

Franco Berardi Bifo  
**Cognitarian  
Subjectivation**

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**Cognitarian Subjectivation**

Recent years have witnessed a new techno-social framework of contemporary subjectivation. And I would like to ask whether a process of autonomous, collective self-definition is possible in the present age. The concept of “general intellect” associated with Italian post-operaist thought in the 1990s (Paolo Virno, Maurizio Lazzarato, Christian Marazzi) emphasizes the interaction between labor and language: social labor is the endless recombination of myriad fragments producing, elaborating, distributing, and decoding signs and informational units of all kinds. Every semiotic segment produced by the information worker must meet and match innumerable other semiotic segments in order to form the combinatory frame of the info-commodity, semiocapital.

Semiocapital puts neuro-psychic energies to work, submitting them to mechanistic speed, compelling cognitive activity to follow the rhythm of networked productivity. As a result, the emotional sphere linked with cognition is stressed to its limit. Cyberspace overloads cybertime, because cyberspace is an unbounded sphere whose speed can accelerate without limits, while cybertime (the organic time of attention, memory, imagination) cannot be sped up beyond a certain point – or it cracks. And it actually is cracking, collapsing under the stress of hyper-productivity. An epidemic of panic and depression is now spreading throughout the circuits of the social brain. The current crisis in the global economy has much to do with this nervous breakdown. Marx spoke of overproduction, meaning the excess of available goods that could not be absorbed by the social market. But today it is the social brain that is assaulted by an overwhelming supply of attention-demanding goods. The social factory has become the factory of unhappiness: the assembly line of networked production is directly exploiting the emotional energy of the cognitive class.

I wish to pinpoint the problem of organic limits, which is often eclipsed by an emphasis on the limitless potential of technology. We should speak of technology in context, and the present context of technology is culturally oriented towards economic competition. Info-producers are neuro-workers. Their nervous systems act as active receiving terminals. They are sensitive to semiotic activation throughout the entire day. What emotional, psychic, existential price does the constant cognitive stress of permanent cognitive electrocution exact? The acceleration of network technologies, the general condition of precariousness, and the dependence on cognitive labor all induce pathological effects in the social mind, saturating attention time,

compressing the sphere of emotion and sensitivity, as is shown by psychiatrists who have observed a steep increase in manic depression and suicide in the last generation of workers.

The colonization of time has been a fundamental issue in the modern history of capitalist development: the anthropological mutation that capitalism produced in the human mind and in daily life has, above all, transformed the perception of time. But we are now leaping into the unknown – digital technologies have enabled absolute acceleration, and the short-circuiting of attention time. As info-workers are exposed to a growing mass of stimuli that cannot be dealt with according to the intensive modalities of pleasure and knowledge, acceleration leads to an impoverishment of experience. More information, less meaning. More information, less pleasure.

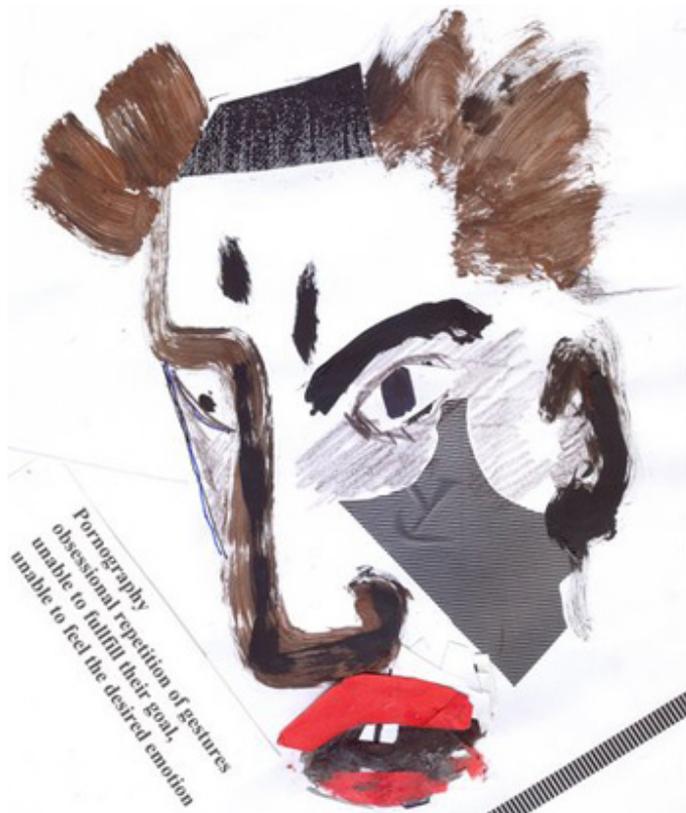
Sensibility is activated in time. Sensuality is slow. Deep, intense elaboration becomes impossible when the stimulus is too fast. A process of desensitization is underway at the point where electronic cyberspace intersects with organic cybertime. The prospect of individual subjectivation, and of social subjectivation, has to be reframed in this context, and a series of radical questions arise:

