *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri emphasize that post-Fordism or economic postmodernization is not homogenizing labour processes around the world, making them identical. Rather, the diverse forms of the organization and experience of work “coexist with a ‘becoming common,’ at a different level of abstraction, of the forms of labor and the general relations of production and exchange.”³⁰ This is an unacknowledged repudiation of their earlier claim in *Empire* that “one consequence of the informatization of production and the emergence of immaterial labour has been a real homogenization of laboring processes,”³¹ with computerization seen as the key. Some of the commonality noted in *Multitude* is a new development, flowing from the shared nature of what immaterial labour produces and from the “performativity, communication and collaboration” characteristic of such labour itself. In contrast to the production of material goods, the products of immaterial labour are “in many respects, immediately social and common.”³² Another portion of commonality is not new, but is only now being recognized as common, as illustrated by the science and knowledge that have always been a part of farming.³³ According to Hardt and Negri, immaterial labour has the performative features of language, being rooted in, creating and conducted in common,³⁴ and “becoming common, which tends to reduce the qualitative divisions within labor, is the biopolitical condition of the multitude.”³⁵ As we shall see, this has important political implications.

Immaterial labour does not simply create a new commonality. Hardt and Negri also argue that immaterial labour is increasingly outside the control of capital. In Marx’s time, capital created cooperation by bringing together workers in factories. But immaterial labour is inherently social. It directly produces communication and cooperation. This view is even more clearly stated in *Empire*: “The cooperative aspect of immaterial labor is not imposed or organized from the outside, as it was in previous forms of labor, but rather, *cooperation is completely immanent to the laboring activity itself*.”³⁶ Cooperative and communicative qualities are “internal to labor and thus external to capital.”³⁷ For this reason, immaterial labour has a

²⁹Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 145.

³⁰Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 114.

³¹Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 292.

³²Hardt and Negri 2004, pp. 200, 114.

³³Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 114.

³⁴Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 201.

³⁵Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 114.

³⁶Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 294.

³⁷Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 147.

great potential for self-management.³⁸ In fact, its social cooperation outside of capital “seems to provide the potential for a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism.”³⁹

As we have seen, Hardt and Negri understand immaterial labour as biopolitical.⁴⁰ It dissolves the separation between work and life, and it produces “not the means of life but *social life itself*.” All of social life becomes productive: “war, politics, economics, and culture in Empire become finally a mode of producing social life in its entirety and hence a form of biopower.” “Just as social production takes place today equally inside and outside the factory walls, so too it takes place equally inside and outside the wage relationship.”⁴¹ As immaterial labour defines social production, even the unemployed poor become participants in biopolitical production.⁴² Empire needs the biopolitical production of the entire population of the world: ‘no group is “disposable.”’⁴³ Biopolitical production is obviously not confined to a working day with a clear beginning and end. Thus it cannot be measured, and it produces more value than capital can ever capture.⁴⁴ Here is another way in which immaterial labour is subversive with respect to capital. Social life is a productive machine, but society is not seen as the social factory of autonomist Marxism.⁴⁵ This is because, even though “the real subsumption of society under capital”⁴⁶ has taken place, capital is unable to fully harness biopolitical productivity to value production, although it tries.

As a consequence of the rise of immaterial labour, the authors argue that it is necessary to reconceptualize labour and value. The relationship between them has, they claim, changed since Marx’s day. Marx saw social labour as “the source of all wealth” in capitalism and abstract labour, “labor in general, labor without respect to its specific form,” as “the source of value in general.”⁴⁷ However, capitalism’s law of value, which measures value in units of labour time, no longer holds because of the tendency for the division between work and non-work time to disappear. “This law... cannot be maintained today in the form that Smith, Ricardo, and Marx

³⁸Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 336.

³⁹Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 294.

⁴⁰As the authors discuss in *Empire*, this notion draws on the post-structuralist ideas of Foucault and, especially, Deleuze and Guattari as well as Italian thinkers associated with *Futur Antérieur* (2000, pp. 22-30).

⁴¹Hardt and Negri 2004, pp. 146, 334, 135.

⁴²Hardt and Negri 2004, pp. 130-1.

⁴³Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 335.

⁴⁴Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 146.

⁴⁵Thoburn (2001, p. 87) also recognizes this. On the concept of the social factory, see Dyer-Witford 1999, pp. 67-8 and Wright 2002, pp. 37-8.

⁴⁶Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 365; see also pp. 271-2.

⁴⁷Hardt and Negri 2004, pp. 144, 145.

himself conceived it,” even if labour is still “the fundamental source of value in capitalist production.” Immaterial labour produces knowledge, communicative capacities, and social relationships, and these fall into the category of “positive externalities.” “Such externalities, which are common to all of us, increasingly define economic production as a whole.” Positive externalities are outside of capital, which tries to control them but can never succeed completely. Immaterial labour is still exploited by capital, but the nature of exploitation has changed along with the relationship between labour and value. No longer can value and surplus value be conceptualized on the basis of temporal units of labour time. Exploitation becomes “the private appropriation of part or all of the value that has been produced as common.”⁴⁸

Significant though this is, the importance of immaterial labour for Hardt and Negri’s project in *Multitude* goes far beyond the manner in which it leads to a reconceptualization of the critique of political economy. Immaterial labour is the basis for the new global class formation they call the multitude. They argue that “a class is and can only be a collectivity that struggles in common,” and that class formation can take place along any social axis, not just production relations. Unlike other popular collectivities, such as crowds and masses, the multitude is not a passive aggregate awaiting leadership from above; it is an “irreducible multiplicity,” “singularities that act in common.” It is “all those who work under the rule of capital and thus potentially... the class of those who refuse the rule of capital.”⁴⁹ This is not a class that actually exists today, but one that is a real possibility grounded in shared conditions of existence. It is immaterial labour which creates these conditions. Immaterial labour underpins the “becoming common” that coexists with singularities on a world scale and makes the multitude possible: “the becoming common of labor is a central condition necessary for the construction of the multitude.”⁵⁰ Waged and unwaged, rural and urban – all biopolitically productive people are the basis for the multitude.

