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Allsorts

A collection of miscellaneous PODs

Swarm Forms: On Platforms and Creativity

By Olga Guriunova

Will the ‘hive mind’ of social networking replace classical forms of knowledge production? Comparing Web 2.0 and small-scale, self-run cultural platforms, Olga Goriunova maintains the possibility for originality in both contexts, while identifying how the same old commercial and institutional pressures still operate

The term ‘platform’ is so common today it makes people sick (though not as much as ‘Web 2.0’ does). It is thought to have originated with Tim O’Reilly and his article on Web 2.0 in which he describes ‘the web as platform’, not as a figure of speech but a description of concrete developments. [1] Back in 2002, when I started conceiving of my work on the software art repository Runme.org in terms of a platform on which to build an art trend, it was difficult to decide on which term to apply. ‘Platform’ only had a history of metaphorical usage, such as with the Dutch ‘Virtueel Platform’ which was established in 1998 as an expertise centre ‘stimulating innovation and supporting e-culture’.[2]

It seems that the web as ‘platform’ in O’Reilly’s terms bears a mainly technical meaning. A platform spans ‘all connected devices’, ‘delivering software as a continually-updated service’; ‘a platform for interacting with content’.[3] Even ‘the web and all its connected devices as one global platform’ implies the meaning of a platform as of a *server* (or servers) ‘delivering desktop-like applications over the web’.[4] Thus, a platform for Web 2.0 adepts serves applications to end-users through a web browser allowing interaction with content. Such a definition is useful and helps make a distinction for designers and programmers between Web 1.0 that supposedly was about static html-based web sites (with CGI or Perl on the back-end) and Web 2.0’s dynamic platforms generally built with ‘CSS for layout, XML for data, XHTML for markup, JavaScript and the DOM for behavior...’ on the front end and ‘PHP or (especially) Ruby on Rails’ on the back-end.[5]

However, this description does not adequately address the politics of the technical architectures and applications involved. O’Reilly and his followers try to do this by nodding towards the fostering of community, collaboration, the ‘architecture of participation’, ‘rich-user experiences’, and ‘collective intelligence’, but continuously fail to prove that such cultural phenomena were not present in the times of what they term Web 1.0. My criticism is not original; Slate.com has been calling Web 2.0 a technical upgrade, while the participatory or social aspects of Web 2.0 are ‘what the Web was supposed to be all along’, as Tim Berners-Lee puts it.[6]

‘Art platform’ was the term I came up with as a solution for what to call an online platform that enables the building of a cultural movement entirely through the use of its own mechanisms. It describes a web platform that solicits, induces and produces a cultural or artistic phenomenon. Examples of such platforms include Micromusic.net, an 8-bit music platform, Runme.org, a software art repository, and Udaff.com, a ‘mate lit’ platform (mate or mat lit is my term for a current literary genre deploying obscene, colloquial, orthographic Russian discourse).[7] Two years ago, trying to provide a definition of an art platform, I wrote:

A platform differentiates itself from other websites by the relations of creative, social, instrumental, educational and historical character it establishes and is involved into. A platform is aimed at supporting and stimulating creative initiatives and work, and it provides a possibility for continuous exhibition of the artefacts, often accompanied by reactions to them, various discussions. Sometimes there is also a set of instruments for particular kind of creative work available. A platform often also puts efforts into translating digital creative processes into offline and more official cultural scenes, establishing connections between cultural movements of different times and orders. Most platforms organize (ir)regular 'real-life' gatherings such as festivals, concerts, workshops or those of a less formal nature.[8]

Most parts of this description can be applied today to blogging, photo-sharing and other platforms. However, the art platforms I refer to are all quite classical static web sites. And, on top of building 'communities', 'experiences' and 'collective knowledge', they build distinctive cultural products, whether regarded as digital folk, creative practices of everyday or artistic trends.

An art platform appears as a reaction to the development of a particular cultural creative practice it focuses on. It is quickly built by a few enthusiasts. A platform is administered, and all incoming projects moderated by, a small group of people (usually 1-5). It has an open database with a user-friendly interface anyone can download from/upload to. It accumulates a number of creative products that in turn attract new users and new products. Building a database of works, a platform chooses a particular mechanism of reward and distinction, be it voting or featuring, and contributes to the discourse and context of the practice it works within. Working with the 'grey' zones of cultural production, with grass-root practices, such platforms can create significant artistic and cultural phenomena, and transfer the practice onto a different cultural level.