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Is it still possible to envisage a process of collective subjectivation and social solidarity? Is it still possible to imagine a “movement” in the sense of a collective process of intellectual and political transformation of reality? Is it still possible to forge social autonomy from capitalist dominance in the psycho-economic framework of semiocapitalism?

### **Dismantling General Intellect**

The refusal of work – which is better defined as a refusal of the alienation and exploitation of living time – has been the main engine of innovation, of technological development and knowledge. The organic composition of capital (as a relationship between dead labor and living labor) progressively changed throughout the twentieth century as the workers’ resistance, their sabotage and insubordination, forced capitalists to hire engineers to replace human labor with machines. Similarly, the intellectualization of human activity is – from any perspective – a consequence of the workers’ insubordination and resistance to exploitation. When the cost of labor increases (as happened in the 1960s and ’70s), the capitalist replaces worker with machine, as the machine is less costly in the long run. Since the massive wave of industrial workers’



resistance, information technology has helped to replace human toil with intelligent machines, and this has provoked the enhancement of the sphere of intellectual labor and cognitive activity linked to value production.

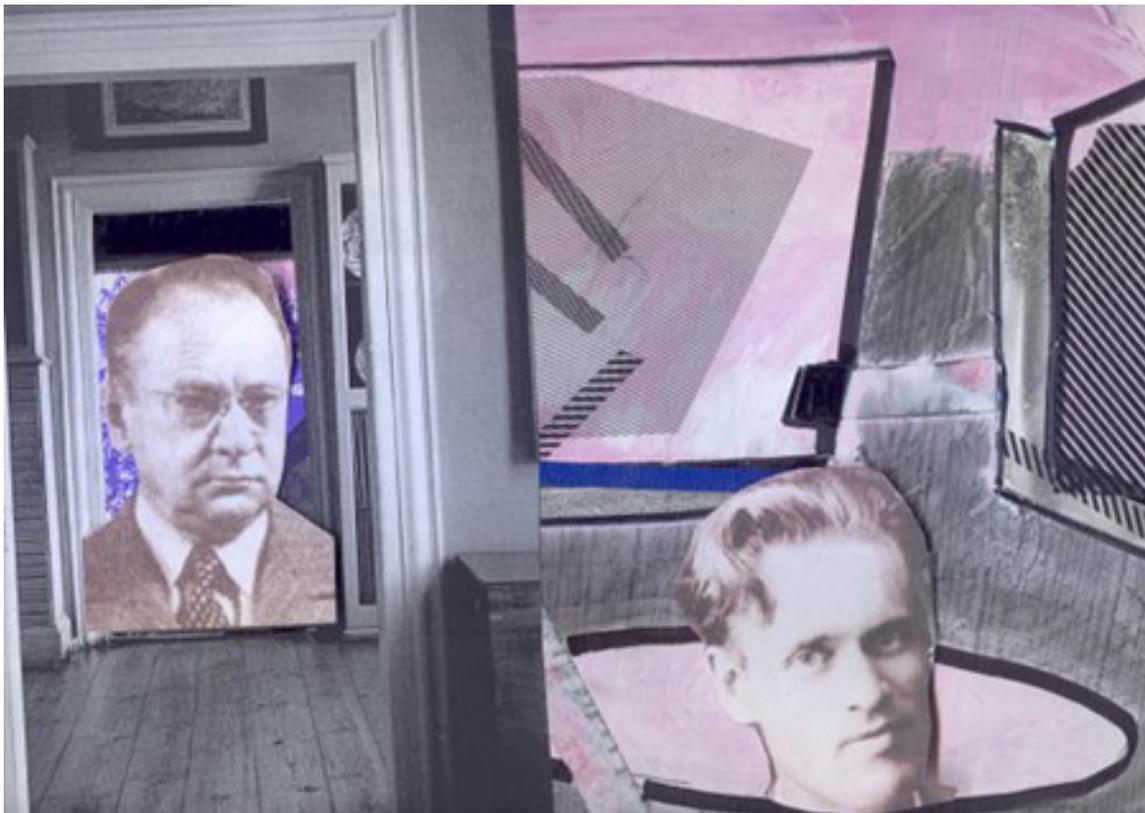
The '90s were a decade of alliances: cognitive labor and venture capital met and merged in the dot-com. Expectations were high, judging by the amount of investment, and creativity became an inherent feature of social labor. Then, after the dot-com bubble burst in spring of 2000, neoliberalism broke the alliance of cognitive labor and venture capital. Using technology itself, neoliberalism managed to subvert the social and political *rapport de force* between labor and capital. As far as we can see now, the result of neoliberal politics is a general reduction of labor cost and an impoverishment of the cognitarians. Both industrial labor, delocalized to the peripheral areas of the world, and cognitive labor, are devalued and underpaid, as precarization has fragmented and finally destroyed social solidarity. In this new context, defined by precarization of cognitive labor, we must rethink the question of subjectivation.

Just after the financial collapse of spring 2000, the dot-com crash and the crumbling of big corporations like Enron and WorldCom, the Swiss