The political significance of this is enormous, for the multitude is “the only social subject capable of realizing democracy, that is, the rule of everyone by everyone.”⁵¹ It organizes in the form of distributed networks. These are more effective than earlier forms of resistance at dealing with today’s prevailing form of power, Empire. These networks also correspond to the form of the hegemonic figure of production, immaterial labour, and are more democratic and decentralized than previous forms of organization such as people’s armies and guerilla forces. The network form emerged in the 1980s in South Africa’s anti-apartheid struggle and the first Palestinian intifada, but in both cases networks of resistance did not disentangle themselves from more centralized and hierarchical forms of organization. The Zapatistas in Mexico represent a more advanced example of transition towards the network form. Recent feminist, queer and anti-racist organizing, particularly in the US, and the revival of anarchism, have network characteristics. The global justice and anti-war movements since the Seattle protests of 1999

⁴⁸Hardt and Negri 2004, pp. 145, 147, 148, 150.

⁴⁹Hardt and Negri 2004, pp. 104, 105, 106. Hardt and Negri contrast the multitude with the working class, which, they claim, is an exclusionary concept because even in the broadest sense it excludes the unwaged (pp. 106-7).

⁵⁰Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 129.

⁵¹Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 100.

most clearly take the form of distributed networks.⁵² That said, Hardt and Negri hasten to repudiate the charge that they are suggesting “that forms of resistance evolve through some natural evolution or in some preordained march toward absolute democracy.”⁵³ There is, they contend, no teleology involved in the contradictory processes of popular struggle and social change, underpinned by the spread of immaterial labour, that have resulted in the conditions of possibility of the multitude.

As this demonstrates, Hardt and Negri’s theory of immaterial labour is central to their theoretical and political project. Immaterial labour is said to be dissolving the division of time between work and non-work, creating a new commonality, undermining qualitative divisions among working people, producing life outside the sway of capital and making possible the popular unity of singularities that can achieve absolute democracy. If one follows Hardt and Negri, immaterial labour is of world-historic importance. But should we follow them?

The Concept of Immaterial Labour

I will begin with the concept itself. As I have shown, there is a conceptual slippage in *Multitude* between two different -- in fact, contradictory -- senses of immaterial labour, one delimited by immaterial products and the other a capacious notion of biopolitical labour that yields both material and immaterial products. Let us first consider this latter sense of immaterial labour as biopolitical labour. This has been praised by some sympathetic readers of Hardt and Negri. For example, Jason Read has written that “what is perhaps most interesting” is how the work of Hardt and Negri “reinvigorates and expands the ‘turn to production’ drawing on its critical force, while, at the same time, expanding production beyond a narrowly economic sense.” As Read notes, Hardt and Negri relate their concept of biopolitical production to a historical shift in capitalism and to an ontological shift, “a reconsideration of production not simply as the production of things but as the production of relations and subjects, as the constitution of the world.”⁵⁴

In *Multitude*, Hardt and Negri do not explain the social processes involved in the historical shift that gives rise to biopolitical labour. However, they do provide something of an explanation in *Empire*. This locates biopolitical labour’s emergence in the flourishing of immaterial production in US social movements of the 1960s, whose struggles destroyed the prevailing productive order and “regime of the production of subjectivity” and created a new one of “autonomous production.”⁵⁵ This eventually became dominant, in line with the autonomist insistence that capital is always reactive to proletarian power and subjectivity, and that the working class “*actually invents the social and productive forms that capital will be forced to adopt in the future.*”⁵⁶ Hardt and Negri are not wrong to pay heed to capital’s appropriation of

⁵²Hardt and Negri 2004, pp. 68-93.

⁵³Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 93.

⁵⁴Read 2001, pp. 25, 25-6. Read’s comments are a reflection on *Empire*, but are equally pertinent to Hardt and Negri’s latest work.

⁵⁵Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 274-6.

⁵⁶Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 268; see also p. 269.

cultural phenomena of the rebellious mid-1960s to mid-1970s era.⁵⁷ But this should not obscure the fact that they do not really explain how counter-cultural immaterial labour is supposed to have achieved a generalized hegemony. Instead, they rely on a theoretical claim that capital always reacts to barriers posed by insurgent self-activity by usurping the latter's creative dimensions for its own purposes. This may satisfy readers who are already autonomists, but many others will find it unconvincing.

The concept of biopolitical labour and production may have an appeal for some readers because of its broad social dimensions, very different from "narrowly economic" notions of the production of widgets, to use the generic example beloved of introductions to neoclassical economics. Yet Hardt and Negri's concept of biopolitical labour is not just expansive. It also fails to make distinctions between the different forms of production involved in the production of all that falls within the scope of "social life itself." In a highly abstract sense it is possible to talk of labour producing goods, services, social relations, and human subjectivities. Yet it is essential to be able to distinguish the production of ourselves as human subjects through our relationships with nature and each other in determinate socio-material conditions and particular historical moments from the production by humans of, say, microprocessors. Very different kinds of production processes and products are involved. Labour is at the heart of them all, *but at different levels of abstraction and in different social forms*. The all-encompassing concept of biopolitically-productive immaterial labour does not allow us to make such distinctions. This conception of immaterial labour is strongly influenced by Deleuze and Guattari, who 'espouse a "material vitalism"' in which desire/life 'opposes itself to the organic unities of bodies, states, societies.'⁵⁸ This variety of post-structuralism lends itself well to exuberant celebrations of anarchic resistance; it is of little use for the careful analysis of the social forms of labour in capitalist societies, let alone strategic emancipatory thought.

It is also worth pointing out that the idea that labour produces social relations and human subjects as well as goods and services is neither novel nor the special contribution of post-structuralism in the vein of Deleuze, Guattari, Hardt and Negri. Marx's concepts of labour and production are far removed from the narrow notions of many Marxists and non-Marxists: humans "have history because they must *produce* their life."⁵⁹ Terry Eagleton contends that 'Marx may have overrated production, but he certainly did not narrow the term to its economic sense.... "Production" for him is a richly capacious concept, equivalent to "self-actualization," and to this extent savouring a peach or enjoying a string quartet are aspects of our self-actualization as much as building dams or churning out coat-hangers.'⁶⁰ "Marx's basic position," as Raymond Williams puts it, is that "fundamentally, in this human historical process, we produce ourselves and our societies, and it is within these developing and variable forms that

⁵⁷See Frank and Weiland 1997 on this in the US context.

