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# Network Culture

By Steve Wright

Steve Wright reviews *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*  
by Tiziana Terranova

Tiziana Terranova is a name familiar to readers of *Mute*. Issue 28 carried a lively and informative discussion between Terranova and Marc Bousquet, addressing the contemporary university as both node of accumulation and site of social conflict.<sup>1</sup> Of her other writings to date, pride of place goes to an influential essay on the peculiarities of that labour which capital has sought to subsume to its digital economy.<sup>2</sup>

Now we have *Network Culture*, an important work that deserves to be read and discussed widely. The book is rich in its scope: in particular, in the fruitful confrontations and collisions it sets up between internet culture and contemporary movements against global capital. At the same time, it is not always an easy read, given the complexity of some of the issues addressed and arguments advanced, and the familiarity presumed with a wide range of debates. Fortunately Terranova writes well and takes her readers seriously, so that the insights provided repay persistence with some of the book's more difficult passages.

*Network Culture* offers a series of distinctive and original arguments, while finding inspiration in a range of different critical perspectives. In a fundamental way, however, *Network Culture* is very much an engagement with many of the key themes dear to the post-operaista (post-workerist) theories that emerged from the wreckage of the Italian autonomist movement of the 1970s. These theories have become familiar to English-language readers, above all through the writings of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Given the fascination with such ideas today in activist milieux, *Network Culture* is likely to find readers in circles well beyond the academy.

The first chapter explores a number of implications thrown up by Claude Shannon's 'classic' conceptualisation of information in terms of the signal-noise relationship within a conduit linking sender and receiver. At this theory's heart is a reading of the transmission of information as 'the communication and exclusion of probable alternatives' (p.20). What is so enjoyable about Terranova's account here are the implications for political work that she draws out from her critical reading of this conduit metaphor of information. As *Network Culture* illustrates, the notion of communication that stems from this metaphor attempts to narrow the field to 'alternatives formulated on the basis of known probabilities within the constraints set up by the interplay of code and channel or medium' (p.25). If this is so, then what Terranova calls 'a cultural politics of information' must entail not merely a battle over the meaning of what currently informs us within late capitalism: It involves the opening up of the virtuality of the world by positing not simply different, but radically other codes and channels for expressing and giving expression to an undetermined potential for change. (p.26)

The second chapter of *Network Culture* explores a number of online practices such as packet switching, and asks whether these can help us resolve some of the more vexed problems within contemporary forms of political engagement. For example, does the internet's open architecture – which in the face of difference, forgoes uniformity in favour of communication protocols – have something to tell us about challenges in terms of 'extensibility' currently facing movements against global capital and war? Here Terranova also reminds us how much online practices themselves have changed over the past decade since the takeoff of the World Wide Web, particularly in terms of community formation. The central chapter of the book is a slightly reworked version of Terranova's essay on 'Free Labour'. Beginning with a tilt at Richard Barbrook's arguments concerning online

anarcho-communism, the chapter grapples with the net-related unpaid labour performed outside the wage relation. Terranova is insistent that this labour, in all its pleasurable for those concerned, is 'a desire of labour immanent to late capitalism' (p.94), and that claims about the anti-capitalist potentialities of movements such as open source must be offset by a healthy dose of scepticism. The fourth chapter follows on from this, discussing different aspects of that 'soft control' which attempts to turn labour's potentialities towards capital's continued reproduction. Network Culture then closes with a brief but enticing exploration of some of the key features that mark out 'the virtual movements of this early twenty-first century' (p.156), with the question of communication once again to the fore.

As should be obvious, Network Culture is part of a broader debate, and the book's bibliography provides some helpful pathways into that wider discussion. Given the book's central themes, it would be useful to examine its arguments alongside those of Ron Day, who has likewise engaged both with post-operaista theory, and information theory 'classics' such as Shannon, Weaver and Wiener.<sup>3</sup> More provocatively, it would also be useful to read Network Culture alongside Doug Henwood's latest offering on the 'new economy', and Ursula Huws thoughts on a growing 'cybertariat', both of which seek to meet capital's claims about its new 'weightless economy' head on.<sup>4</sup>

As with any text worth reading, there is much to argue with in this book. Those not enamoured of the 'immaterial labour' thesis advanced by the post-operaisti will be perplexed by some of Network Culture's arguments, not least the assertion that the work of writing/reading/managing and participating in mailing lists/websites/chat lines ... falls outside the concept of 'abstract labour' (p.84).

In a similar vein, Terranova offers the following tantalising statement about another key post-operaista concept:

Unlike class, however, a multitude is not rooted in a solid class formation or a subjectifying function (although it is also a matter of class composition) (p.130).

She elaborates a little on this: the category multitude is of necessity 'vague' in that it seeks to denote something that while 'not deny[ing] the existence of the stratification of identity and class', nonetheless threatens to reach beyond them (p.130). Is this a case of wanting to have your cake and eat it too? How exactly might class composition analysis prove useful here? This question is not answered directly in Network Culture, even if a range of suggestive beginnings are provided in the second half of the book.

In the concluding paragraph of her original 2000 essay on 'Free Labour', Terranova argued as follows:

As the spectacular failure of the Italian autonomy reveals, the purpose of critical theory is not to elaborate strategies which then can be used to direct social change. On the contrary, as the tradition of cultural studies has less explicitly argued, it is about working on what already exists, on the lines established by a cultural and material activity which is already happening.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps I also want to have my cake and eat it too, but why shouldn't we aspire after both these goals? Certainly we don't need strategy in the sense of some predefined pathway to salvation laid down from on high by specialists, whether these claim to be 'theorists' and/or 'leaders'. But couldn't strategy encompass a collective attempt to develop some sense of the directions in which we'd like to head, together or apart? Or at the bare minimum, some sense of what it is we seek in various ways to move away from? If so, then Network Culture can be seen as a stimulating contribution to the ongoing SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis of contemporary power relations in and around online networks. We should all look forward to Terranova's future offerings to the development of that 'inventive and emotive political intelligence' (p.157) which is so sorely needed today. a

1. T. Terranova & M. Bousquet, 'Recomposing the University', Mute issue 28, Summer-Autumn, 2004
2. T. Terranova, 'Free labor: producing culture for the digital economy', Social Text 63 Summer, 2000  
[http://www.uoc.edu/in3/hermeneia/sala\\_de\\_lectura/t\\_terranova\\_free\\_labor.htm](http://www.uoc.edu/in3/hermeneia/sala_de_lectura/t_terranova_free_labor.htm)
3. R. Day, The Modern Invention of Information: discourse, history and power, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001
4. D. Henwood, After The New Economy, New York: The New Press, 2003 ; U. Huws, 'The Making of a Cybertariat: Virtual Work in a Real World', New York: Monthly Review Press, 2003
5. T. Terranova, 2000, op.cit

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