

What does Cognitariat Mean?

Work, Desire and Depression

FRANCO BERARDI (BIFO)

In order to understand the meaning of the notions of cognitive labour and cognitariat, it is necessary to analyse not only the transformations that have taken place in the work process but also what is happening in the psychic and desiring dimension of post-industrial society. What is at stake in the social definition of cognitive labour is the body, sexuality, perishable physicality and the unconscious. Cognitariat is the social corporeality of cognitive labour. In his most celebrated book *Cyberculture*, Pierre Lévy proposes the notion of collective intelligence.¹ But the social existence of cognitive workers cannot be reduced to intelligence: in their existential concreteness, the cognitarians are also body, in other words nerves that stiffen in the constant strain of attention, eyes that get tired staring at a screen. Collective intelligence neither reduces nor resolves the social existence of the bodies that produce this intelligence, the concrete bodies of the male and female cognitarians.

—DIGITAL LABOUR AND ABSTRACTION

What does it mean to work today? Work is tending to assume a uniform physical character: we sit down in front of a screen, move our fingers on the keyboard and type. But at the same time, work is a lot more diversified in the contents it elaborates. The architect, the travel agent, the

programmer and the lawyer carry out the same physical gestures, but could never exchange jobs because each of them performs a specific, local task, one that is not communicable to someone who has not followed their particular educational cursus or to someone who is not familiar with that complex content of knowledges.

Mechanical industrial labour was characterised by the traits of substantial interchangeability and depersonalisation and as a consequence was perceived as something extraneous, a task that was performed solely because one received a salary in exchange. Dependent salaried work was a pure service of time.

Digital technologies open up an entirely new vista for work. In the first place, they modify the relationship between conception and execution, then the relationship between the intellectual content of work and its manual execution. Manual labour tends to be carried out by automatically controlled machine-assemblages, while the innovative labour that produces the greater part of value is to be found in cognitive labour. The material to be transformed is simulated by digital sequences. The content of labour becomes mental, but at the same time the limits of productive work become uncertain. The very notion of productivity becomes imprecise: the relationship between time and the quantity of value produced becomes difficult to stabilise, because not all the hours of a cognitive labourer are equal in terms of productivity.

The Marxian notion of abstract labour needs to be redefined. What does 'abstract labour' mean in the language of Marx? It signifies an extortion of time, without regard for its quality, without relation to the specific and concrete utility of the objects it creates. Industrial labour tended towards abstraction because its concrete utility was entirely irrelevant with respect to its function of economic valorisation.

Can we say that this progressive reduction to abstraction continues to operate in the era of infoproduction? In a certain sense yes; indeed, in a certain sense we can say that this tendency is amplified to the highest degree, because every residue of materiality and concreteness disappears from the labouring operation, and only the symbolic abstractions remain, bits, digits and differences of information, on which productive activity acts. We can say that the digitalisation of the work process has made all kinds of work equal from the physical and ergonomic point of view. We all do the same thing: we sit down in front of a screen and tap on the keys of a keyboard, and the automatic machines transform our activity into a television script, a surgical operation or a car. From a physical point of view there is no difference between a travel agent, a machine operator in the petrochemical sector, or a detective novelist, when they are carrying out their work.

And yet at the same time, work has become part of a mental process, the elaboration of signs dense with knowledge. It has become a lot more specific, a lot more specialised: the lawyer and the architect, the IT technician and the supermarket employee, are positioned in front of the same screen and tap on the same keys, but the one could never take the position of the other because the content of their elaborative activity is irreducibly different and untranslatable.

A chemical worker and a metal mechanics worker are engaged in labour that is totally different from the physical point of view, but a metal mechanics worker can acquire the operational knowledge for performing the job of the chemical worker in a few days, and vice versa. The more industrial labour is simplified, the more interchangeable it becomes. In front of the computer and connected to the same universal machine of elaboration and communication, human terminals all carry out the same physical movements, but the simpler their work becomes from the physical point of view, the less interchangeable become their bodies of knowledge, their capacities and their services.

Digitalised labour manipulates absolutely abstract signs, but its recombinant functioning is all the more specific, all the more personalised and therefore less and less interchangeable. As a consequence, high tech workers tend to consider their work as the most important, most singularised and most personalised part of their life—the exact opposite of the industrial worker's situation, for whom the eight hours of salaried service were a sort of temporary death from which one awoke only when the stop-work siren went off.

