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The Archipelago of Immateriality

By The Melancholic Troglodytes, et al.

Last weekend Mute visited the dreaming spires of Kings College, Cambridge for the conference 'Immaterial Labour, Multitudes and New Social Subjects: Class Composition in Cognitive Capitalism'. With the high-priests (Negri and Lazzarato) jumping ship at the last minute, the conference struggled to bridge the divide between the historical legacy of the rigorous and innovative Autonomist and Post-Autonomist movements and the acolytes who inherit, but don't advance on, some of their key interests: immaterial labour, the multitude and the common. Over the next few weeks we will be collecting some short responses to the conference. The Melancholic Troglodytes kick off claiming that some Autonomist Marxists are openly making overtures to neo-social democracy and Richard Barbrook, whose response follows, concurs, but commends them for it! See also Chris Carlsson's report reposted here from his blog 'Attitude Adjustor' in which, amongst numerous other things, he laments the obliviousness of conference speakers and attendees to the ecological disaster currently unfolding and its systematic subordination to the more pressing questions of 'class, wages, structures of production'

Response 1.

By The Melancholic Troglodytes

The Melancholic Troglodytes felt there were two fundamental and interrelated problems with the Immaterial Labour Conference [henceforth ILC]: first, the mode of organising was (at best) a *Zone of Bourgeois Development* (ZBD), and second, the content of Autonomist Marxism seemed impoverished. We will elaborate on these two problems below:

Problem of organising

Neo-Vygotskians have made a distinction between two different ways of organising, the Zone of Bourgeois Development (ZBD) and the Zone of Proletarian Development (ZPD). The Zone of Bourgeois Development (ZBD) is a convergence space for modern science, technology and academia. Its endpoint is the creation of instrumentalist knowledge and bourgeois individualism. Its historical midwives were rationalism, positivism and empiricism. The ZBD has three main characteristics, namely, *organisational dualism*, *organisational fetishism* and *organisational religiosity*.

The ILC is not a party or a permanent organisation; it was just a weekend conference and a semi-permanent network of associates. Therefore it suffered more from organisational dualism than fetishism or religiosity. Organisational dualism manifests itself in a number of dichotomies as for instance the one between intellect and emotion which Leninist, Anarchist and Social Democratic parties have historically resolved through the mind-body metaphor. The mind or brain (the party's central committee) takes care of decision making whilst the rank-and-file provide the emotional demiurge for enacting the committee's decisions. It leads to the creation of specialisms and control of one-way (monologic) communication by experts.

Melancholic Troglodytes were not expecting anything other than a ZBD at Cambridge. We went there fully cognisant of what we were getting ourselves into. If you want a ZPD (characterised by Joint-Dialectical activity and organisational Heterogeneity and organisational Carnavalesque) you have to create it yourself. However, we were expecting a *competent* ZBD- one that delivers according to its own limited and anaemic criteria of communication and development. Sadly, we felt we did not even get that. What we had most of the time was a Zone of Bourgeois (under) Development. The reasons

for this failure are connected to the second major problem of the ILC.

Impoverishment of thought

Autonomist Marxism is finished! That is not to say it was once a revolutionary trend because it was always enmeshed in leftism. But in the 1960s and parts of the 1970s it had life, ideas, dynamism and a real connection to the class struggle. Since then its various factions have become guardians of theoretical orthodoxies and keener to defend their territory than say or do anything new. Autonomist Marxism which made some genuine attempts to break free of structuralist Stalinism has today collapsed back onto the Leninist terrain. One faction - what we witnessed at Cambridge- has become the post-structuralist Stalinist wing which is now openly making overtures to neo-social democracy. The other faction (Negri, etc) is gravitating toward wishy-washy post-modernist Leninist-Trotskyism and is also making overtures to neo-social democracy but more covertly.

