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ON SIGNS AND SUBJECTIVITY – A RESPONSE TO JODI DEAN

In *Communicative Capitalism and Class Struggle*, Jodi Dean argues that recent manifestations such as Occupy, should be understood as manifestations of class war in the context of the changing nature of capitalist exploitation, rather than as middle class episodes of defensive politics. According to Dean, it is only once we consider the changing role of production in this latest phase of capitalist development that we can recognize how, where and in what ways class war is manifested in the current capitalist terrain. At the centre of this argument is her concept of communicative capitalism that has become a recurring thesis in her writing and presentations over the last years.¹ Communicative capitalism, simply put, is the process through which communication itself has become subsumed into capitalist production. As Dean notes, it is a concept that elicits some parallels to what has been referred to elsewhere as the “knowledge economy, information society and cognitive capitalism”, however, there are also differences, which are integral to understanding her argument.

In this short paper, I wish to concentrate on this concept of communicative capitalism. I will first provide a cursory overview of some of the main characteristics of communicative capitalism, and how the term lends itself to a particular understanding of class war in our increasingly informationalized world. Next, I wish to focus more specifically on the facets of communicative capitalism that I find most interesting and which distinguish it from other contemporary analyses of capital. This final section will end with an introduction to Maurizio Lazzarato’s recent work, *Signs and Machines*, which resonates with Dean’s work but also raises some different theoretical points that

1 For a few examples, see the following sources: Jodi Dean, “Why the Net Is Not a Public Sphere”, *Constellations*, 10 (1), 2003, pp. 95–112; Dean, “Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics”, *Cultural Politics* 1(1), 2005, pp. 51–74; Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2009; Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, London, Verso, 2012.

enable a very different way of understanding the current field of capitalist relations, and what this means for the creation of a non-capitalist possibility.

COMMUNICATIVE CAPITALISM

As Dean argues, communicative capitalism highlights the exploitation of our faculties to communicate with one another for the accumulation of capital. Through this process, communication no longer “provide[s] a critical outside”; communication is imbricated within capital. But communication here infers much more than strictly linguistic transmission, though it is that too. Communicative capitalism extends into and exploits things like our abilities to care and share. Our emotions, abilities to affect one another and be affected by one another, are seized upon by capital in this arrangement. Crucially, even modes of togetherness, such as democracy, are embedded within capitalist relations to the extent that its forms of horizontality witnessed in networked and informational assemblages are not in themselves situated oppositionally to capitalism, but flourish comfortably together with it. As Dean puts it, communicative capitalism “tries to capture this strange merging of democracy and capitalism [...] by highlighting the way networked communications bring the two together”.²

In communicative capitalism there is no longer any temporal or spatial boundary – qualitative or quantitative – that separates the production of life from the production of value. The significance of this observation is that labour is a perpetual activity and value is constantly extracted, but also that labour is spatially diffuse. One works at home, in the subway, at the coffee shop, or in bed on a Sunday morning nursing a hangover as they ‘like’ a friend’s Facebook status. All different times and spaces become potential venues for the production of value. Because of these shifting relations of production, Dean argues that we are simultaneously witnessing a shift in the boundaries of class war. Class confrontation is no longer restricted to the walls of the factory but, like labour, permeates all areas of life, extending “beyond the workplace”. When the idea of work and non-work dissolves, and life itself becomes an articulation of capital, resistance to capital occurs throughout life.

In terms of the dimensions of communicative capitalism discussed above, Dean’s concept touches on many points that are shared with other authors concerned with post-Fordist capitalism. Those associated with the Italian movements of *operaismo* and *autonomia* have argued for decades that the social has become entwined with capital—particularly

2 Dean, “Communicative Capitalism”, pp. 51–74.

notable in Mario Tronti's thesis of the *social factory*³ – an argument that has gained traction in recent years thanks to figures like Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri and others⁴. Like Dean, they argue that the totality of life has become an articulation of labour, and that the spatial and temporal boundaries of work dilate to produce a “factory without walls”. Moreover, debates around affective labour have highlighted how our emotions and feelings have increasingly become the object of capitalist exploitation and, perhaps, a means to challenge capitalism or to create a subjectivity outside of capitalism⁵. Apropos to Dean's thesis that class war itself expands outside of the traditional boundaries of work, we might also acknowledge David Harvey's recent work, *Rebel Cities*. Here, Harvey argues that in the current capitalist moment,

“[d]istinctions between work-based and community-based struggles start to fade away, as indeed does the idea that class and work are defined in a place of production in isolation from the site of social reproduction”⁶.