⁵⁸Callinicos 1990, p. 84. On the influence of Deleuze and Guattari on Hardt and Negri, see Callinicos 2006, pp. 140-8.

⁵⁹Quoted in Geras 1983, p. 67.

⁶⁰Eagleton 1999, p. 26.

‘material production,’ then itself variable, both in mode and scope, is itself carried on.”⁶¹ This suggests that it is quite possible to appreciate and, more importantly, investigate how labour -- always in a determinate social form -- constitutes the (social) world, without adopting Hardt and Negri’s vitalist biopolitical concept of immaterial labour.

The other sense in which Hardt and Negri use the term immaterial labour refers to that labour which produces immaterial products. Such labour and such products indisputably do exist in contemporary capitalist society. What is curious is that Hardt and Negri -- theorists who are still influenced in certain ways by *operaismo*, even if they have moved a very long way from it -- define immaterial labour in terms of its *products* rather than in relation to the labour process, social relations and class antagonism. A hallmark of autonomist Marxism is its theorization of class in terms of class composition, “a disaggregated picture of the structure of class power existing within the division of labour associated with a particular organization of constant and variable capital.”⁶² Traces of this kind of analysis are visible in Hardt and Negri’s effort to identify the basis of the multitude. However, neither the mass worker of *operaismo*, originally conceived as deskilled toilers in mass production deprived of control in the labour process,⁶³ nor the socialized worker of *autonomia*, “the whole proletariat, subject qua abstract labour, constituted throughout the arc of the valorisation process,”⁶⁴ were identified by their labour’s products in the way that Hardt and Negri link immaterial labour (in this definition) and the multitude. There were problems with how Italian autonomist Marxism theorized the mass worker as a stylized figure of labour. Nevertheless, its analyses were more grounded in attempts to understand the working-class formation of its time than Hardt and Negri’s writing on the multitude.⁶⁵ Moreover, *Multitude*’s suggestion that a certain type of labour has distinctive qualitative features by virtue of its products, rather than because of a characteristic labour process or place in working-class formation, seems a fetishistic methodological error.

Equally serious is the problem of Hardt and Negri’s depiction of the characteristics of immaterial labour. Recall that its intellectual/linguistic and affective qualities are said to be putting their stamp on the rest of labour and society and driving a becoming common. Yet it seems quite a stretch to argue, as Hardt and Negri do, that the work of food servers and salespeople as well as that of computer engineers and teachers is fuelling a drive to “informationalize, become intelligent, become communicative, become affective.”⁶⁶ The extensive use of microcomputers in paid workplaces in advanced capitalist societies is indisputable, but employment in workplaces in which such technology is used is not by itself a convincing basis for claiming that all who are so employed are part of Hardt and Negri’s

⁶¹Williams 1977, p. 91.

⁶²Cleaver 1992, p. 113. On autonomist Marxism and class theory, see Camfield 2004.

⁶³Wright 2002, pp. 107-10.

⁶⁴Wright 2002, p. 164.

⁶⁵On the shift in the analysis of the mass worker, see Wright 2002, pp. 137-38; see also pp. 176-96, and on the criticism of Negri’s early analysis of the socialized worker by some of his comrades, pp. 170-2.

⁶⁶Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 109.

immaterial labour. I will return to the issue of computer technology in the workplace below. For the moment, we should ask how it is that Hardt and Negri are able to claim that such very different kinds of concrete labour as that of retail salespeople and computer engineers are all part of their intellectually/linguistically and affectively-rich immaterial labour?

An answer is suggested by a look at the development of their concept. Nick Dyer-Witthford argues that the ideas about immaterial labour developed in the *Futur Antérieur* milieu, influenced by a reading of Marx's concept of general intellect in the *Grundrisse*, implicitly gave a privileged place to highly-qualified knowledge workers, mostly white men in advanced capitalist countries.⁶⁷ This was one of George Caffentzis's lines of criticism of Negri.⁶⁸ In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri signal their distance from the *Futur Antérieur* conception -- it "marks a step forward, but its conceptual framework remains too pure, almost angelic" and its "new conceptions too only scratch the surface of the productive dynamic of the new theoretical framework of biopower"⁶⁹ -- and expand immaterial labour to include affective as well as intellectual/linguistic work. As a result, "'Immaterial labor' release 0.2 thus appears to answer or disarm accusations of technological avant-gardism, Cartesian dualism, or masculine bias; both sex workers and software developers can now be included." However, despite the inclusion of affective as well as intellectual/linguistic work within the category of immaterial labour, the intellectual/linguistic is privileged: immaterial labour's "defining features continue to be attributes of the 'cyborg' worker."⁷⁰ This remains the case with the latest incarnation of immaterial labour (release 0.3) in *Multitude*.

In addition to bearing characteristics that have been generically assigned to it in a questionable manner, Hardt and Negri's category of immaterial labour is itself problematic. Dyer-Witthford, who as we shall see attempts to save the concept by revising it, raises a pertinent warning: "analysis that puts under one roof multimedia designers, primary-school teachers... and strippers... may reveal valuable commonalities, but can also cover up chasmic differences, fault lines of segmentation, veritable continental rifts that present the most formidable barrier for the organization of counterpower."⁷¹ For *Multitude*'s understanding of immaterial labour to be a credible and coherent theoretical concept, Hardt and Negri would have to argue persuasively that there really are significant degrees of qualitative commonality across the huge range of concrete labours that they would have us believe are all examples of immaterial labour. Instead, they simply assert that all labours whose products are immaterial, whether primarily intellectual/linguistic or affective, are part of the category of immaterial labour. This is unconvincing.

The claim that immaterial labour is increasingly outside the control of capital is no more persuasive. As Nicholas Thoburn notes, immaterial labour is seen as moving towards increasing

⁶⁷Dyer-Witthford 2001, 71.

⁶⁸Caffentzis 1998.

⁶⁹Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 30.

⁷⁰Dyer-Witthford 2001, p. 72, 72.