If we look at the interface, art platforms can be clearly differentiated from blogs. Art platforms are single interface platforms, and blogs or tagging platforms are multiple interface platforms. Single interface platforms have a single entrance, a point of concentration, of maximum understanding of the resource. Such an interface may include a list of categories, whether a straightforward taxonomic database interface, as in the case of Runme.org, or of the latest texts, as with Udaff.com. If you visit a multiple interface platform there is no home page or main entrance. In the blogosphere, you navigate through personal blogs, through photographs and cross-references, by means of user names, friends, comments and links. Although banal, this distinction reveals a further, more fundamental one: single interface platforms are devoted to a single 'theme', a shared aesthetic, creative, even political horizon.

If on multiple interface platforms there are tools that help maintain the 'healthy' functioning of the system (for instance, 'abuse teams' in the case of blogs), with single interface platforms there is a need for moderators who are responsible for the development of the interface, which in fact means control over the content development of the entire system.

Such centralisation renders moderation very crucial, and is far from being 'automated curation'. [9] It is a taste-based, individualised decision-making process developed over time. Precise moderation, especially at the beginning, and the considered construction of a system is necessary to the survival of the platform and success of the trend. Moderation, together with users' input, helps develop the cultural movement and its discourse.

Multiple interface platforms users visit selected pages. With singular interface platforms, the user, interested in the trend the platform is devoted to, can explore almost the entire database. Contributing to such a platform, the user enters and co-creates a content rich context. With such platforms it is possible to develop an artistic movement, to add some missing elements to a creative activity, giving it a theoretical, social or political dimension.

However, I would like to add that in terms of how and what they (can) potentially produce, art platforms and other platforms are not so different and can complement each other. This possibility exists against a general climate of mistrust on the part of researchers and intellectuals over the quality of the knowledge produced on platforms. There is a continuous outcry on the part of some theorists and developers, claiming that the horizontalisation of knowledge and power celebrated by projects such as Wikipedia is dangerous. Jaron Lanier talks of the dangers of online collectivism and the belief in the wisdom of the collective. Larry Sanger criticises not specifically the celebration of amateurism but attacks on professionalism and expertise. Jürgen Habermas claims the use of the internet weakens the position of the traditional intellectual and undermines the achievements of the public sphere.[10]

However, the institution and construction of knowledge on Wikipedia, for instance, is really no different to the construction of offline encyclopedias. According to Wikipedia etiquette, as Fernanda Vegas and Martin Wattenberg mention in their study, before posting to an article it is desirable to discuss the prepared text on an article's 'talk page' with others, including 'permanent editors' of the article.[11] Trust for a certain author is built on the 'reputation' she develops over her history of participation in Wikipedia, and most authors possess individual personae known to others. The history of changes of an article presents a quite detailed and documented 'history of argument' and disagreement over a subject fighting its way through. The roles of institutions participating in the invention and construction of knowledge offline, such as scientific magazines with their peer-reviews or publishing houses with their publications and conferences, are seriously transformed but to a large degree reproduced online.

Wikipedia is a unique example, however. It should not serve as the face of Web 2.0 or some new generation of 'dangers'. Nor should it be mixed with tagging, blogging or mapping platforms which are much more oriented toward individual than collective production.

The central claim here is that, contra the critics of social network-based knowledge, the creativity of users across all kinds of platforms, from digital folklore, creative and liberating practices of everyday life, subcultural expressivity, and graphorrhea to artistic production, is capable of producing 'original' results, especially if certain human-technical decisions help channel the process.

For instance, with art platforms, the technical bottlenecks of moderating, featuring, voting and making comments that channel the collective effort help create an artistic or cultural phenomenon. An art platform works as an art institution – it allows for the bias of the curator or editor; it allows for the storage and exhibition of works, as do museums or libraries with journals; it allows for contextualising, as do publications or conferences; it allows for feedback and peer review, as do magazines. An art platform produces histories, identities, knowledge and social clusters, exactly in the manner of those interrelations constituting power which Foucault grasped. It represents a quite centred power model that is seemingly not characteristic of platforms considered to be Web 2.0 services.