philosopher and economist Christian Marazzi, a sharp analyst of the social implications of financial crises, wrote an article on the danger of privatizing the general intellect, in which he predicted the trend that ten years later is in full swing: the reduction of research financing, the manipulation and militarization of state-financed research, and the impoverishment and precarization of cognitive labor.<sup>1</sup>

If we look at the politics of the European neoliberal ruling class, we see that they are doing exactly this: in some countries (such as Italy) they are reducing the financing for school and for research, privatizing public schools, and provoking a large-scale de-scholarization that has already begun showing signs of producing widespread ignorance and fanaticism. In some countries (like France), they increasingly limit the public financing of research to that which can immediately translate into the politics of economic growth. Subjugating research to immediate economic interests reduces the role of research, rendering it a mere tool for governance, for the repetition of an existing framework of social activity. As cognitive workers are forced into precarity, they are also denied the possibility of deciding the scope of their own research. This obviously reduces the creativity

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invested by cognitarians in their work, as well as the pace of innovation and progress in technology.

In the long run, this trend obliterates the progressive features of capitalism. As the cost of labor becomes so low that exploiting the physical force of a worker costs less than looking for some technological replacement, the push toward innovation slows to a halt. The interest in immediate profit prevails over the long-term development of productive force. Notwithstanding the shortsighted opinions prevailing in the field of neoliberal economics, a decrease in labor cost suggest that the progressive impulse of capitalism is fading; capitalism becomes a factor of de-civilization, of intellectual and technological regression.

### **Cognitarians Searching for a Body**

Cognitarians are those who embody the general intellect in its many forms: they process information in order to give birth to goods and services. As the cognitive function of society is inscribed in the process of capital valorization, the infinitely fragmented mosaic of cognitive activity becomes a fluid process within a universal telematic network, redefining the shape of labor and capital. Capital becomes the

generalized semiotic flux that runs through the veins of the global economy, while labor becomes the constant activation of the intelligence of countless semiotic agents linked to one another.