⁷¹Dyer-Witthford 2001, 73.

autonomy.⁷² Hardt and Negri's claim amounts to a contention that the real subsumption of labour to capital is retreating, making capital parasitically exploitative of autonomous production; they do not attempt to reconcile this with their contention that the real subsumption of society as a whole to capital has taken place. One reason for their failure to address this contradiction is their "neglect [of] the forms in and through which labour exists in capitalism."⁷³ Hardt and Negri see immaterial labour as increasingly outside and against capital, rather than in and against it. Be that as it may, research on labour processes gives no credence to Hardt and Negri's view. For example, Peter Meiksins's argument that employers' concerns about control lead them to restrict how information technology (IT) is used, cramping the communicative and cooperative potential that Hardt and Negri believe is inherently internal to immaterial labour, external to capital, and currently being realized, undermines their position.⁷⁴ So too do studies of the labour process of software developers.⁷⁵ It is true that one group of immaterial labourers may in certain circumstances pose special problems for capital: those whom Ursula Huws calls "creative" or "originating," workers who produce ideas, music, computer programs and the like, in cases where they are legally freelancers or independent contractors. Such workers' attempts to assert control over their immaterial products do lead to clashes with capital's efforts to impose its property claims.⁷⁶ Recognition of this does not, however, justify the inflated claim Hardt and Negri make about the escape from capital of immaterial labour in their very broad conception of it.

In light of these problems with immaterial labour in both of Hardt and Negri's senses of the concept, I believe that the concept is deeply flawed and ought to be abandoned altogether. Even the term itself is confusing, since the words used convey an initial impression that the labour being referred to lacks materiality. Dyer-Witheford has attempted to salvage the concept with a major revision. He suggests, with good reason, that "analysis that *started* with, say, day-care workers, nurses' aides, and dancers as its paradigmatic cases, rather than *adding* them later" might not end up conferring the attributes of labour that is mainly intellectual/linguistic to other kinds of labour, as Hardt and Negri do. With this in mind, in his essay on *Empire* he suggests a friendly amendment to the concept which remains relevant to Hardt and Negri's most recent usage: abandon the attempt to stretch the category of immaterial labour too far, and instead think of "the diversity of planetary labourers" as composed of material, immiserated and immaterial workers, with tendencies towards all three "latent... throughout the entire postindustrial work force."⁷⁷ Although this is a substantial improvement on Hardt and Negri's concept of immaterial labour, in my view it perpetuates two of the latter's defects: using the products of labour to conceptualize a distinct form of labour, and the conceptualization of stylized workers or forms of labour inherited from *operaismo*. For this reason, I conclude that Dyer-Witheford's salvage

⁷²Thoburn 2001, p. 86.

⁷³Bonefeld 1993, p. 26.

⁷⁴Meiksins 1998.

⁷⁵See Beirne, Ramsay and Panteli 1998; Barrett 2004; also Dyer-Witheford and Sharman 2005.

⁷⁶Huws 2003, pp. 140-2.

⁷⁷Dyer-Witheford 2001, 76.

effort fails, and there is no reason to mount another. This does not exhaust the matter, however. If the concept of immaterial labour itself is fatally flawed, what of the associated account of contemporary capitalism presented in *Multitude*?

The Hegemony of Immaterial Labour

According to Hardt and Negri, in the late 20th century the hegemony of industrial labour, dating back to the mid-19th century, was replaced by that of immaterial labour.⁷⁸ This raises two conceptual questions they do not confront directly: what does it mean for a figure of labour to be hegemonic, and what is the labour that exercises this qualitative dominance?

In a response to commentators on *Empire*, Hardt and Negri cite a passage from Marx's *Grundrisse* to explain their notion of immaterial labour's hegemonic position: "In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it."⁷⁹ They note, correctly, that Marx is writing about the dominance of capital, adding "but the notion is equally applicable to our case."⁸⁰ This assertion is questionable. The basis for the view that capital has the character to which Marx refers appears a few lines below the sentences quoted by Hardt and Negri: "Capital is the all-dominating economic power of bourgeois society."⁸¹ This dominance of capital over various branches of production is an issue at a higher level of abstraction than the dominance of a particular socio-technical variety of labour over others during a particular capitalist era. Capital's sway over social production and the hegemony of a figure of labour are issues at different levels of analysis. Thus Hardt and Negri's substitution of a quotation from Marx for an argument is a gesture with little intellectual weight.

There are both historical and theoretical problems with Hardt and Negri's position. The claim that from the middle of the 19th century industrial labour was globally hegemonic, in the sense of being in the process of imposing its qualities on all labour, is dubious. By the 1870s, capitalism was only well-established in Europe and North America.⁸² In Britain at the time, the proliferation of handicraft production employing wage-labour alongside the growth of steam-powered industry casts doubt on the notion of industrial labour's hegemony even in the country where industrial capitalism was most highly developed. It is true that British wage-earners encountered new kinds of discipline on the job wherever they toiled, but handicraft and industrial workers were not affected in the same way.⁸³

On a theoretical level, it is problematic to posit the existence of a globally hegemonic

⁷⁸Hardt and Negri 2004, pp. 108-9.

⁷⁹Quoted in Hardt and Negri 2001, p. 40.

⁸⁰Hardt and Negri 2001, p. 40.

⁸¹Marx 1973.

⁸²Beaud 2001, p. 130.

⁸³Samuel 1977.

socio-technical figure of labour in any era in the history of capitalism. The development and global expansion of capitalism makes wage-labour a tendentially world-historical social form of labour.⁸⁴ But no single socio-technical configuration of wage-labour (figure of labour in Hardt and Negri's parlance) is ever globally dominant. There are many socio-technical arrangements for the commodification of labour power, unfree as well as "free,"⁸⁵ and so the social form of wage-labour is a "unity of the diverse."⁸⁶ Because Hardt and Negri do not distinguish between the social form of wage-labour and the many possible socio-technical varieties thereof, they end up proposing hegemonic singular socio-technical figures of labour that occlude both the genuine diversity of labour and what really has become dominant, the social form of wage labour.