—ENTERPRISE AND DESIRE

Only if we take this into account can we explain why, over the last two decades, disaffection and absenteeism have become totally marginal phenomena, whereas they were endemic in the late industrial period. The studies carried out by Juliet Schorr (*The Overworked American*) show that in the 1980s (and even more so in the 1990s) the average working time increased considerably. On average, every worker in the USA dedicated 148 more hours to work in 1996 than his or her colleague in 1973. The percentage of people who work more than 49 hours a week increased from 13 per cent in 1976 to almost 19 per cent in 1998 according to the US Bureau of Labour Statistics. As for managers, the percentage went up from 40 to 45 per cent.²

How can the conversion of workers from disaffection to adherence be explained? Certainly it can be explained by the political defeat that the working class suffered after the end of the seventies—a consequence of technological restructuring, the resulting unemployment and the violent repression of working class avant-gardes. But this is not enough. In order to fully

understand the psychosocial change of attitude towards work, we need to take into account a decisive cultural mutation that is linked with the displacement of the social centre of gravity from the sphere of industrial labour to the sphere of cognitive labour.

Unlike the industrial labourer, the cognitive labourer considers work as the most important part of his or her life, no longer opposes the lengthening of the working day, and indeed tends to lengthen work-time of his or her own accord. And this happens for diverse reasons: above all, over the last decades the urban social community has become progressively less interesting and has been reduced to a dead wrapping of relations without humanity or pleasure. Sexuality and conviviality have been progressively transformed into standardised, regulated mechanisms, and the singular pleasure of the body has been progressively replaced by the anxiety-ridden need for identity. As Mike Davies shows in books such as *City of Quartz* and *Ecology of Fear*, the quality of existence has deteriorated from the affective and psychical point of view as a consequence of the rarefaction of community ties and their security-driven sterilisation.³

It seems that in human relations, in daily life, in affective communication, one finds less and less pleasure and less and less reassurance. A consequence of this dis-eroticisation of daily life is the investment of desire in work, understood as the sole space of narcissistic reaffirmation for an individuality used to seeing the other according to the rules of competition, that is, as a danger, an impoverishment, a limitation, rather than a source of experience, pleasure and enrichment.

The effect that has taken hold of daily life during the last decades is that of a generalised de-solidarisation. The imperative of competition has become dominant in work, communication and culture, through a systematic transformation of the other into a competitor and thus an enemy. The principle of war has taken the commanding position in social life, in every instance of daily life and in every aspect of relationships. What is also decisive is the drastic worsening of the conditions of social protection provoked by twenty years of deregulation and dismantling of the public structures of assistance.

The more time we dedicate to acquiring the means of consumption, the less time remains for us to enjoy the actual world. The more we invest our nervous energies in acquiring the power to acquire, the less we can invest them in enjoyment. It is around this problem—completely neglected by economic discourse—that the question of happiness and unhappiness is played out in hypercapitalist society. In order to have more economic power (more money, more credit), we need to dedicate more and more time to socially ratified work. But this means we have to reduce the time of enjoyment and of experience; in short, we have to reduce life.

Wealth defined as enjoyment diminishes in proportion to the increase of wealth as economic accumulation, for the simple reason that mental time is dedicated to accumulating rather than enjoying. Conversely wealth understood as economic accumulation increases when the dispersed pleasure of enjoyment is reduced. And the two possibilities conspire to produce the same effect: the expansion of the economic sphere coincides with a reduction of the erotic sphere. When things, bodies and signs enter into and become part of the semiotic model of the economy, the experience of wealth can only be actualised in a mediated, reflexive, deferred way. Wealth no longer consists in the enjoyment of the time of things, bodies and signs, but the accelerated and expansive production of their lack, transformed into an exchange value, transformed into anxiety. At this point it becomes possible to understand why work has acquired a central position in social affectivity: the liberal offensive has so devastated sociality that workers are obliged to accept the primordial bribe—work whenever and as much as the boss wants or sink into poverty. Moreover, the impoverishment of the social dimension and the dis-eroticisation of experience have made daily life so sad that work ends up seeming like the only tolerable condition. We reconcile ourselves with work because economic survival is becoming more difficult and metropolitan life is becoming so sad that we might as well exchange it for money.

—PANIC-DEPRESSIVE SYNDROME AND COMPETITION

In his book called *La fatigue d'être soi* [The Fatigue of Being Oneself], Alain Ehrenberg describes depression as a pathology with a strong social content, linked in particular to a situation characterised by competitiveness.

