The Soul at Work and in Debt abstracts

The Soul at Work and in Debt (I): “Subjectivation, Subsumption, and the Spaces of Daily Life”

Chair: Gregory J. Seigworth

Thursday 14:15-15:15 WIN 0-04

Inside the Garden of Bifurcations: Technologies of Composition & the Space of the Soul in Neoliberalism

Stevphen Shukaitis

In an interview for the Sunday Times on May 1st, 1981 Margaret Thatcher famously declared that for her “Economics are the method; the object is to change the heart and soul.” That is to say that neoliberalism as a social and economic transformation was not just about changing institutional or political arrangements, but rather instead intended to attempt to enact a kind of degree zero rewriting of the fundamental conditions of labor and subjectivity as it is subsumed within the workings of capitalism. In recent years social theory has turned to exploring how precise and accurate a statement this was, from Jason Read’s theorization of the subsumption of subjectivity within the labor process (2003) to broader discussions about the nature of biopolitics, affective and immaterial labor, and the possibilities or blockages of subversion around transformed compositions of labor.

This presentation will bring together various strands of thought on such subject, exploring through an autonomist framework oriented around issues of class composition. How does the attempt to shape the social within neoliberalism operate as a form of class decompositon, one that attempts to pre-empty attempts to find new avenues for the political recomposition of struggles? In particular it will explore these questions through the writings of Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi and his explanation of how the soul is ‘put to work’ within a hyper-subsuming capitalist logic that can only result in pathological overload of immaterial and communicative dynamics. While Berardi’s work analyzes with insightful prescient the dynamics of soul shaping labor that work to prevent the recomposition of labor subversion in these conditions, at face value they seem to point to a politics of hopelessness. Rather than accept a logic of collapse as the end of a politics of autonomy, the goal will be to return to earlier moments in the autonomist tradition to reconstruct how practices of workers inquiry and class composition analysis, by understanding what brought about this collapse, can rebuild a new approach to labor, subversion and autonomy from within the ruins.
Schemes from the Broken Bubble

Peter Conlin

The paper presents a series of fragmentary descriptions, aphoristic observations and sketches based around the search for instances of deviation within a post-crisis cultural logic. The emphasis is on an everyday culture of neoliberalism, consisting of a proliferation of internal divisions within ostensible sites of accessibility, a generalization of an aspirational ethos and the experiential dimension of financialization. Specific sites/areas of investigation are transportation (subways and airports), office environments, education (academy schools and universities), and vacant lots. The paper explores concepts drawn from theorists assessments of neoliberalism in Foucault, Lazzarato, Berardi and Bourdieu—however it is not a ‘theory paper’ in the sense of an exposition of a particular text, or an argument based on a particular reading of a concept. Instead, points of the city which are at once striking and ordinary are deciphered and unfolded to explore the psycho-social registers that fall under the headings of ‘growing inequality’ or ‘uneven development’. The descriptions, a kind of juncture between Franco Berardi and Philip K Dick, are attempts to find alternate realities within zones of subsumption and control.

The Soul at Work and in Debt (II): “Labour: Value, Power, Immaterial”

Chair: Gregory J. Seigworth

Friday 11:30-13:00 ABF003

On Labour-Power and the Discourse of Creativity

Toby Bennett

The creative industries have become increasingly central to social and economic policy across the globe; accordingly, the categories of cultural and creative labour have, in recent years, been paid close attention by the social sciences. These jobs – with their perceived high levels of flexibility, independence, and satisfaction – are, in many accounts, assumed to be the model towards which all work aspires. Yet the conception of ‘creativity’ that emerges here is usually harmonised into managerial discourse, such that it sits alongside sister-terms like ‘innovation’ and ‘entrepreneurialism’. Is this the inspired creativity of Kant’s ‘genius’ – an innate, natural, and ineffable talent? Or is it rather an attribute or skill that an individual ‘owns’ or develops, like a mathematics qualification, or an ‘eye for detail’? Both interpretations appear to be present when talking of creativity as a form of labour-power; as the potential force that can be drawn upon and actualised in the service of production. This paper seeks to explore the schisms that emerge when the two terms enter into dialogue.
Workers-as-Consumers: Rethinking the Political Economy of Consumption and Capital Reproduction

Niamh Mulcahy

By following Marx’s classical definition of the working class as producers who must, in the absence of owning any means of production, sell their labour-power for a wage, much of Marxist theory focuses on workers as alienated and exploited in the process of production. The obverse implication for the working class, which is less often addressed, is that they are also necessarily consumers owing to their separation from the means of production. The working class usually only comes into contact with the objects of production by exchanging wages for commodities. Yet, mass consumption, alongside the securitisation of financial markets through credit and the concurrent problem of debt, make working class consumption an important issue in the reproduction of capitalist social formations: as a large class of consumers, workers are simultaneously tasked with spending wages to ensure further production, while managing personal levels of debt to avoid destabilising credit crises. Hence, working-class subjectivity is invariably multifaceted, where interests in the production process, but also in acquiring objects of labour, are concerned. While capitalists aspire to realise the exchange-value of commodities and reproduce capital, workers are more often concerned with use-value, which is partly why debtor creditor relations, wherein commodities can be used before their exchange-value is fully realised, have generated contradictions and instability in the reproduction of capital and capitalist social relations. I therefore suggest the need to theorise the worker-as-also-consumer, rather than treating consumption as a normative social problem, in order to address the contradictory ontology of contemporary capitalism.