Conclusion

It saddens Melancholic Troglodytes to see this degeneration. We used to rely on Autonomism for a good deal of our thinking, since no one group can solve all the complex problems of the class struggle alone. We will continue to read and perhaps even learn from Autonomism in a limited way. But no amount of trendy vocabulary and no amount of super-celebrity performances can hide the fact that Autonomism as a viable project is now well and truly dead. Perhaps the onus is on the rest of us to create an alternative.

Response 2.

by Richard Barbrook

Kautsky in Cambridge

“How was the conference?”, Simon asked. “Very interesting”, I replied. “The Autonomists have finally come out of the closet as reformists!” At the opening session of the Immaterial Labour conference in Cambridge, Andrea Fumagalli had told us that Toni Negri and the other gurus of the movement now advocated a commendably pragmatic political programme: a guaranteed income for all citizens; employment rights for precarious workers; the democratisation of the European Union; and more environmental protection. “As left-wing members of the Labour party”, I pointed out, “we can no longer criticise the Autonomists. Their policies are also our policies!”

I continued, “It’s particularly good to see that after 25 years the Autonomists have at long last aligned their practice with their theory.” Back in the early-1980s, Simon and I had both diligently studied the Red Notes booklets which had first made available the key texts by Negri, Tronti and their comrades to an English-speaking audience. What was then so striking about the writings of the Autonomists was their engagement with Marx’s critique of political economy. Unlike their Althusserian and Trotskyist peers, these Italian leftists did have something intelligent to say about the neo-liberal restructuring of capitalism. However, at this point, the Autonomists’ admiration for Marx’s theory didn’t extend to his practice. Far from being social democrats, they took pride in their revolutionary intransigence. Autonomism was the extreme left of the Ultra-Left.

“What was the comrades’ reaction to Andrea Fumagalli’s speech?” Simon asked. “As you might have guessed”, I replied, “it didn’t go down very well with most of his audience. For the old school, it was a betrayal of the holy precepts of Autonomism. For the younger generation, it was a bit like going to see Johnny Rotten and discovering that he had always been a Bee Gees fan!” “What did they expect?”, Simon exclaimed. “It was obvious that Autonomism was reformist right from the beginning. Haven’t

they ever read Negri's article on Keynes from the mid-1970s? If you correctly point out that 'ineffective demand' is a euphemism for working class struggle, then you're arguing in favour of social democracy!

'Maybe', I mused, 'their horrified reaction proves that the revolutionary image of Autonomism was always more important than its theoretical achievements? It can't be an accident that its acolytes prefer reading the Grundrisse to Capital. If they carefully studied the chapter on the Factory Acts in Volume 1, they would realise that Marx himself was a social democrat!'

'So was your visit to Cambridge worthwhile?', Simon enquired. 'Back in the early-1980s, we might have disagreed with their politics, but we always enjoyed going to their conferences.' 'Of course', I responded. 'It's not just our politics which have converged. Do you remember the cyber-communism article which I wrote in the late-1990s for the McLuhan conference in New York? At the time, it was meant as a satirical piece: America invented the only working model of communism in human history - it's called the Net! Well, you'll be pleased to hear that there were two excellent papers at the conference which put forward the same argument.' 'Very good', Simon said. 'But do you think that anyone outside the academic Left is listening to what was said?' 'I do hope so since the conference was rather appropriately being held in Keynes hall at Kings. Looking at the current state of the Labour party, it certainly needs some fresh ideas. Maybe - as in the 1930s - Cambridge can again provide them?' My comrade smiled somewhat sceptically, 'I look forward to that day!' 'You never know', I joked, 'in a couple of decades time, we could be going to a similar conference in the Negri hall at Kings!' 'After Blairism', Simon announced, 'Autonomist reformism!' 'We should drink to this future!', I concluded - and so we left for the pub to continue the conversation over a few pints!

Response 3.

By Chris Carlsson

(Reposted by him from his blog Attitude Adjustor to the discussion area of metamute, and now promoted to the Articles section)

May 03, 2006

Cambridge Conference

At King's College, Cambridge, England, April 29, 2006

Started out my trip by going to Cambridge to attend a conference on 'Class Composition, Immaterial Labor and New Social Subjects', which was ironically held under the bemused gaze of a bust of John Maynard Keynes.

