

Keti Chukhrov

Towards the Space of the General: On Labor beyond Materiality and Immateriality

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1. Basic Provisions for the Theory of Immaterial Labor

In his programmatic work *A Grammar of the Multitude*, Paolo Virno describes a number of signs of post-Fordist capitalism that mark radical changes in the First-World production system's relation to labor over the past forty years. Most importantly, he states that post-Fordism has annulled or complicated the traditional Marxist correlation between the worker's labor time and the degree of his or her exploitation.¹ As labor is dematerialized and the division of labor in industrial production erodes, capital not only occupies the working hours during which products or goods (and its surplus value) are produced; it absorbs all of the worker's time, as well as his or her existence, thoughts, and creative desires. Products or goods are produced not to be consumed, to be swallowed directly, but as a set of new modes of communication, knowledge, languages, or even worlds.

Labor coincides increasingly with the creative maneuvers of a virtuosic performer, with active memory and an engagement with knowledge. According to Maurizio Lazzarato, the aim of consumption today is not merely the production of goods, but the multiplication of new conditions and variations for production itself.² The prerogative of immaterial industry becomes the production of subjectivities and worlds – and these are cultural and creative categories, not economic ones. Consumption in turn gives rise to a consumer who does not merely devour, but communicates, is “creatively” engaged. In this way, production activates and occupies life, social and societal space, the intellect, the “soul.” Contemporary material labor only reproduces this scheming of worlds, situations, and events automatically, finding itself on the periphery of strategies of modern production.³ Despite all this, Virno believes a positive aspect of post-Fordist capitalism can be found in its having created the conditions for the emergence of non-private, non-capitalist public benefits – languages, network-based know-hows, systems for informational and cultural dissemination.⁴ Virno as well as other theorists of post-operaism (André Gorz, Maurizio Lazzarato, Antonio Negri, Enzo Rulani, Antonella Corsani) refers to what Karl Marx called “general intellect.”⁵ As Virno puts it,

Marx ... claims that ... abstract knowledge – primarily yet not only of a scientific nature – is ... becoming no less than the main force of production and will soon relegate the repetitious labor of the assembly line to the fringes. This is the knowledge objectified in fixed capital and embedded in the

automated system of machinery.⁶

This knowledge is social and general; it is a collective competence that creates a shared common space of production. Although it is true that post-industrial capitalism has blurred the boundary between consumption, information, cognition, and communication, this doesn't mean that post-Fordist capitalism automatically generates a post-capitalist utopia. On the contrary, when corporations vie for control over the power of knowledge objectified, the space of the commons becomes a real battleground. Slavoj Žižek, in a recent talk at the "Idea of Communism" conference in Berlin, made an apt observation: the wealth of monopolies like Microsoft or Nasdaq derives not so much from their sales profits, but mainly from the fact that they are acting in the name of a universal, nearly Enlightenment-style standard of "general intellect."⁷

The French researcher of immaterial and creative production André Gorz has presented a variety of examples of the new post-industrial economy in which cognitive, symbolic, and aesthetic value exceeds both use and exchange value.⁸ Added value and profit depend on an immaterial, imaginary dimension of the goods involved. And it is for this reason that most industrial enterprises do not create their own brands, but simply provide services to firms whose products are immaterial. For instance, as Gorz points out, Nike doesn't actually own any machines or equipment at all. The company only develops footwear concepts and designs, and, in a sense, even the "philosophy" of a certain product. All other production (including the creative stage of advertising and marketing) is handled by partner companies and license holders. However, at the same time, the central-office company that produces the product concept buys up the goods produced in these industrial enterprises at very low prices and makes enormous profits by reselling them as brand-name products.

So on the one hand, the field of immaterial production allows capital to occupy an increasingly generalized territory, the space of the common good. On the other hand – and the ambivalence of post-operaist theory is revealed here – all the theoreticians (Virno, Negri, Lazzarato, Gorz) agree that modern post-industrial goods contain such a density of creative and communicative effort that even its commodity form cannot cancel it out completely; the process of creative and intellectual work, still evident in the commodity, reconnects the result of immaterial labor back to a commonly owned general social knowledge.

It is on this basis that the concept of the

"communism of capitalism" emerges in the work of Virno and Lazzarato.⁹ In other words, the hope emerges that if capitalism itself so quickly gave birth to technologies that allow for the socialization of industry and information, and the transformation of labor and economy into knowledge, then the opportunity will arise to "subtract" this knowledge away from capital. It becomes possible to imagine the reappropriation of the commons and their leaving the grasp of a capitalist economy. The political subject or agent for this withdrawal or "exodus" must be a class of immaterial workers – the so-called cognitariats, or the cognitive multitude.