Cognitarians are the social body of the soul at work in the sphere of semicapital, but this body is dimidiated in a sphere isolated from the other's body. The form of alienation that is spreading in the living sphere of the cognitarians is a form of psychic suffering that escapes the Freudian definition of neurosis. If Freud's definition of neurosis lingered on repression of desire, semicapital is pushing demand for consumerist hyper-expression: just do it. Panic, depression, and a de-activation of empathy – it is here that we find the cognitariat's problem.

Precarious cognitive workers are forced to think in terms of competition. You can become friends with another person on Facebook, but genuine friendship is difficult under conditions of virtual isolation and intense economic competition. If we want to find the way towards autonomous collective subjectivation we have to generate cognitarian awareness with regard to an erotic, social body of the general intellect. The way to autonomous and collective subjectivation starts here: from the general intellect searching

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for a body.

Our main political task must be handled with the conceptual tools of psychotherapy, and the language of poetry – much more than the language of politics and the conceptual tools of modern political science. The political organizer of cognitarians must be able to do away with panic and depression, to speak in a way that sensibly enacts a paradigm shift, a resemiotization of the social field, a change in social expectations and self-perception. We are forced to acknowledge that we do have a body, a social and a physical body, a socioeconomic body.

Cyber-optimists were fashionable in the '90s, and they were able to interpret the spirit of an alliance between venture capitalists and artists or engineers. But the alliance was broken in the Bush years, when technology was submitted to the laws of war, and financial capitalism provoked a collapse that may still lead to the destruction of modern civilization. Today, cyber-optimism sounds fake, like advertising for a rotten product. In his recent book, *You Are Not a Gadget*, Jaron Lanier, the same person who engineered the tools of virtual reality, writes:

true believers in the hive mind seem to think that no number of layers of abstraction in a financial system can dull the efficacy of the system. According to the new ideology, which is a blending of cyber-cloud and neo-Milton Friedman economics, the market will not only do its best, it will do better the less people understand it. I disagree. The financial crisis brought about by the U.S. mortgage meltdown of 2008 was a case of too many people believing in the cloud too much.<sup>2</sup>

### **Governance and Cognitive Subjugation**

In the present, agonizing phase of neoliberalism (an agony that is more ferocious and destructive than the previous phases) European governments are staging an assault on the educational system – and particularly on scientific research – as a part of a war against cognitive labor, a war aimed at its subjugation. The university system across Europe is based on a huge amount of precarious, underpaid, or unpaid labor. Researchers and students have staged protests against this trend, attempting to return the educational system to its original vocation: a place of non-dogmatic knowledge, of the public sharing of culture. Research should not be subjected to any restraining criterion of functionality, because its very function is to explore solutions that, although dysfunctional in

the present paradigm, may reveal new paradigmatic landscapes. This is the role of scientific research, especially when we are facing conundrums that seem unresolvable within the capitalist paradigm.

The European ruling class aims to reduce research to a method for the governance of complexity. The ideology of governance is based on the naturalization (hypostatization, I would say in Hegelian parlance) of economic reasoning. The economy has achieved the status of a universal language, of the ultimate standard of choice, whereas economics should be just a branch of knowledge among others. The normative role that the economy has acquired is unwarranted from an epistemological point of view, and devastating at the social level. If research is subjected to economic conceptualization, it is no longer research, but technical management. The so-called reform of the European educational system launched in 1999 (the year of the Bologna Charter) is aimed at the separation of applied research from the questioning of the very foundations and finalities of scientific knowledge, accompanied by the subjugation of research to standards set by economic evaluation.

The epistemic implications of this move are enormous: to submit research to the laws of economic growth obliterates the most important purpose of knowledge, what Thomas Kuhn calls its “paradigmatic” function. The ability to produce paradigm shifts in the field of knowledge and in the field of experimentation depends on the autonomy of research from established standards of evaluation. Only when research can work and discover and create concepts regardless of established social interests can knowledge move beyond repetition, and open new prospects to imagination and technology.