What became clear even before the conference, but really sharpened as it proceeded, was how problematic the terms are, and how disparate the attendees were with respect to their emphases. I'm glad I went but I have to say it was a rather disappointing gathering. I was very glad to meet Steve Wright, Nick Dyer-Witheford and his wife Anne, Phoebe, Michel Bauwens, Richard Barbrook, and a variety of other interesting people (Bauwens and Barbrook both have posted comments on the conference at MetaMute.org). I rather enjoyed the first day of the conference since I was so committed to engaging with the material and other conferees, but after a couple of days have passed, Eddie and I have had a chance to digest it, and I have to conclude that on balance it was pretty weak.

I won't go through every presentation piece by piece. I think Steve Wright gave a good overview of the theme, and by so doing he demonstrated how much trouble we were in. Here's a chart he put up to show something of the genealogy of the conference's intellectual and political roots.

By the end of his own talk he conceded that his attempt to circumscribe the tendency we were discussing was incomplete and moreover, that even if it weren't, that it could not be an adequate framework for a rigorous understanding of our world. Later he was overheard suggesting that the World Systems writers like Arrighi and Wallerstein had at least as much relevance for figuring things out as do the seminal contributors to 'autonomous Marxism' (or whatever you want to call it), since a number of theorists were lost in jargon and abstractions.

He was followed by Yann Moulier-Boutang, who gave a presentation that I found tediously academic, though he tried to bring in to the discussion large swaths of the world population that have been left aside by the workerist theories with their roots in mid-1960s Italy, and Marx before that. Both Wright and Boutang failed to leave time for discussion in their half-hour segments which produced some howling objections when conference convener Ed Emery unceremoniously pre-empted any discussion on the grounds of the tight schedule he had done so much to plan.

I had been dismayed back in December when he told me I was not welcome to present at this conference, even though I felt I had a lot to offer. It seems my lack of academic credentials and general antipathy to a highly theoretical approach to the topic precluded me. OK, I decided to come anyway. But as the weekend progressed it became clear that that early rejection was a premonition of an overly self-important and really authoritarian approach to this conference. I found a number of the talks, especially on the 2nd day, to be laboriously academic and weirdly tangential to what I thought the conference would focus on. We weren't able to stay to the very end when there was a more open round-table discussion scheduled—we were sure it was going to explode since there had been a growing undercurrent of dissatisfaction all weekend. I wonder why the conference had to be so rigid, academic, and closed, instead of curious, open, and diverse. I suspect it has a lot to do with Ed Emery's decisions. (Too bad, because I liked him personally. He just seems to be a bit lost in an old-style class politics that I—and I think many other attendees—thought we were collectively trying to overcome with some fresh thinking! he did demonstrate a great ability to create moments of convivial pleasure like this one where he is poling us along on the nearby river, 'punting' during lunch on Saturday.)

At least a third of the talks made discussion of 'Basic Income' their main focus, a concept that traces its roots to a 1970 proposal by Potere Operaio for a Salario Garantito. After a young Japanese scholar finished his talk about it on Sunday morning, Emery stood up to announce with a beatific glow that he could feel a 'revolutionary program' taking shape at the conference. I was not alone in my astonishment as many people glanced around in disbelief at this odd assertion. Italian economist Andrea Fumagalli filled in for Toni Negri on Friday night and re-presented his talk on Sunday, trying to show with some impenetrable charts that a capitalist economy that is generating a surplus from 'social labor' (in which he included those of us who spend time critiquing capitalism, since after all this is a function that capitalism needs to progress) could direct that general increase in social wealth to paying everyone a basic income, not as means-tested charity or as direct compensation for specific activities, but as an unconditional right of existence. And that such a reform would make sense from capitalism's point of view because it would act as a Keynesian boost for demand, while also serving the needs of revolutionaries who must escape the strict blackmail of capitalism to create the spaces and initiatives that can begin to reshape life.