Furthermore, if we accept that labour that has been subsumed to capital exists in and against capital, then we should conclude that wage-labour does not configure itself globally, as Hardt and Negri claim. Rather, labour subsumed to capital is organized by capital, through class struggle, in determinate historically- and geographically-specific and variable shapes. Hardt and Negri's hegemonic figure of labour cannot grasp this because it theoretically extracts labour from capital within capitalist society. In addition, their hegemonic figure of labour can be seen as a further example of the common practice in the autonomist tradition of thinking in terms of a stylized worker (craft, mass, socialized).⁸⁷ This kind of theorizing is an enormous obstacle to understanding classes as complex and heterogenous formations,⁸⁸ and to recognizing the diverse forms of "free" and unfree labour that capital, hierarchically-structured through combined and uneven development, exploits on a world scale.⁸⁹

⁸⁴Thanks to David McNally for this formulation (personal communication).

⁸⁵Van der Linden 2003.

⁸⁶Marx 1973.

⁸⁷Wright 2002 has the great merit of appreciating both the potential and deep flaws in this tradition's efforts to theorize class formation.

⁸⁸See Camfield 2004.

⁸⁹In the shadow of Hardt and Negri's hegemonic figures of labour lurks a potentially more credible notion (one that they do not propose), that of globally dominant forms of capitalist accumulation. If instead Hardt and Negri were to take a more Marxist or at least *marxisant* approach, they could argue that every era of the capitalist world economy is organized by a dominant type of accumulation, a kind of globally preeminent social structure or regime of accumulation. To theorize capitalism in this manner would be to elevate to the global scale concepts which Regulation School and Social Structure of Accumulation-style political economy have usually applied at the level of nation-states. This would be an improvement on the putative hegemony of figures of labour. Yet it would probably reproduce the weaknesses of Regulationist and SSA political economy, including a focus on institutional arrangements at the expense of the contradictory dynamics of capitalism itself. It would likely also fail to capture the articulation of different forms of accumulation that exists in every phase of capitalist development. Alnasser et al 2001 discuss international regulation from a Regulation approach. Kotz, McDonough and Reich 1994 offer an SSA perspective on the global economy. For critiques of such approaches, see Brenner and Glick 1991, Callinicos 2001, Clarke 1988 and

Paid Work in Contemporary Capitalism

If the notion of a hegemonic figure of immaterial labour is untenable, what about Hardt and Negri's picture of the kind of labour that is allegedly dominant today? Let us set aside the specific theoretical concept of immaterial labour scrutinized earlier. Instead, we can look at what Hardt and Negri offer in a more general sense with respect to paid work in contemporary capitalism. Immaterial labour amounts to work outside of manufacturing and resource-extraction, where products are material. Immaterial labour is, in effect, "service sector" labour. In identifying the new dominant form of labour with the service sector, Hardt and Negri tacitly accept what Ursula Huws calls "an article of faith in most of the literature" since Daniel Bell's work of the early 1970s on post-industrial society, namely the belief "that a major, if not *the* major trend of the twentieth century has been the rise of services at the expense of agriculture and manufacturing."⁹⁰

In the same vein, Hardt and Negri write that "industrial labor" has lost its hegemony, which has passed to immaterial labour.⁹¹ By "industrial," they, like most writers, mean the manufacturing of material goods. This use of the term is common. It is also regrettable, since it suggests that work which is neither agricultural nor extractive nor manufacturing does not have industrial features. The issue here is what is meant by industry. Is it simply the production of material goods, manufacturing in the everyday early 21st century sense of the word? For Marx, industry referred to commodity production organized around a "machine system" operated by "associated labour" and geared to the extraction of relative surplus value.⁹² In this sense, industry need not be limited to the production of material commodities; it is also applicable to the production of commodified services, from health care to fast food to finance. The provision of services in contemporary capitalism is often industrial in the sense that workers are organized through a detail division of labour in a labour process to which not just machines but technological systems are central.⁹³

Hardt and Negri's rise to hegemony of immaterial labour can be considered a variant of the widely-accepted economic narrative of the rise of the service sector and knowledge work. Their lack of critical distance from conventional depictions of paid work is perhaps most starkly visible in *Empire*, which at one point states that in the service sector in advanced capitalist countries "jobs for the most part are highly mobile and involve flexible skills."⁹⁴ Human resource management practitioners would not disagree.⁹⁵ However, Hardt and Negri at the very

Husson 2005.

⁹⁰Huws 2003, p. 130.

⁹¹Hardt and Negri 2004, pp. 108.

⁹²Marx 1977, p. 508.

⁹³See Good and McFarland 2004; Taylor et al 2002; Kainer 2002, 121-126; Reiter 1991.

⁹⁴Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 285.

⁹⁵Thompson writes that in *Empire*'s treatment of contemporary capitalism and work "what we read is barely different from what can be found in business literature" (2005, p. 81); his article

least pass over what many studies have shown: that much-vaunted mobility usually amounts to little or no job security, and skill (functional) flexibility to the requirement to perform several deskilled tasks (multi-tasking).⁹⁶

Although the rise of services narrative is part of contemporary social science “common sense,” there are good reasons not to swallow this story uncritically. Not least of these is that “the dangers of developing a stylized account of the changing world of work by appealing to simple dualisms, such as the old (industrial) and new (knowledge-intensive) economies, are transparent. Complexity, unevenness, and the enduring features in the structure and relations of employment are crowded out by visions of universal paradigm shifts”⁹⁷ Of course, it is indisputable that in advanced capitalist countries the percentage of the paid labour force working outside of what are conventionally categorized as agriculture, resource extraction and manufacturing is growing. Nevertheless, conventional conceptualizations of “the service sector” are fraught with problems. Pietro Basso argues that it “is a category totally devoid of scientific value.”⁹⁸ What counts as a service? The classification involved in the assembling of conventional occupational sector statistics can be misleading. For example, building cleaners employed by a manufacturing firm are taken to be manufacturing workers, but if the firm hires cleaners from a janitorial firm they are service sector employees.⁹⁹ Similarly, the widely-held assumption that few people still work in agriculture in advanced capitalist countries would be recast if workers employed in producing agricultural equipment and chemicals and in packing, preparing and distributing agricultural produce to points of sale were included in the category of agricultural employment. Integrating the decline in domestic service employment in such countries over the twentieth century would also force a revision of the dominant narrative about services. So too would serious consideration of the fact that specialized “knowledge work” is an outgrowth of the division of labour in manufacturing.¹⁰⁰ None of these issues is addressed by Hardt and Negri.