In *Les Révolutions du capitalisme*, Maurizio Lazzarato confirms that he considers it possible to draw up new forms of activity in such a way as to precisely dissociate the creation of common goods from the accumulation of profit by a company.¹⁰ This should provide access to a non-exploitative type of temporality that "allows for the creation of subjectivity as well as material values." By subjectivity, Lazzarato means the factor of creative, intellectual, and political independence from the interests of capitalist production. One of the specific tasks in the struggle against the privatization of public goods involves, on the one hand, distinguishing invention from occupational, automatic, and routine reproduction, and on the other hand, neutralizing the division between mindlessly repetitive routine labor as subjugated activity and creative or intellectual invention. Bearing in mind that industrial production facilities are located in Third-World countries while large companies' branding and strategy whizzes live in the First-World, it is striking that today this division takes on not only a social but also a geopolitical character.

André Gorz, in turn, sees potential for overcoming capitalism in the overcoming of productivism (i.e., in endless production), which, in a sense, counters post-operaist positions.¹¹ Gorz insists that the Marxist position is more about overcoming post-Fordist economism, in which humans are in service to production rather than production serving human development, as the post-operaists would have it. In that sense, Gorz explicitly acknowledges that, just as Fordist capitalism did, post-Fordism entails a massive intensification of labor. If the former captured people's bodies, the latter now captures people's souls. This totality of immaterial production leaves no time free of work.

Meanwhile, the common good is obtained not only through productive labor (material or immaterial), but via any other free activity, which is not just optimizing this or that productive achievement or goal. Gorz refers here to one of the most important components of the common

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good in the frame of a socialist and communist project – free time, enabling one to develop artistic, or, as Gorz writes, “non-instrumentalized capacities.”¹²

2. A Few Contradictions in the Theory of Immaterial Labor

Most scholars of cognitive capitalism position themselves as Marxists when speaking of immaterial (“spiritual” or general) values. However, the post-operaists understand the very categories of the general (as in “general intellect”), the “immaterial,” and the “common” in a somewhat one-sided manner. Immaterial labor – especially for Virno and Lazzarato – is often identified only with intellectual production or entrepreneurial virtuosity. In Virno’s thought, for instance, the concept of virtuosity (which is interpreted in culture, art, and performance more as a superficial spectacular stunt founded on mere mechanical dexterity than as a thought-through apprehension of creative activity) constitutes an essential property of both political and creative activity.¹³ In this case Virno identifies the category of the general with the intellect and its efficiency factor, which is to say that immaterial production in any form and the post-industrial economy overall are synonymous

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with the production of the common. But this means that only developed cognitive capitalism and technologically advanced forms of production can generate general values. Correspondingly, the new general forms of the commons can only develop in countries of the First or, in extreme cases, the Second World. (By the way, this is one of the reasons why the industrial and post-industrial lag of the Soviet economy that began in the 1960s is identified among Western leftists with the political, philosophical, cognitive, and creative “immaturity” of Soviet society.) We end up with an idea that it is only possible to imagine modern creative potentialities and intellectual inventions proceeding from the technological capabilities of developed countries. If we were to describe the classical Marxist notion of surplus value under the conditions of a late post-Fordist economy, we would have to acknowledge that immaterial labor today generates more surplus value than material labor; which in turn gives us the grounds to consider immaterial or creative workers as being the most exploited social layer. It is not surprising, then, that “revolutionary” vocabulary and “proletarian” poetics are predominantly employed in the discourse of contemporary criticism and the creative industries, and rarely



König+Neurath standby office.

emerge in the realm of unprestigious material labor.

But this formulation contradicts the generic and humanist horizon of Marx's notion of general intellect. (The notion of the "generic" stands out as one reminiscent of the post-romantic work of Marx's youth, when he spoke of the social nature of all human practice, including language, in terms of generic being – an anthropological category gleaned from a dialectical critique of Ludwig Feuerbach's idealist philosophy.) The "general" in "general intellect" assumes not only quantity, availability, and technologies for the dissemination of knowledge, nor just the engagement of knowledge and creative abilities towards one or another goal (which is essentially a purely practical task). In fact, it also assumes the horizon of the "spiritual" that rests upon an exclusionary paradox: no immaterial, intellectual, or even creative production carries the scale and quality of general, non-private interests.