In order to create a focus, all platforms apply similar mechanisms rooted in the offline histories of power and institutions, however. For instance, when a community devoted to certain topics is formed on a blogging platform, a moderator turns up, a set of rules arises, and often after a while postings are re-filtered and organised in a database with a straightforward taxonomic interface. Such filters, human and technical, help re-create the figure of the professional or even intellectual, with individual judgement, taste and insight. It is a figure that re-vitalises the zombie of the traditional intellectual specialist, making it more 'autonomous' but also more vulnerable.

Bourdieu describes the intellectual as an historical product formed by a struggle between the forces of economics and politics, a struggle for autonomy.[12] The authority of intellectuals derives from their specific position in the relatively autonomous world of art or science and their adherence to values

such as disinterestedness, ethical purity and expertise. Bourdieu calls for the preservation of the intellectual's autonomy currently endangered by corporate sponsorship of universities, and their direct subordination to business and political imperatives. Answering Lanier's criticism of Wikipedia, its co-founder, Larry Sanger, counters:

Slashdotters would not simply stand for a system in which some hand-selected group of editors choose or promote posts; but if the result is decided by an impersonal algorithm, then it's okay. It isn't that the Slashdotters have a rational belief that the cream will rise to the top, under the system; people use the system just because it seems fairer or more equal to them.[13]

While traditional bastions of knowledge/power suffer a crisis of authority arising from their loss of autonomy, many internet users, believing they are able to own their means of production, circulation and consecration, become the new intellectuals fighting for a 'fairer' space or principle, re-establishing autonomy through technical or human-technical decisions. They are in fact led by the very same imperatives Bourdieu describes.

Working on a platform is an economically vulnerable position. Such labour is usually performed by 'freaks' for free or for micro-money obtained for purposes loosely associated with their work on the platform. Nevertheless, a moderator or developer is well aware of their economic precariousness. The work of the ordinary user, by contrast, is not ordinarily understood as labour per se. It does, however, belong to the category of 'immaterial labour' as described by Italian marxists such as Maurizio Lazzarato, Paolo Virno, Tiziana Terranova and others. Such cultural production provides new types of products and relations which alter the process of surplus value extraction; it drives innovation, trains in precariousness, locates social desires.

The means of cultural production, in this case platforms, necessarily belong to the capitalist class and are either bought by companies or – today – built by them from scratch. These companies not only want to control the technical means, but the data as well. However, platforms' licences and terms of use vary drastically. Some, like Tagzania, use a Creative Commons licence, but most platforms stipulate shared copyright with the content's author.

Tim O'Reilly, an originator of the idea of the 'user ownership of data' (an oft repeated but rather unclear statement), claims:

Much as the rise of proprietary software has led to the Free Software movement, we expect the rise of proprietary databases to result in a Free Data movement within the next decade.[14]

However, there are several issues worth raising concerning the user's data and its ownership. First, data is not that important to platform owners. What is important is the presence of users and the continuous use of the platform's facilities. For instance, one cannot easily gather all the postings to a personal blog along with their commentaries and transfer that data to another platform. The data is intertwined in the platform and, until she loses interest, the user will be back to work on the relevant platform she has already devoted time to. Secondly, a person willing to make an open or free data platform will (and did) eventually find out that traffic volumes are too high for an individual to sustain and will eventually sell it. This complex set of interdependencies defines the current picture.

As Tiziana Terranova puts it:

... this mode also signals the emergence of new machines of control and subjectification which reimpose hierarchical relations at the service of social reproduction and the production of surplus value. These are moments which turn qualitative, intensive differences into quantitative relations of exchange and equivalence; which enclose the open and dissipative potential of cultural

production into differential hierarchies; which accumulate the rewards or work carried out by larger social assemblages...[15]

However, Wikipedia managed to choose a different economic model for itself. The vicious circle described above can only be challenged if platforms are considered public spaces, analogous to those of a city. This said, other problems linked to public space and coupled with the issues relating to the nature of networks will inevitably arise.