In her work on services, Huws argues that studies of the subject that use data calculated from sources such as standard economic measurements of employment or output blur together what are actually different kinds of activities, “involving contrasting and contradictory tendencies.” She splits the unitary category of services into three fields. The first involves paid work identical or similar in kind to work done on an unpaid basis in households and

identifies a number of points on which the critique of the latter is relevant to Hardt and Negri’s account.

⁹⁶See Peck 1996; Burchell, Ladipo and Wilkinson 2002; Stanford and Vosko 2004; Armstrong and Armstrong 2003, p. 130. As Smith and Thompson have written, there is a “continuing need to look behind official claims for up-skilling or fundamental shifts in the quality of work” in order to demystify “the almost daily claims of paradigmatic changes to the nature of work within contemporary capitalism” (1999, pp. 228-9).

⁹⁷Nolan and Wood 2003, p. 173.

⁹⁸Basso 2003, p. 120.

⁹⁹Henwood 2005, p. 51.

¹⁰⁰Huws 2003, pp. 130, 135.

communities, such as child care, health care and cleaning, along with what she calls “public housekeeping,” such as garbage collection, and even live entertainment and the sex trade. The second is “the reproduction of the knowledge workforce itself”: education, training and some research and development. The third kind is the “knowledge work” involved in producing material or immaterial products.¹⁰¹

This analysis illuminates why lumping services into a single category on the grounds that they generate immaterial products is a very forced abstraction. Hardt and Negri’s addition of affective qualities to their definition of immaterial labour may have helped deflect some criticism, but it also adds to the extreme looseness of the category. As Huws implies and other studies of service sector work have demonstrated,¹⁰² interactive service work that involves what Hardt and Negri call affective labour, but which is better theorized as body work,¹⁰³ is qualitatively different than highly intellectual/linguistic “knowledge work.” Placing both kinds of work within immaterial labour licenses the inclusion within this category of anyone whose job involves considerable interaction with other humans (and other animals?). This underscores how Hardt and Negri’s category is a barrier to developing a better understanding of labour processes and workers’ actions and consciousness in the areas of work identified by Huws.

Recognizing that it is unhelpful to think in terms of a unitary service sector undermines the vision of the nature of work conveyed by Hardt and Negri. Nevertheless, one should still pay attention to their cursory attempt to provide empirical support for their argument that immaterial labour is hegemonic. One of the pieces of evidence they cite is the claim that immaterial labour is central to the fastest-growing occupations in advanced capitalist countries. Their reference, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics’s (BLS) study of which jobs in the US are projected to grow most quickly,¹⁰⁴ identifies the ten fastest-growing occupations as:

Medical assistants
 Network systems and data communications analysts
 Physician assistants
 Social and human service assistants
 Home health aides
 Medical records and health information technicians
 Physical therapist aides
 Computer software engineers, applications
 Computer software engineers, systems software
 Physical therapist assistants

This obviously confirms Hardt and Negri’s unexceptional recognition that the fastest-growing jobs are in “the service sector.” What is more interesting about the BLS projection – and it must

¹⁰¹Huws 2003, pp. 131, 131, 134.

¹⁰²See Thompson, Warhurst and Callaghan 2001.

¹⁰³See Walkowitz 2002.

¹⁰⁴BLS 2004a. My reference is to the current version of the online source cited in *Multitude*, a slightly revised version of that available to its authors.

be remembered that it is a projection over the years 2002-2012 – is that most of its fastest-growing job classifications do not fall within Huws’s category of “knowledge work” (where work is most likely to have the intellectual/linguistic content that continue to be definitional for Hardt and Negri’s immaterial labour concept, as Dyer-Witheford argues) but instead into her other two categories.

Using conventional statistical data to understand the core issue here is difficult for two reasons: in general “official classifications of the occupational structure focus upon the form of jobs rather than the content of labour”¹⁰⁵ and job classification systems are not consistent across national states. But the picture that emerges from studies of actual job growth suggests that many fast-growing occupations do not have a high degree of intellectual/linguistic content. For example, in Canada between 1995 and 2004 the three fastest-growing occupational categories were Sales and Service Supervisors (whose numbers grew by 105.9%), Clerical Supervisors (73.5%) and Assisting Occupations in Support of Health Services (71.1%), none of which feature a high level of intellectual/linguistic content.¹⁰⁶ In Australia, although the category of “professionals” grew fastest (30.3%) between 1986 and 2000, closer examination reveals that jobs in the fastest-growing sub-categories -- Computing Professionals, Accountants and Technical Sales Representatives – were all associated with “knowledge handling and servicing provision... with low levels of discretion and analytical skill” rather than the production of knowledge and considerable autonomy.¹⁰⁷

Hardt and Negri also cite the qualitative influence that is causing all work to “informationalize, become intelligent, become communicative, become affective.”¹⁰⁸ The spread of IT is indisputable. It underlies the trend to “become communicative,” through the diffusion of means of communication such as e-mail, cell phones, and text-messaging. But is IT causing work to “become intelligent”? Many jobs that involve computer use involve either what the above-mentioned Australian study calls “knowledge handling and service provision” or merely the routinized and repetitive input of information.¹⁰⁹ Much is made about the impact of computers in manufacturing, but a major study on a leading-edge lean production automobile assembly plant in Canada casts doubt on the notion that the intellectual content of jobs there is increasing. Most of the work, its authors write, “is not characterized by substantive complexity... requires little conceptual acumen, and the emphasis is on physical dexterity and performing at line speed.”¹¹⁰ In his assessment of the issue, DW Livingstone concludes that skill requirements in North America have increased since the 1940s, but that the most significant changes took place before 1960.¹¹¹ The thesis of a trend towards work “becoming intelligent” is also called

¹⁰⁵Warhurst and Thompson 1998, p. 3.

¹⁰⁶Statistics Canada 2005b.

¹⁰⁷Fleming, Harvey and Sewell 2004, p. 735.

¹⁰⁸Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 109.

¹⁰⁹Fleming, Harvey and Sewell 2004, p. 738.

¹¹⁰Rinehart, Huxley and Robertson 1997, p. 64.