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Hans Hollein, *Mobiles Büro*, 1969. Austrian architect and designer Hans Hollein created a mobile office in the form of a plastic bubble. Inside, the individualized, nomadic worker was simultaneously shielded from the outside and connected to it by telephone and telefax.

The following argument presents yet another contradiction preventing the universalization of the theory of immaterial labor. The class of immaterial workers often stands out as an avant-garde of political opposition based on proximity to the most modern postindustrial means of production. However, if we turn to Lenin's revolutionary motivation for singling out the proletariat as the class of struggle and universalization, here the foundation was not only the nature of proletariat's tools but also the fact that the proletariat was the most dehumanized and disadvantaged social group of its time. Unlike a certain echelon of immaterial workers (the so-called cognitariat), which is able to control the means of production to a

significant degree, the proletariat could not.

Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou believe that the motivation for proletarian uprising did not spring from the proletariat's proximity to the means of production, but, on the contrary, from their detachment to them, from the impossibility of directing them.¹⁴ And so, for example, when criticizing immaterial workers' (in)capacity for resistance, one can argue that the worker already controls part of immaterial labor and its means of production, even if he or she does not own them. However, there is no way to explain why this does not lead to perceptible changes in the infrastructure of neoliberal societies. The reason lies in the fact that the social role of today's immaterial workers (in the sense of the concept of "precarity," the lack of social security) is very elastic. The "cognitariat" does not constitute a class. It is a social group that can include top managers of the highest echelon, white-collar workers, and service-industry workers on short-term contracts. The class gap within the "class" of immaterial workers is enormous and often depends on the area or country of residence. As André Gorz writes, in the US, for instance, workers in the immaterial sphere make up 20 percent of the working population, while only 5 percent of this 20 comprise the wealthiest part.¹⁵ The bulk of immaterial labor workers make no use whatsoever of their higher education and are working outside their specialization.

3. The Theory of Immaterial Labor and the Post-Soviet Labor and Production Space

And so, the central contradiction of the theory of immaterial labor consists in the fact that the zones of oppression, physical exploitation, and material labor often lie beyond its interpretation of the commons (general intellect, culture, artistic creativity, science, etc.). These zones are automatically isolated from the spaces of the general, from artistic creativity. It is interesting that the work of Western artists investigating routine, industrial, poorly paid labor is always conspicuously marked by the impossibility of a shared cultural space constructed by a pan-European middle class that includes material-labor workers and representatives of non-prestigious professions.¹⁶

In the social space of developed countries, physical labor is invisible; and if it comes into view, it is seen as something hovering between the exotic and the obscene. In the works of artists such as Artur Żmijewski, Michael Glawogger, or Mika Rottenberg, material labor testifies to the fatal division between routine, mechanical labor, and the intellectual-creative and cultural space of middle-class life and activity. In Artur Żmijewski's *Selected Works*, an

industrial worker's twenty-four-hour cycle appears as bare life, akin to that of an animal, split between existential survival and the material-physical labor necessary for that survival.¹⁷ The cultural, creative, or cognitive dimension of the worker's life is entirely out of the question here. Michael Glawogger tries to emphasize this same effect of "bare life" in his labor epic, *Workingman's Death*, which depicts Nigerian workers at a livestock factory, a private team of Donetsk miners who have organized illegal coal mining and sales out of an abandoned mine, Pakistani welders taking apart old ships at a scrap-metal yard, and Indonesian peasants gathering sulfur to sell to tourists. Each group is shown as marginal beings torn away from the life of any rational community.

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Michael Glawogger, filmstill from *Workingman's Death*, 2005, 122'.

For our purposes, it is interesting to see how the film depicts the history of Soviet industrialization, the Stakanovite movement, monuments to the heroic shock workers, and the industrial heritage of the Donbass as unnecessary remnants of industrial trash. The director does not see them as part of the historically emancipated genealogy of labor that, despite its physical component, was an irremovable part of productive and industrial processes in the Soviet Union. The postindustrial remnants of the heroic feats of Soviet labor and the paid labor of self-organized work teams find themselves on the same side of the scale.