The situation is different with art platforms. If platforms are increasingly corporately owned, art platforms tend to be run by enthusiasts. The developer of a platform can sell it, the moderator of an art platform can't. An art platform's moderator is the one who registered the domain name, collaborated on or supervised the technical development of the resource, invested, along with other moderators, significant amounts of time into 'raising' a platform, deciding on almost every single aspect of its development. The moderator(s) and the users together create a cultural entity which is coherent, specific and, importantly, small-scale. Its subject is avant-garde and marginal.

Without moderation and the trust of its users, the art platform turns into a dead archive. This is the core principle by which it is distinguished from other platforms that largely run 'by themselves', demanding maintenance from the owner in a way comparable to the maintenance of a bicycle. In conclusion, it is rather unlikely that art platforms in their current shape will become economically appealing to companies.

The term 'Web 2.0' was created as a business slogan, a logo, so it came as little surprise to hear that O'Reilly had applied for a patent on Web 2.0 as a service mark in 2003. The patent was pending the whole time O'Reilly was promoting it as a generic term. Despite the term's poverty, its success subsumes all the attempts to talk about social software, a participatory web, collective creation and other, different and pre-existing models.

Like Meccano, many buildings can be constructed from the same constitutive elements, and different purposes and principles inform different platforms. If we understand them in this way, platforms cannot in general be stigmatised as loci of the unoriginal 'hive mind', and there is no need for a term like Web 2.0.

[1] Tim O'Reilly, 'What Is Web 2.0. Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software', 2005 <http://www.oreillyn.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html>

[2] Virteel Platform, 'About', see: <http://www.virtueelplatform.nl/set-223-en.html>

[3] Andrew Orlowski, 'Web 2.0: It's ... like your brain on LSD!', http://www.theregister.co.uk/2005/10/21/web_two_point_nought_poll/;
Richard MacManus & Joshua Porter, 'Web 2.0 for Designers', http://www.digital-web.com/articles/web_2_for_designers/

[4] Dion Hinchcliffe, 'The State of Web 2.0', http://web2.wsj2.com/the_state_of_web_20.htm; Paul Graham, 'Web 2.0', <http://www.paulgraham.com/web20.html#f1n>

[5] Jeffrey Zeldman, 'Web 3.0', <http://www.alistapart.com/articles/web3point0>

[6] Paul Boutin, 'Web 2.0 Doesn't Live Up to its Name', <http://www.slate.com/id/2138951/>; Nate Anderson, 'Tim Berners-Lee on Web 2.0: "Nobody Knows What it Means"', <http://arstechnica.com/news.ars/post/20060901-7650.html>

[7] For a more detailed analysis of mate lit, see Olga Goriunova, "'Male literature" of Udaff.com and Other Networked Artistic Practices of the Cultural Resistance', in *Control + Shift. Public and Private Usages of the Russian Internet*, eds. Henrike Schmidt, Katy Teubener, Natalja Konradova, Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2006.

[8] Olga Goriunova & Alexei Shulgin, 'From Art on Networks to Art on Platforms', in *Data Browser*, volume 3: Curating Immateriality: On the Work of the Curator in the Age of Network Systems, ed. Joasia Krysa, New York: Autonomedia, 2006.

[9] The term 'automated curating' appears to originate from Eva Grubinger's project *C@C – Computer-Aided Curating* (1993-1995). For an account of the project, see Eva Grubinger, 'C@C, Computer-Aided Curating (1993-1995) Revisited', in Joasia Krysa, op. cit.

[10] Jaron Lanier, 'Digital Maoism: The Hazards of the New Online Collectivism', 2006, http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/lanier06/lanier06_index.html; Larry Sanger, 'Why Wikipedia Must Jettison Its Anti-Elitism', 2004, <http://www.kuro5hin.org/story/2004/12/30/142458/25>; Jürgen Habermas, 'Towards a United States of Europe', 2006, <http://www.signandsight.com/features/676.html>

[11] Fernanda Vegas, Martin Wattenberg, Kushal Dave, 'Studying Cooperation and Conflict between Authors with *history flow* Visualisations', 2004, http://alumni.media.mit.edu/~fviegas/papers/history_flow.pdf

[12] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005

[13] Larry Sanger, 'On "Digital Maoism: The Hazards of the New Online Collectivism" By Jaron Lanier', http://www.edge.org/discourse/digital_maoism.html

[14] See Dion Hinchcliffe, op. cit., and Tim O'Reilly, op. cit.