¹¹¹Livingstone 1999, p. 147.

into question by Livingstone's research on the performance gap, the difference between the skills and knowledge workers have and those they actually use on the job. Looking at data from the US and the Canadian province of Ontario, he concludes that the gap "is extensive and increasing on all available measures."¹¹² Such evidence casts doubt on the linkage between IT and work "becoming intelligent." As for the alleged demand that all work and society "become affective," this seems an unhelpful implication to draw from the growth in advanced capitalist countries of paid body work and other service jobs that demand "social and aesthetic skills and competencies,"¹¹³ including emotional self-modulation, all of which are distinctly gendered. In sum, Hardt and Negri's claims of qualitative changes mix together unenlightening observation, the imprecise inflation of real changes in the world of paid work, and egregious misinterpretation.

The other two pieces of evidence cited by Hardt and Negri are immaterial property forms and the diffusion of distributed networks in society. The former is testimony to an important phenomenon of our times that Hardt and Negri neglect – the extension of the scope and depth of commodification. Some conflicts over immaterial property are, as Huws points out, clashes between capital and creative or originating workers whose legal status is not that of employee and who therefore are able to attempt to assert control of the immaterial products of their labour; regrettably, Hardt and Negri's theory of immaterial labour does not illuminate such cases because its treatment of the wage-relation is so general. My claim is not that Hardt and Negri ignore commodification altogether; *Multitude* discusses the private ownership of immaterial products in such cases as the online music file-sharing site Napster, "bio-property" (life-forms), and the privatization of public transport and utilities.¹¹⁴ However, even though the message that "Our World is Not For Sale!" has been expressed in many different languages by movements of protest and resistance from Bolivia to France to India, and has had great popular resonance because it connects with people's experiences, global commodification is not a central theme in their thought.¹¹⁵ Perhaps this is because acknowledgment of its importance is theoretically incompatible with Hardt and Negri's commitment to the belief that immaterial labour and its products are increasingly autonomous of capital?

Hardt and Negri's final example, distributed networks, is a further case of inflating and misreading a trend. The network concept may well be useful for some purposes, but, for example, egalitarian distributed networks are nowhere to be found in the franchised firms in which so many service workers are employed. Franchising has always been about "decentralizing risk and centralizing control," as Meiksins points out. In such firms, "legal arrangements and new technologies are used to eliminate local autonomy and to maximize the degree of control from the center."¹¹⁶ A similar combination of centralization and

¹¹²Livingstone 1999, p. 85.

¹¹³Thompson, Warhurst and Callaghan 2001, p. 937.

¹¹⁴For example, Hardt and Negri 2004, pp. 179-88 and 302-3.

¹¹⁵See, for example, Laxer and Soron 2006. I take the term global commodification from McNally 2002.

¹¹⁶Meiksins 1998, p. 156.

decentralization can be seen at play in the restructuring of state agencies.¹¹⁷ The contemporary world of paid work shows no sign of being reshaped into non-hierarchical network patterns.

Three Alleged Consequences of Immaterial Labour

If Hardt and Negri's attempt to provide empirical backing for their theory only adds to doubts about their understanding of contemporary society, their claims about the effects of the rise of immaterial labour do the same. I will examine three alleged consequences. One is their claim about the breaking down of "the division between work time and the time of life."¹¹⁸ Unfortunately for Hardt and Negri, even the examples they mention, Microsoft workers enticed into spending long hours in the office and workers forced to hold more than one low-paid precarious job, suggest that, far from the division disintegrating, the time of paid work is expanding, pushing deeper into the time of life. This is confirmed by recent statistics. For example, one out of every three male workers and one in ten women in the UK now performs over 50 hours of paid work per week; in Canada, one in four men and one in ten women do 50 or more hours of paid work; in the US, one in four men and one in ten women work 49 hours or more.¹¹⁹ The fact that some workers may come up with ideas related to their paid employment while they are in the shower or dreaming rather than the office does not signal the erasure of a temporal division which remains extremely important in the everyday lives of hundreds of millions of people. Rather, it demonstrates how today "work time" casts its shadow over the rest of life for researchers, designers and other such workers, whose employers, like other employers, are demanding higher levels of productivity (more courses taught, more publications, shorter project deadlines...). Little wonder, then, that many such workers have difficulty preserving "time of life" away from the concerns of their jobs, sometimes to the detriment of their health.¹²⁰ Basso's assessment that lean work reorganization and neoliberal state policies are making paid work hours 'more intense, longer... freer from legal obligations, and more desynchronized with respect to other "social times"'¹²¹ is a much more plausible interpretation than Hardt and Negri's view.

Another consequence of immaterial labour is the undermining of qualitative divisions among working people as a result of its "becoming common" tendency. Despite the importance of this claim for their theory of the multitude, their only empirical gesture in its direction is to point to struggles in defence of housing, water and electricity provision in South Africa. A footnote in *Multitude* encourages readers to consider the rise of the hegemony of immaterial

¹¹⁷See Sears 1998.

¹¹⁸Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 145.

¹¹⁹For the UK, Nolan and Wood 2003, p. 169. The figures for Canada and the US are from Statistics Canada 2005a (2001 census data) and BLS 2004b (kindly provided by Randy E Ilg of the BLS) respectively.

¹²⁰As this pertains to university teachers and researchers, see De Angelis and Harvie 2006 and Winefield et al 2002.

¹²¹Basso 2003, p. 83.

labour as the basis of possibility for the global cycle of struggles that began in the late 1990s.¹²² It in no way impugns the significance of these struggles to point out that Hardt and Negri never actually explain in detail how qualitative divisions are being undermined as they allege.

Hardt and Negri also argue that the tendency they see for the line between work time and non-work time to dissolve has undermined the law of value as Marx understood it, and it is therefore necessary to reconceptualize value.¹²³ The logical conclusion of this, which they do not draw out, is that social production today is not (or is decreasingly) regulated by the self-expansion of value and the standard of the socially-necessary labour time required to produce goods and services, and therefore the social form of production is (or is becoming) non-capitalist; to the extent that capital relates to this emerging autonomous production, it is an external relationship of the parasitical appropriation of its products.