This is not surprising. Many zones of post-Soviet industrial production were subjected to closure in the mid- to late 1990s. However, to this day neither alternative industrial enterprises nor any postindustrial development have emerged to take the place of the old production facilities. Thus, a great number of former Soviet industrial regions have become postindustrial not because they exceeded their industrial capacities, but rather because they were simply

made inaccessible. While industrial parks in the West now serve as testaments to the next step in an ongoing urbanization, post-Soviet industrial "trash" presumably reveals the opposite: the deurbanization and cultural provincialization of many post-Soviet cities. The possibilities for so-called creative industry are concentrated in the few major cities of an enormous country, while a rather significant portion of the population is keyed into products of the creative industry only at the level of passive consumption (through television, advertising in various media, and so forth). The economic paradox of the post-socialist countries is that in the absence of developed technological and social infrastructures, the expansion of a middle class there leads to the abuse of underpaid service labor by that very middle class. This is the reason why the rise of the creative industries under the auspices of a resource economy (which is the case in post-Soviet space as well as in other non-First-World countries) may often be combined with a return to serf labor provided mainly by illegal migrants. While it is possible in the Western European context to talk about a certain homogenous cognitive component of immaterial labor and about its (at least) potential function in the emancipatory transformation of society, in Russia immaterial labor often appears as a zone of privileged job placement for prestigious residential areas. It is more likely to denote social segregation and gentrification zones than social development.

In Glawogger's film, there is an episode on post-Soviet Ukrainian miners who extract coal from a closed mine and subsequently sell that coal to illegal clients. These are the exact opposite of the images in Dziga Vertov's *Donbass Symphony* (1930). Despite the Taylorist elements in the Soviet project of shock work, in the latter film, physical labor does not prevent us from imagining these workers as producers of immaterial, "spiritual" values.

The scholar, revolutionary, poet, engineer, and highly qualified metalworker Aleksei Gastev – who was also the founder and director of the Central Institute of Labor (1920–1938) and author of the *Labor Configurations* (1924) – used to call his directives relating to the organization of labor "poetological epistles."¹⁸ Devoting a great deal of attention to the Taylorist rationalization of labor, he nevertheless believed that material labor and its organization do not cancel out poetry, creativity, and invention. On the contrary, the becoming of a creative personality was inseparably tied to the goal-oriented and volitional configurations in the organization of labor directed towards socialist construction. When not reduced to its Stalinist background, shock work is not just extreme

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overproduction. The worker's satisfaction derives from a belief in him- or herself as the subject in the project of building a new society, defining goals and procedures and sharing the means of production. Contrary to interpretations of physical overwork and production results as the only goal of socialist industrial modernization between the 1920s and 1960s, it should be noted that it was not only physical overwork that counted as emancipatory, but also the opportunity for an industrial worker to lay claim to values beyond factory and overwork – the values that, despite a worker's physical engagement in production, could exceed his or her particular skills or efficiencies.

In his article "Dialectic of the Ideal" (1963), the Soviet philosopher Evald Ilyenkov goes far beyond the concept of "general intellect" by reintroducing the concept of the "ideal" into the materialist dialectic. He asserts that it is impossible to think about material prerequisites without ideal prerequisites. But the ideal in this case is not Hegel's idealism. It is "a specific mode of reverberation of the surrounding world by the human brain," which would never appear without material preconditions.¹⁹ Thus the Marxist interpretation of the ideal presupposes

the real process, in the course of which the material life and activity of the social human being start to produce not only the material, but the ideal product; but having appeared, the ideal in its own turn becomes part and parcel of the material life of the social human being.²⁰

Unlike post-operaist theoreticians, who state that general knowledge and common goods are an external coordination of equipment, knowledge, and societal organs, and that the category of the "general" is identical to these qualities, Ilyenkov emphasizes the ideal as a permanent horizon of human *existence*.²¹ It cannot be reduced to pure brain function, to the physical-material form of one object or another, nor to some material or immaterial activity. Labor as a social-human activity that separates things and life from their natural qualities is also related to the dialectical category of the ideal.²² But labor in its turn – be it material or immaterial – cannot be reduced to the thing produced or the labor process. Labor is a form of a person's vital activity, yet it lies outside the person and is realized in the form of the "things" he or she creates. According to Ilyenkov, the possibility for such vital activity lies in the very potential of the ideal in the context of human existence. If labor is not exploitation of a person's will and consciousness, then it is a "spiritual" category, the possibility of a dialectical connection

between the material and the ideal – independent of its materiality or immateriality.²³

Interestingly, in the most recent films of the so-called post-Soviet new wave (particularly in Boris Khlebnikov's *Free Floating* [2006] and *Crazy Aid* [2009]), physical labor does not separate people from the areas of cognition, creativity, reflection, and, even less, ethical action – unlike in the above-mentioned Western works addressing material labor.²⁴ The simplicity of the provincial worker does not contradict the potential for a poetic or political relationship to reality. For a person with a Soviet background, it is not difficult to unite the elderly physicist-inventor and the Belorussian guest-worker in their collective ethical justice project (*Crazy Aid*), which they bring about by inventing and creatively implementing absurd situations in urban space, helping their fellow citizens.