The point of drawing these connections out is not to insinuate that the concept of communicative capitalism lacks any particularity and is merely a replication of what has already been understood. Though her concept may highlight some of the same features of post-Fordist capitalism as others do, she draws upon different theoretical bases for these arguments and provides diverging conclusions. The point of drawing out these connections is, rather, to direct attention to the aspects of communicative capitalism that are much less acknowledged and perhaps more fruitful. The most distinctive argument Dean makes relates to how democracy and capital seem to thrive well together, challenging arguments that they are somehow ontologically opposed. But what I find most intriguing in her paper is where she discusses the themes of semiotics, signification, meaning and subjectivity. It is here that I find Dean – along with Maurizio Lazzarato, and, to a lesser degree, ‘Bifo’ Berardi – extends the theoretical and empirical evaluation of contemporary capitalism into new territory. It is also here that Dean touches on points that carry tremendous divisive weight as to how the left is to construct an alternative to capitalism. This becomes

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- 3 Mario Tronti, “Social Capital”, *Telos*, 17, 1973, pp. 98–121.
- 4 For inflections of the *social factory* thesis developed more recently, see: Antonio Negri, *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge, Polity, 2005, p. 204; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000, pp. 292f.
- 5 For a good introduction to debates around affect and labour, see the contributions by Patricia Clough, Kim Hosu and Jamie Bianco in: Patricia T. Clough and Jean Halley (eds.), *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2007; cf. Hardt, “Affective labor”, *Boundary 2*, 1999, pp. 89–100; Negri and Hardt, “Value and Affect”, *Boundary 2*, 1999, pp. 77–88.
- 6 David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: from the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, London, Verso, 2012, p. 139.

particularly apparent if we compare Dean's understanding of the relationship between semiotics and subjectivity to that of Lazzarato.

COMMUNICATION, MEANING, AND SUBJECTIVITY

For Dean, communicative capitalism is not interested in the message or the content of communication as much as it is interested in the production of signs for the sake of production, on their circulation, and that they are added onto by further data. In other words, what is primary is connections, flows, and quantities of information, relegating the signifying aspects of communication in the relationship of capitalist value production. Communicative capitalism does not depend on what is being said, but rather, that what is said is circulated as much as possible, and others contribute and “add on” to the original message. A piece of information is not valued by its content, but by the quantitative connections it makes, and the number of additions that are added to it. Thus, every communicative kernel has equal value, precisely because the content is not important:

“Unlike a message, which needs to be understood, a contribution is just to be added. One contributes one's opinion or idea to whatever discussion is going on. This additive feature of the contribution depends on a fundamental communicative equivalence. As a contribution, each message is communicatively equal to any other. What matters is not what was said but that something was said.”

This sort of “communication without communicability” in which “the content of our utterances are unimportant”, is a dimension of late capitalism that Franco Berardi also takes up with his concept of semiocapitalism⁷. For Berardi, similar to Dean, capitalist production now functions by an incessant circulation information. In order to increase productivity, semiocapitalism “has to accelerate the infosphere, the environment where information races towards the brain”⁸. But the by-product of this necessity is sort of overproduction, or “semio-inflation”, whereby that qualitative value of our informational productions becomes less meaningful, and information takes on a “floating value”. As Berardi writes, “[t]here is no more truth, only an exchange of signs, a deterritorialization of meaning”⁹.

As the circulation and addition of signs takes primacy over the meaning and content of communication in communicative capitalism, we witness a shift in subjectivity according to Dean. We can no longer

7 Franco Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2012, pp. 71–102; Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, New York, Semiotext(e), 2009, pp. 106–183.