“Governance” is the keyword for this process. Governance produces pure functionality without meaning, the automation of thought and of will. It embeds abstract connections in the relation between living organisms, technologically subjecting choices to logical concatenation. It recombines compatible (compatibilized) fragments of knowledge. Governance is the replacement of political will with a system of automatic technicalities forcing reality into a logical framework that cannot be questioned. Financial stability, competitiveness, labor cost reduction, increase of productivity: the systemic architecture of EU rule is based on such dogmatic foundations that cannot be challenged or discussed, because they are embedded in the technical function of managerial subsystems. No enunciation or action is operational if it does not comply with

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embedded rules of techno-linguistic *dispositifs* of daily exchange.

Governance is the management of a system that is too complex to be governed. The word “government” means the understanding (as a reduction to a rational model) of the social world, and the ability of the human will (despotic, democratic, and so forth) to control a flow of information sufficient for the control of a relevant part of the social whole. The possibility of government requires a low degree of complexity with regard to social information. Information complexity grew throughout the late modern age, and exploded in the age of the digital network. Therefore, the reduction of social information to comprehensive knowledge and political control becomes an impossible task: control becomes aleatory, uncertain, almost impossible, and an increasing number of events escape the organized will.

At this point, capitalism shifts to the mode of governance. It employs abstract concatenation of technological functions in place of the conscious processing of a flow of information. It connects asignifying segments in place of dialogic elaboration. It automatically adapts in place of forming consensus, using technical language in place of shared meaning

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resulting from dialogue and conflict. In place of planning, it manages disruption. It assesses the compatibility of agents entering the social game in place of mediating conflicting political interests and projects. And it employs the rhetoric of systemic complexity in place of a rhetoric of historical dialectics.

### Looking for Autonomy

As the governance model functions perfectly, in itself, it destroys the social body. Conceptualizing the field of cybernetics, Norbert Wiener argued that a system exhibiting positive feedback, in response to perturbation, increases the magnitude of perturbation. In contrast, a system that responds to a perturbation in a way that reduces its effect is said to exhibit negative feedback.

A logic of positive feedback is installed in the connection between digital technology and financial economy, because this connection tends to induce technological automatisms, and psycho-automatisms too, leading to the advancement of destructive tendencies. Look at the discourse of the European political class (almost without exception): If deregulation produced the systemic collapse with which the global economy is now confronted, we need more



deregulation. If lower taxation on high incomes led to a fall in demand, let's lower high-income taxation. If hyper-exploitation resulted in the overproduction of unsold and useless cars, let's intensify car production.

Are these people insane? I don't think so. I think they are incapable of thinking in terms of the future; they are panicking, terrorized by their own impotence; they are scared. The modern bourgeoisie was a strongly territorialized class, linked to material assets; it could not exist without a relationship to territory and community. The financial class that dominates the contemporary scene has no attachment to either territory or material production, because its power and wealth are founded on the perfect abstraction of a digitally multiplied finance.

And this digital-financial hyper-abstraction is liquidating the living body of the planet, and the social body. Only the social force of the general intellect can reset the machine and initiate a paradigm shift, but this presupposes the autonomy of the general intellect, the social solidarity of cognitarians. It presupposes a process of autonomous subjectivation of collective intelligence.

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All images by ISTUBALZ

Franco Berardi, aka "Bifo," founder of the famous "Radio Alice" in Bologna and an important figure of the Italian Autonomia Movement, is a writer, media theorist, and media activist. He currently teaches Social History of the Media at the Accademia di Brera, Milan.

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See Christian Marazzi, "The Privatization of the General Intellect," trans. Nicolas Guilhot, <http://deconstructural.files.wordpress.com/2010/10/christian-marazzi-the-privatization-of-the-general-intellect.pdf>.

2

Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not A Gadget* (New York: Random House, 2010), 97.

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