Even if their premise regarding time is faulty, and production is not escaping from capital, it is worth scrutinizing their argument about value, which is shot-through with confusions. First, Hardt and Negri are simply wrong to, in effect, equate Marx's theory of value with the theories of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, as they do.¹²⁴ Marx's theory is fundamentally different from theirs, concerned as it is with the social form of production and featuring the novel concepts of socially-necessary labour time (never mentioned in *Multitude's* discussion of value theory) and the distinction between labour and labour power.¹²⁵ Second, they attribute to Marx "the maxim that in capitalist society labour is the source of all value and wealth,"¹²⁶ when in fact Marx is perfectly clear that "labor is *not the source* of all wealth. *Nature* is just as much the source of use values (and it is surely of such that material wealth consists!) as labor, which itself is only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labor power."¹²⁷ Related to this, they persistently confuse the concepts of value and wealth.¹²⁸

Furthermore, the blurring of the line between work time and non-work time as this is experienced by workers is not relevant to the production of value. Value is not produced by concrete labour, in its temporality. As Moishe Postone clarifies, value is "an objectification of abstract labor. As that which constitutes a general, 'objective' social mediation, abstract labor is neither expressed in terms of the objectifications of particular concrete labors nor measured by their quantity." The value magnitudes of commodities are determined by the socially-necessary labour time necessary to produce them. This "expresses a quasi-objective social necessity with which the producers are confronted. It is the temporal dimension of the abstract domination that

¹²²Hardt and Negri 2004, pp. 135-6, 215, 390.

¹²³Negri has maintained since the 1970s that the law of value no longer holds, except as the violent power of capitalist command (Negri 1991, pp. 147-8, 172)

¹²⁴Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 145.

¹²⁵See Clarke 1991, pp. 96-103.

¹²⁶Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 144.

¹²⁷Marx 1970.

¹²⁸On which see Postone 1993, pp. 193-200.

characterizes the structures of alienated social relations in capitalism.”¹²⁹ Thus Hardt and Negri’s argument depends on both a faulty premise and theoretical confusion about the relationship between concrete labour, abstract labour and value. It does not offer any compelling reason to question the belief that value continues to regulate the global economy. Unfortunately for humanity and nature, the alienated structure of social mediation that Marx theorized as value does still dominate the world (though not in some pure and perfect form, since the tyranny of value is subject to partial negations arising from state activity, the concentration and centralization of capital, and class struggle). Hardt and Negri’s contention that it does not is, like their other alleged consequences of the hegemony of immaterial labour, an indictment of their theory of contemporary society.

In Conclusion: A Kangaroo and the Multitude

It is clear, then, that Hardt and Negri’s theory of immaterial labour is deeply flawed. In its vitalist biopolitical sense, immaterial labour is an all-encompassing concept whose alleged historical ascendancy is poorly explained and which leaves no room for making important distinctions between production at different levels of abstraction and in different social forms. In its more delimited sense of labour producing a certain kind of products -- a problematic way of identifying a qualitatively-distinct mode of labour -- immaterial labour’s essential characteristics continue to be traits associated with workers whose labour is highly intellectual or linguistic in nature, yet these are only a small fraction of the people who are lumped together in Hardt and Negri’s category. The claim that immaterial production is increasingly outside of capital is, with the partial exception of creative/originating workers with non-employee legal status, little more than an example of wishful thinking. Furthermore, the autonomist habit of theorizing in terms of a stylized singular worker or figure of labour – craft, mass, socialized, immaterial – homogenizes the complex heterogeneity of working-class formations. Rather than theorizing wage-labour as a tendentially world-historical social form of labour and exploring the diverse unfree and “free” concrete arrangements in which it always exists, Hardt and Negri erroneously posit the hegemony of a self-configuring socio-technical figure of labour in each historical era of capitalism. The account of contemporary capitalism in which the concept of immaterial labour is embedded reproduces a series of commonly-held but misleading notions about the “service economy” and offers very little insight about the different kinds of paid work that happen under that label. The real-world consequences of immaterial labour that they discuss are fanciful, and their revision of value theory is misguided and confused. As a whole, what Hardt and Negri write on work and society brings to mind EP Thompson’s charge that Althusser’s theory suffered from “*The Kangaroo Factor*”:

this kind of idealism, since it prohibits any actual empirical engagements with social reality, is delivered, bound and gagged, into the hands of the most vulgar empiricism ... [and so] the theoretical practitioner proceeds in gigantic bounds through the conceptual elements, with the most gracious curvatures of thought; and while he is bounding he performs the most elegant acrobatic twirls and he paws the air with sublime gestures. But every so often (since the law of gravity cannot be disregarded for ever) he comes down: *bump!* But he does not linger on

¹²⁹Postone 1993, pp. 188-9, 191.

this assumption, sniff it, taste the grass. *Hop!* He is off into the air again.¹³⁰

Regrettably, Hardt and Negri are far from the only contemporary scholars who eschew the method of developing theory through a careful process of abstracting from studies of concrete social realities, using concepts that are themselves socio-historically grounded, in favour of the method of the kangaroo.

This critique of Hardt and Negri's theory of immaterial labour also has a clear implication for their theory of the multitude. For Hardt and Negri, it is immaterial labour that through "the becoming common of singular forms of labor, the singularity of local human contexts in a common global anthropology, and the common condition of poverty and productivity" establishes "the conditions of possibility for the formation of the multitude,"¹³¹ which for them is the real self-identical subject-object of universal history.¹³² Even if this belief grounded in the hegemony of immaterial labour as they conceive it could be sustained, Hardt and Negri could with justice be accused of mistakenly looking to socio-economic developments to create a new political subject of social emancipation, in a manner which neglects the immense labour of unification through self-organization in paid workplaces, communities and households and the specifically-political challenge of winning mass support for a liberatory project, both of which are arguably required to forge such a subject. But, these problems aside, it is evident on the basis of the critique developed in this article that immaterial labour cannot perform the function assigned to it by Hardt and Negri. This leaves the philosophical and political theory of the multitude, whose defects have been cogently specified by Daniel Bensaïd,¹³³ without the socio-economic foundation that they wish to give it.

¹³⁰Thompson 1978, p. 124.

¹³¹Hardt and Negri 2004, pp. 211-2.

¹³²I owe this observation to Bryan Smyth (personal correspondence).

¹³³Bensaïd 2004.

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