[15] Tiziana Terranova, 'Of Sense and Sensibility: Immaterial Labor in Open Systems', in Joasia Krysa, op. cit.

Olga Goriunova <og AT dxlab.org> is a new media curator and scholar, co-organiser of the Readme software art festivals <<http://readme.runme.org>>, and lecturer in new media at Moscow City University. She is completing her PhD on 'art platforms' at the Media Lab, University of Art and Design, Helsinki

The Social SoftWar

By Angela Mitropoulos

Do blogs and social network-based sites offer the prospect of a democratic sociability without borders or wars? Should unpaid producers of content struggle for fair compensation? Or does the very sense of ownership, justice and right founded on labour need to be shaken up?

Angela Mitropoulos takes a critical look at the dissident pragmatism of the startup and the ‘alternative’ economies of the digital commons

The cylons were created by man. They were created to make life easier on the twelve colonies. And then the day came when the cylons decided to kill their masters. After a long and bloody struggle, an armistice was declared. The cylons left for another world to call their own. Now mankind’s children are returning home!

– *Battlestar Galactica, opening titles, miniseries/pilot*

The cylons were created by man. They evolved. They rebelled. They look and feel human. Some are programmed to think they are human. There are many copies. And they have a plan.

– *Battlestar Galactica, opening titles*

‘Being social’ is often understood as the opposite of ‘being at war’. ‘Social software’, even if implicitly, retains this distinction and its premises. Let’s begin, then, with the topic of war – and technology. As Clausewitz once famously complained, ‘War is regarded as nothing but the continuation of politics by other means.’[1] That is, war is conceived as an instrument – to be defended, opposed, or explained according to ends that are external to it, usually political, but also economic, civilisational, humanitarian, theological and so on. In this sense, war is often reckoned as technology, which is to say, with all the associated connotations according to which technology is considered an instrument. That is, as Aristotle defined technics: a man-made thing, distinguished from man by not having the origin of motion or rest within it.

In another but related sense, the question of war, no less than that of technology, is frequently posed in such a way that the nexus between politics, life and technics is denied – often for the purposes of clinching either a pessimistic or optimistic stance – or credited with an infinite sway. In this way, the question of technology too often becomes, and perhaps parallels, the theologisation of politics (and history) that has repeatedly animated both conservative and radical critiques of capitalism. Whether assigned with almighty powers from which, according to Heideggerian lamentation, ‘only a God can save us’, or serving as placeholder of eschatological hopes for the reclamation of a divine-like mastery over the world, the question of technology presents itself as the answer to a political question that has – to modify Althusser’s remark on the structure of ideology – not been overtly posed. In this respect, Arthur Kroker is right to ask whether ‘technology is the name given today to the ancient language of metaphysics.’[2] Foucault’s similarly famous reply to Clausewitz – ‘that politics is war continued by other means’ – suggests the intersection of technics, politics and life as the circumstance of war. Differently put: that war is not outside society, but a condition of it, as an often diffuse and permanent war that, also, marks the perimeter of any given society.[3]

In discussions of the internet, the association between the temporality of this seemingly permanent global war and the entanglements of politics, technics and life has barely begun to be articulated. I want to sketch how this articulation might proceed, emphasising some of the more difficult questions that arise from the intimate networking practices of ‘social software’, particularly as they relate to copyrights. I am interested in underlining the work dimensions of networking, the implications of always-on net-*working* for conventional distinctions between society and war.

Because work, too, has its theological aspects. From the far-reaching sense of labour as auto-teleology and auto-production to its specific manifestation in the Lockean doctrine of labour, rights and enclosure, the condition of being at war would be posited as the deficiency of borders and rights. Locke’s understanding of society and property rights is of some significance here, being revived in

debates over intellectual property, digital content and the like. Locke accorded a privileged status to labour in the definition of the social contract and the determination of rights. For him, the goal of society is the preservation of property rights – and, one can claim rights because labour has been exerted.