I'm not hostile to a politics that seeks to break income from work; I also consider it essential in terms of transitional demands in this time of growing precariousness and insecurity. Demanding jobs or work is painfully obsolete, and even if it could succeed on its own merits, would only leave people

back in the dead-end subordination of a new wage-labor deal. So as demands emerge in the face of growing immiseration, I do hope they are for direct income and shared wealth instead of for jobs or work. But I found the theoretical efforts on basic income presented at this conference unconvincing and more like wishful thinking than any real demonstration of the coherence of the demand. Even if there is now a social factory in which we all contribute to an aggregate profitability (which seems true enough), the way money and work is organized still leads to a fetishized dynamic in which some workers are paid and taxed, as are specific businesses, and then the government redistributes those revenues through payouts to whatever public goods and services (including, potentially, basic income) it deems necessary.

The politics of this demand are daunting at best, and as one person suggested in a (typically polemical) question, why fight for basic income instead of fighting to overthrow capitalism itself? Isn't the social pressure required to extract such a huge and basic concession worthy of greater goals than a new stabilization of capitalist society? The other preponderant problem for this demand is rooted in the nation-state and the wide disparity of conditions among different countries and regions. A meaningful basic income would have to span the globe and include everyone unconditionally. Such a structural feature implies a globe-spanning state to administer it, no? Without that, as one participant aptly noted, wouldn't a basic income in some places and not others just serve as a further magnet to the impoverished? And to respond to that wave of immigration wouldn't it increase pressure to produce a "fortress Europe" as he put it? Curious problems without answers. Of course radical change always begs difficult problems, it goes with the territory, and should not automatically disqualify anything from being considered.

The implication of a new global state echoes the argument of Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, wherein they claim that we are in a new period of history and that we must go through Empire to the other side, a global society beyond capitalism. Empire has already gone through a lot of critical evaluation, which I will leave you to find elsewhere. But the ideas that they develop, also in their later volume *Multitude*, were oddly absent from this conference where you might have thought they'd be more central. In fact, the enthusiastic embrace of the early core of Operismo (Workerism in English) has the strange effect of obliterating from view at least two crucial points that ought to be central to any contemporary revolutionary politics, leaving them unspoken, unrecognized, and invisible.

First of all, the problem of useless work. You might expect a conference dedicated to discussing, among other things, General Intellect, cognitive capitalism and the creation of new subjects (or subjectivities) would make the basic stupidity of so much work in the world a central point. Except for Harry Halpin's animated denunciation of 90% of computer programmers as the "stupid ones" (compared to the 10% of programmers who actually create most of what works in software), there was no mention of the larger division of labor, what is done, by whom, or crucially, why. The other big elephant in the room going unnoticed by this very academic crowd, was ecology. All the focus on class, wages, structures of production, shape of work, etc., and not a single reference to the unfolding ecological disaster to which this kind of obliviousness is an essential contributor.

For me, there are two keys to unlocking the relative sterility and confusion of this whole line of inquiry: the refusal of stupid work and the embrace of an ecological rebuilding our urban life. The abolition of capitalism and class society is an abstract way of proposing the general liberation from stupid and self-destructive, ecocidal work. The concept of "exodus" which runs through some of the key texts, from Hardt & Negri to Virno and Berardi, didn't come up much here. But exodus is real practice in many places by many individuals. The refusal of work is one of the pillars of the radical workerist movement's early decade or two. The intelligent rejection of the limits of wage-labor is the positive flipside of the precariat experience. It might have started out as a liberatory exodus but as capitalism embraced labor market flexibility a growing insecurity on all workers was imposed, turning

the exodus against the escapees.

But the answer to this imposed desperation is not to succumb to capitalist blackmail but to redouble an insistence on a self-directed life, a new organization where we can decide what to do, how to do it, to whom the benefits of our work go, and so on. To leave unchallenged the pernicious capitalist division of labor is to go on producing the ecological catastrophes that already urgently need remedial efforts. We are not only not taking meaningful action in that direction, but at a conference like this we carried on as though there was no problem at all, just the need to expand the struggle for social wealth. Fumagalli even presented uncritically an economic framework utterly dependent on growth, with no nuance or further attempt to unravel what that might mean in a post-capitalist world.