8 Berardi, *The Uprising*, p. 97.

9 Berardi, *The Uprising*, p. 85.

use vacant signs as an identifier of any “imaginary identity” of ourselves, because this imaginary identity requires a position from which to judge specific images as “more compelling or attractive to us than others”: a symbolic field. Disappearing are the days when people identify with symbolic, collective identities such as the “worker”, for instance, which are a fundamental component for collective action. Identities are now much more malleable and ephemeral, with individuals adopting several different identities, and changing those identities constantly. This results in a situation in which our identities become self-referential and singularized to the point where it hinders any prospect of collectivity and solidarity.

To the extent that Dean’s concept of communicative capitalism begins to arrive at a somewhat different conceptualization of semiotics and subjectivity than what is offered by terms such as cognitive capitalism, Lazzarato’s recent work, *Signs and Machines*, provides both a nice corollary and juxtaposition to her work. Lazzarato’s work focuses specifically on this question of how signs function in the capitalist production of subjectivity, and what this means for revolutionary political project to overcome capitalism. While similarities between the two’s work are apparent, through turning to Lazzarato’s book we can also see how there are distinct differences in how the two approach the question of subjectivity and what that means for an anti-capitalist project.

SUBJECTIVATION, ENSLAVEMENT, AND THE DIFFERENT SIGN FORMS

Borrowing from the work of Félix Guattari, Lazzarato considers the production of contemporary capitalist subjectivity to be the product of two different, but reinforcing, apparatuses of subjectivation: “social subjection” and “machinic enslavement”¹⁰. Social subjection denotes the ways in which subjectivities such as “identity, sex, bodies, professions, and nationalities”, are produced through forms of representational language and signification¹¹. On the other hand, machinic enslavement, as a separate apparatus of capitalist subjectivity production, works through providing individuals with “certain modes of perception and sensibility and manufacturing an unconscious”¹². Both modes of subjectivization are dependent on signs, but the types of signs particular to each mode are different. Social subjectivation produces subjectivity through representative signs, like language, which centre on the individuated subject’s consciousness, “[producing]

10 Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, New York, Semiotext(e), 2014, p. 13.

11 Lazzarato, p. 12.

12 Lazzarato, p. 38.

meaning, significations, interpretations, discourse and representations [...]”. The mode of machinic enslavement, however, works through “asignifying semiotics [...] which do not involve consciousness and representations [...]”, and centre instead on a “pre-personal” or “suprapersonal” level, producing “action”¹³. This latter set of signs are what I believe Dean is highlighting in respect to communicative capitalism, and just as the forms of information Dean associates with communicative capitalism, they “operate prior and next to signification, producing ‘sense’ without meaning”¹⁴.

Like Dean, Lazzarato associates these asignifying semiotics – relating to the realm of machinic enslavement – with a sort of destruction of subjectivity, or a process of “desubjectivation”¹⁵. Through machinic enslavement and the deterritorialization of signs and their ascribed meanings, there is a loss of molar identities, such as “worker”¹⁶. In other words, machinic enslavement dismantles some of those more settled forms of subjectivity resulting from social subjection, which form individual identities. While Lazzarato would acknowledge that the desubjection and the proliferation of asignifying signs can pose some difficulties for overcoming capitalism, for him this is a process that is not solely limiting for an anti-capitalist alternative. On the contrary, the process of desubjection can be seen as welcomed and necessary step in overcoming capitalism for at least two reasons.

First, because if we are to overcome the shackles of capitalism, we must overcome the capitalist subjectivities that are particular to capitalism and that reinforce its hold on us. While the level of social subjection provides us with the unities that have traditionally formed subjective centres around which leftists have organized, such as “worker” and “class”, they are also products of a specifically capitalist division of labour. It is in this sense that the process of desubjection through the deterritorialization of signs offers the potential to dismantle capitalist subjectivities. Secondly, while the level of asignifying signs is destructive in one sense, asignifying signs are also simultaneously involved in producing new subjectivities; machinic enslavement is a form of *creative* destruction. In a Deleuzo-Guattarian flavour, the deterritorializing of subjectivity on the one hand always produces a reterritorialization of different subjectivities. While asignifying signs unravel existing formations of social subjection, they also provide the “proto-subjectivities”, or the subjective substrate that forms the basis for new subjective formations¹⁷. In a way similar to Gilbert Simondon’s