A Crisis of Measurability? Immaterial Production, Abstract Labour and the Value Form

Frederick H. Pitts

The theoretical literature on immaterial labour suggests that work in post-Fordist economies has become based principally around the creation and manipulation of ideas, symbols, selves, emotions and relationships, inhabiting as a result the entirety of life itself. Due to the intangibility and boundlessness of this production, a ‘crisis of measurability’ is posited by which all quantification or qualification of work-time and the value created is impossible. Furthermore, it is contended, the central movement of the law of value - i.e. the translation of multiple different and heterogeneous concrete labours into the abstract average necessitated by the exchange relation- is made redundant in the post-Fordist, informational, immaterial work processes that define contemporary capitalist production. Today, it is claimed, differently performed labours do not need to be homogenized through the exchange abstraction, but are rendered actually homogeneous through the reduction of labouring activity to abstract labour in its very performance rather than through the value-form. In this paper, I will seek to combine an appreciation of the qualitatively different status of
‘immaterial’ forms of labour within post-industrial capitalism, whilst restating value theory as a medium through which this labour can be understood. When one considers the theory of value to be a question not of quantification but of the analysis of social form—specifically that of the commodity, physical and non-physical, one sees very little difference between labours of a ‘material’ or ‘immaterial’ kind. It is in recognition of this that the continuing relevancy of value theory can be stated.

The Soul at Work and in Debt (III): “Debt Collection, Soul Affections”

Chair: Gregory J. Seigworth

Friday 16:00-17:30 WIN 0-03

“All Bailiffs are Bastards”: Debt Collection Goes to Work

Alexander George Baker

Marxist accounts of debt have traditionally focused on the relationship between debtor and creditor parties and placed a heavy emphasis on economic transaction. More recently, work in a *post-operaismo* tradition has emphasised the experience and resistance of the indebted subject and the disciplinary effect debt has on workers (Lazzarato 2012, Mcclanahan 2011). Yet, with a few notable exceptions, most accounts have completely overlooked the role of debt collection agents themselves. As the limited work on the topic, such as that by Arlie Hochschild (1983), has indicated, the experience of debt collection workers has a profound influence on the affects and dispositifs used to enforce and administer debt.

This paper attempts to renew accounts of debt collection as a form of labour in itself, through briefly re-examining the history of debt collection in the UK (drawing on the likes of Linebaugh, 2005) and contemporary media representations of the experience of debt collection work. Using critiques of labour, especially those drawn from the ‘post-work’ perspectives of writers such as Kathi Weeks (2012) and Andre Gorz (1980, 1989, 1999), alongside lessons drawn from recent studies of physical labour and force in the security sector more broadly (Hobbs et. al. 2005, Hall 2010), the paper will argue that viewing debt collection as labour is vital to understanding the interplay and conflict between the disciplinary power of debt and the resistance of the indebted. It will then explore the limits of post-operaismo and ‘post-work’ critiques’ usefulness for such an understanding.


McClanahan. A. (2011) ‘Coming Due: accounting for Debt, Counting on Crisis’ *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, 2 539-545

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Souls in Default: Pursuing the Intimate Encounters Between Debtor and Collector

Joe Deville

Consumer credit borrowing – using credit cards, store cards and personal loans – is an important and routine part of many of our lives. But what happens when these everyday forms of borrowing go ‘bad’, when people cannot, or will not, repay, and when a space of intersection opens up between, on one side, a borrower and, on the other, a collector? I argue that this space of intersection offers important pointers for both understanding the relational composition of debt, as well as for the study of economic life more widely. Drawing on interviews with debtors and an exposition of debt collections technologies, the paper demonstrates how this market domain, in seeking to prompt calculative engagement, depends on its ability to intersect successfully with the everyday lives of economic agents. Critically engaging with key currents emerging out of the ‘economization’ programme it builds on its attention to the socio-material mechanisms of market making. However, the paper argues that materially sensitive economic sociologies need to account more thoroughly for the place of affect in markets. While affect is not an analytical category equally relevant to all market spaces, it certainly is when it comes to studying consumer markets, where exchanges routinely centre on intimate and embodied encounters between economic actors. These include homes reconfigured as space of ‘anxious anticipation’, where the collector hopes to focus calculative attention on them, not a competitor by ‘capturing’ a range of emergent, co-constituted affective affordances.

– Discussant –

Greg Siegworth
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