Emma Dowling gave one of the talks I liked best in the conference, because she was trying to explode the idea of this broad category of immaterial labor. As a high-end waitress in a state-of-the-art restaurant she started out by giving us a version of her introductory rap to a table of hungry patrons. In it she showed how her own emotional talent was a crucial job skill, and then as she went on to unpack her labor process we learned that nearly every detail of her demeanor and performance was scripted in a 25-point system of patented values by the entrepreneur who invented her chain. I loved it as a demonstration of that overriding truth of modern work: nearly anyone can learn to do the physical tasks, but not everyone can *really believe* in their work (or have ability to create that impression at least), not everyone can maintain a *professional attitude* in the face of daily frustrations and their own personal lives. The skill most in demand by capital in the *service industry* is our ability to subsume ourselves fully under the terms imposed by our work, by capital. Massimo de Angelis and David Harvie followed her (and the three of them helped break the iron logic of the conference's overly rigid scheduling by bunching themselves up and sharing their discussion time, which was still limited) with an assertive presentation about how tightly measured affective labor is, using their own academic work as an example. Harvie detailed the absurd measurements imposed on his work life, e.g. there are 3.5 hours allocated to prepare for a one hour lecture, etc. If he/the teacher/the worker cannot meet that schedule the additional time required simply comes unremunerated from his personal life. Or he can quit. From the two papers our vague notions of the immeasurability of immaterial labor were debunked. But without adequate time to hash it out and further discuss it their arguments didn't alter the conference or other speakers' continuing assertion of immeasurability in this period of capitalism.

Nick Dyer-Witford, author of the brilliant *CyberMarx*, gave a good talk which drew an analogy between the *acellular form* of capitalism (the commodity) and the cellular form of communism or commonism which is the commons, i.e. goods and services produced not to sell but to share. In conversation with him later we grazed across a notion that the kinds of commons-producing that we can already see going on in daily life need a push from a central, state-like entity to help galvanize and extend their logic more fully. If you think about all the ways that the state subsidizes private business, privatization of common wealth, and obstructs cooperation and mutual aid with bureaucracy and legal impediments, it's hard not to fantasize about how quickly and thoroughly we might transform a lot of our material lives with institutional support and aid. But of course there are no states whose mission is not first and foremost the preservation and extension of capitalism and the social relations that allow for further capital accumulation.

Anyway, I could probably write more, but you get the drift. It was certainly worthwhile going, though perhaps not in the way I expected. I kind of accepted my offer to speak being rejected as an indication that I'd find a lot of the conference over my head, and that the work this crowd is doing would make my head spin. Were that it were so! On the contrary, I'm more sure than ever of my book project and that it is a unique contribution, but not just to this arcane and small political tendency.

I had hoped to discuss the idea of class composition in the way that I've been thinking about it and planning to write about it in my book. I can't summarize my whole work here, but quickly, I think most people don't identify with a class identity. Instead they reject class as a meaningful category. And that's not a problem, but actually indicates the early stages of a whole swath of (actual) workers who are working to supercede the limitations of wage-labor and the narrowing of themselves as "just" workers. In various activities and pursuits, they are recomposing the working class outside of wage-labor and in ways that might actually start creating the basis for a classless and ecologically sound human society. And those activities are actually a lot of work, but unpaid and strictly geared towards creating a commons as Nick Dyer-Witheford described it. (This is not to say that all these incipient efforts aren't eminently co-optable and turned against themselves by becoming reintegrated into the logic of the market, but that's part of my book too...)

Anyway, I'll leave it there, since this is obviously already too long a blog entry. It may well be that there was a mini-revolt Aat the end of the conference that I missed entirely, so I hope if anyone reads this and wants to add on to the narrative, or to contradict or embellish my account, they will do so!