13 Lazzarato, pp. 31, 38.

14 Lazzarato, p. 41.

15 Lazzarato, pp. 12, 25.

16 Lazzarato, p. 9.

17 Lazzarato, p. 16.

concept of individuation, we might say that the realm of asignifying signs makes up the pre-individual terrain out of which subjectivity arises. Thus, for Lazzarato, not only does the proliferation of non-signifying signs hold the means through which to dismantle capitalist forms of social subjectivation, they also hold a potential for creating new subjectivities outside of capitalism. This is a crucial point of divergence between Lazzarato and Dean.

It is obvious through reading Dean's paper that, for her, the loss of subjectivity attributed to post-Fordist production and the proliferation of asignifying signs in communicative capitalism, is something to mourn. The outcome of this process is an "intense attachment to individuality, difference, and uniqueness, attachments that [...] hinder solidarity" and, indeed, a leftist alternative. Even though recent protests can be read as articulations of a class, it seems as though the current communicative field forecloses any potential beyond confused expressions. Ultimately, this loss of subjectivity is viewed negatively because her notion of collective subjectivity is always the result of signifying signs, and once those signs disappear, there is an inability to produce identity. In Lacanian terms, the imaginary identity of ourselves is always dependent on the symbolic, and this symbolic is always determined by language. Subjectivity is always the product of language, in a sort of structuralist sense. Thus, what it seems like in Dean's paper is that a leftist alternative, a leftist subjectivity, is only possible through a return to signifying signs.

This understanding of subjectivity is in stark contrast to Lazzarato, as I emphasized above. What Lazzarato attempts to do is undermine this logocentric reading of subjectivity. While aspects of subjectivity are the product of language and signification, this is only part of the story. Subjectivity formation is not only determined by signifying signs, but also through non-signifying signs that work on a level of unconscious – an unconscious that *is* collective and is engaged in a type of experimentation with a new. Thus, for Lazzarato the disintegration of old modes of subjectivity and the proliferation of asignifying signs is not all doom and gloom. For Lazzarato,

“[w]e must free the human and non-human forces that the first industrial revolution imprisoned in *labour, language and life*, and do so not in order to find an ‘original’ subjectivity, but to open and activate other processes of its production by seizing on the deterritorialization of work, language, and life as an opportunity”¹⁸.

In conclusion, the different ways in which we understand subjective formation and the role that asignifying signs play in its construction is

¹⁸ Lazzarato, p. 93.

crucial for how we move forward in creating an alternative to capitalism, and leads to divergent readings of recent forms of protest. Whereas Dean – basing her understanding of subjectivity on signification – would argue that recent protests are a characteristic of a loss in subjectivity, Lazzarato – basing his understanding on the role that non-signifying semiotics play in the destruction *and* production of subjectivity – might point to how they are forms of experimentation and subjectivity in formation. For Lazzarato recent protests might be understood not in terms of a crisis in the production of subjectivity, but as an experimentation with ways of becoming that break with the past and that are elementary forms of subjectivity. While Dean would be sure to point to the lack of demands and perceived organizational chaos of movements like Occupy as indicative of a capitalist war on meaning, these features might alternatively be seen as processes of subjectivization. As Nicholas Thoburn argues in respect to Occupy,

“refusing to make demands is not a refusal to *speak*, to formulate and express our anger, hopes and desires. On the contrary, to work through the problems of Occupy requires an incessant production of critical knowledge, knowledge that needs be circulated in the extension and development of these problems. The point is that this knowledge production is *immanent* to Occupy, not a pleading for recognition from an external power”¹⁹.

Indeed, it is about time we start looking at the ways in which non-signifying signs and affects play a role in constructing new knowledges and subjectivities that go beyond a logocentric understanding of subjectivity.

19 Nicholas Thoburn, “Minor Politics, Occupy, and Territory”, *Mute*, 2(3), 2012.