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Boris Khlebnikov, filmstill from *Free Floating*, 2005, 101'.

The unity of mental activity and physical labor is the heritage of the socialist project, in which general intellect appears not only as a distribution of abilities and knowledge, but also as a general, ideal, ethical presumption of cognition's availability to workers in any area. On the other hand, both of Khlebnikov's films demonstrate to what extent the humanist horizon of the socialist project has fallen out of the collective post-Soviet consciousness; it has only been preserved in the form of rudimentary, merely personal, and therefore inevitably eccentric attempts to restore the space of the "general."

P.S.: Today, with culture having become one of the most prestigious forms of consumption, many, especially Russian, contemporary artists are going to extremes. Some see themselves in the manipulative role of a human office or enterprise for the production of art. Some, on the contrary, assess their artistic activity in the

system of contemporary art as “precarious” and exploited immaterial labor. This is unequivocally the case. The creative industries exploit enthusiasm, desires, ideas, and feelings while simultaneously teaching that they should be expediently “packaged” as artistic services. These processes must be made self-conscious. However, we should also not forget that there does exist an area of the non-exploited and non-commodified. And this is not the field of “non-commercial” or public art (which often fails to distinguish art from social activism), nor that of the distribution of knowledge and information in society. Rather, this area is created from the presumed potential of the general without a segregation between material and immaterial labor – without an anthropological division of people into two races of producers.

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Translated from the Russian by Ainsley Morse.

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- 1
Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004).
- 2
Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labour," trans. Paul Colilli and Ed Emery, available at <http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcimmateriallabour3.htm>.
- 3
Maurizio Lazzarato, *Les Révolutions du capitalisme* (Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2004), 168–198.
- 4
Paolo Virno, "The Dismeasure of Art," interview by Pascal Gielen and Sonja Lavaert, *Open*, no. 17, <http://www.skor.nl/article-4178-nl.html?lang=en>.
- 5
See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1993), 706. "The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a *direct force of production*, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it."
- 6
Paolo Virno, "General Intellect," in *Lessico postfordista: dizionario di idee della mutazione*, eds. Adelino Zanini and Ubaldo Fadini (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2001), 146–151.
- 7
"The Idea of Communism: Philosophy and Art" was held in Berlin's Volksbühne theater, June 25–27, 2010.
- 8
André Gorz, *L'Immatériel: Connaissance, valeur et capital* (Paris: Galilée 2003), 31.
- 9
Virno, "The Dismeasure of Art."
- 10
Lazzarato, *Les Révolutions du capitalisme*, 193.
- 11
Gorz, *L'Immatériel*, 51.
- 12
Ibid.
- 13
Paolo Virno, "Virtuosity and Revolution," trans. Ed Emory, available at <http://www.makeworlds.org/node/view/34>.
- 14
This thought was expressed at several points during the "Idea of Communism" conference (see above).
- 15
Gorz, *L'Immatériel*, 52.
- 16
See the series of films by Polish artist Artur Żmijewski called *Selected Works* (2007); Michael Glawogger's film *Workingman's Death* (2006); and the American artist Mika Rottenberg's piece *Dough* (2006).
- 17
For more on the concept of "bare life," see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- 18
Alekssei Gastev, *Trudovye ustanovki* (Labor Configurations) (1924; Moscow: Ekonomika 1973). Also see his manifesto "Kak nado rabotat?" (How We Should Work), first published in *Organizatsiya truda*, 1921, and then in *Poesija rabochego udara* (The Poetry of the Worker's Blow) (1918; Moscow: Ekonomika, 1976), 270–297.
- 19
Evald Ilyenkov, *Filosofia y Kultura* (Philosophy and Culture) (Moscow: Political Literature Publishers, 1991), 240.
- 20
Ibid, 238.
- 21
Ibid, 256.
- 22
Ibid, 268.
- 23
Whereas classical German idealism considered the world existing outside human consciousness to be material, and everything conceived by that consciousness to be ideal, the Marxist interpretation of the ideal used by Ilyenkov allows it to be seen dialectically: i.e., not opposing the material and ideal, but assuming the ideal to be a human potentiality; with the "human" being understood through the potentiality of liberated labor.
- 24
The representatives of the new wave in Russian film today are considered to be Boris Khlebnikov, Aleksei Popogrebsky, Vasily Sigarev, Nikolay Khomeriki, Bakur Bakuradze and Ivan Vyrypaev.

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