Depression began to assert itself when the disciplinary model of managing behaviour, the rules of authority and the respect for taboos that assigned a destiny to social classes and sexes, gave way to norms that incite everyone to individual initiative, exhorting them to become themselves.

Because of this new normativity, the entire responsibility for our lives is located inside each of us.

Depression thus presents itself as a sickness of responsibility in which the feeling of insufficiency dominates. The depressive is not up to the mark, is tired of having to become his or herself.⁴

Depression is intimately linked to the ideology of self-fulfilment and the happiness imperative. And depression is also a way of identifying, in the language of psychopathology, a kind of behaviour that wasn't clearly identifiable as pathological outside of the competitive, productivist and individualistic context. According to Ehrenberg:

Depression enters into a problematic where what dominates is not so much emotional pain as inhibition, slowing down and asthenia: the ancient sad passion is transformed into an obstacle to action in a context where individual initiative becomes the measure of the person.⁵

Competitiveness involves a high-risk narcissistic stimulation because naturally, in a competitive situation (like that of the capitalist economy in general, but in a particularly accentuated way, like that of the new economy), the contenders are many and the elect are few, while the social norm doesn't recognise the possibility of failure since this is identified as a psychopathological category. There is no competition without defeat, without failure, but the social norm cannot recognise the normality of failure without putting into doubt its ideological foundations, without putting into doubt its economic efficiency.

The use of psychostimulant or anti-depressive substances is naturally the other face of the new economy. How many workers of the new economy survive without Prozac, without Zoloft or without cocaine? The habituation to psychotropic substances, those that can be bought in a pharmacy and those that can be bought on the black market, is a structural element of the psychopathogenic economy. When the fundamental psychological imperative of social interaction is that of economic competition, the conditions of mass depression are being created. This is effectively what is happening before our very eyes.

Social psychologists observe that panic and depression have become endemic over the last few decades. Panic is a syndrome that psychologists know little about because it seems that in the past crises of this sort were quite rare. The panic syndrome has only recently been diagnosed as a specific phenomenon and it is with great difficulty that its physical and psychic causes are being identified. It is with even greater difficulty that an adequate therapy for this syndrome is being identified. I don't claim to provide an explanation, much less a solution, for the pathological problem represented by this syndrome. I restrict myself to a few reflections on what panic signifies. Panic is the feeling we experience when, confronted with the infinity of nature, we feel overwhelmed, incapable of accepting into our consciousness the infinite array of stimuli that the world arouses in us. The etymology, in effect, comes from the Greek word signifying 'everything that exists' (pan), and the divinity who went by this name made his presence felt as the bearer of a sublime madness, as James Hillman writes in his 'Essay on Pan'.⁶ But in the social context of competitive society, where all energies are mobilised towards a position of supremacy, and in the technological context of constant acceleration of the rhythms of the global machine, panic becomes a social effect of the constant expansion of cyberspace with respect to the limited performance capacities of the individual brain and with respect to cybertime.

The infinite vastness of the infosphere surpasses the performance capacities of the human organism as much as sublime nature surpasses the Greek man's capacities for feeling when the god Pan appears on the horizon. The infinite speed of expansion of cyberspace, the infinite speed of exposure to signals that the organism perceives as vital to survival, subjects it to a perceptive, cognitive and psychic stress that culminates in a dangerous acceleration of all vital functions, breathing and the heart beat, to the point of collapse.

Thus what is at stake here is not an individual psychopathology but the individual manifestation of a widespread social psychopathology.

—

Translated by Melinda Cooper.

Franco Berardi (Bifo) is a philosopher and political activist. Co-founder of *Rekombinant* <www.rekomdinant.org>, a web environment of informal communication, and media and political activism, he is also the author of numerous books. His most recent work, *Il sapiente, il guerriero, il mercante*, is currently being translated into English.

—NOTES

¹ Pierre Lévy, *Cyberculture*, trans. Robert Bononno, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2001.

² Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*, Basic Books, New York, 1991.

³ Mike Davies, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, Verso, London, 1990; *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*, Metropolitan Books, New York, 1998.

⁴ Alain Ehrenberg, *La fatigue d'être soi*, Odile Jacob, Paris, 1998, p. 10.

⁵ Ehrenberg, p. 18

⁶ James Hillman, 'An Essay on Pan: Serving as a Psychological Introduction to Roscher's Ephialtes', in Wilhelm Roscher, *Pan and the Nightmare*, Spring Publications, New York, 1972.