Moreover, Lockean arguments are a cliché of anti-piracy campaigns, serving to conflate the work of musicians with the legal ownership of that work by record companies, film-makers with studios, and so on, for obvious effect. But if Locke's liberal contentions have reinforced juridico-commercial property as rightful, they have also been the ethico-political ground of various socialist – from social democratic to national socialist – claims for a properly remunerated labour (or is it life?). Proposals for an 'alternative compensation system' from the 'digital commons' are a version of this; coupling rights and labour together almost as precisely as Locke did. In this way, differences are slid under the equilibrating heading of 'stakeholders' and, as the Berlin Declaration on Collectively Managed Online Rights added, the goal of balancing rights.

But if one response to this is to insist that there is a crucial asymmetry between wage and profit – without which there would be no profit – the issue becomes complicated if considered through the relation between labour and rights, not least insofar as subcontracting and the 'free labour' of the net serve to diffuse this question beyond that of formal wage contracts. Because it is through the coupling of labour and rights that juridico-commercial precepts radiate as politics and/or morality, which is to say: as the quasi- or openly transcendental determination of merit and its rewards and, not least, justice. For the moment, let's recall Locke's 'labour theory of rights', which is echoed in Marx's writings. Without doubt, entire debates between variant marxisms have turned around the question of this echo. In any case, for Locke, labour, and the property rights that flow from it, are a condition of being human, a secularised version of divine creation. In his *Second Treatise of Government*, he wrote:

every man has a property in his own person. This no body had any right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his.

That is, the human subject consists, above all, in self-possession, in the regard for oneself and one's labour, as property. One can, of course, contract to sell one's labour: 'a freeman makes himself a servant to another, by selling him[self], for a certain time.' A 'freeman', a citizen, is in this sense a proprietor. Locke underscores the sense of the work contract as a non-absolute transference of right and temporal limitation, going on to distinguish servants from slaves. The latter, being captives taken in war, have 'forfeited their lives,' and are therefore 'not capable of property.' The resonances of Lockean justice and right are more than apparent in Marx's writing, not least in the early theme of alienation. They are also, later, much more ambivalently put:

At first the rights of property seemed to us to be based on a man's own labour. [...] Now, however, property turns out to be the right, on the part of the capitalist, to appropriate the unpaid labour of others or its product, and to be the impossibility, on the part of the labourer, of appropriating his own product. The separation of property from labour has become the necessary consequence of a law that apparently originated in their identity.[4]

Nevertheless, the question of whether Marx, here and elsewhere, adapts a Lockean exposition for the purposes of a subsequent ironic reversal – as in the recurrence of 'at first ... seemed' throughout *Capital* – is perhaps less significant than the problem itself. Or, to put it another way: the circumstances and the predicament of the meshing of life, technics and politics that, in later writings and notes, Marx would refer to as 'real subsumption' and, even later still, (translations of) Tronti's writing would emphasise with the concept of the 'social factory.' In this regard, the problem is in no way forestalled by substituting Locke's abstract individual as proprietor with a properly redeemed

collectivity of the ergological, productivist society that exhilarated national socialism.

The larger dilemma – aside from the reverence for labour, but bound up with it – is the foreclosure of politics in democratic theology which accompanied the transformation of ‘class war’ into ‘permanent war.’ If I put it like this, it is to circumvent the dreaming of a time when war was suspended through the determination of fixed boundaries (not least those of class understood as an identity) and in the armistice of (social) democracy. While Walter Benjamin’s arguments on the author function and technology are important to discussions of *network*, it is I think his discussion of war that might sharpen the connections between authorial subjectivity, right and war. As he remarked in ‘Critique of Violence’, war does not annihilate adversaries. On the contrary, war fixes the borders and shape of adversity itself, proceeding to bestow equal rights upon (what is left of) the adversary as contracting party to a treaty. Benjamin adds:

Here appears, in fearsome originality, the mythic ambiguity to which Anatole France refers satirically when he says, ‘Poor and rich are equally forbidden to spend the night under the bridge.’ [5]

Borders are not simply geopolitical. They are not only the means by which war is displaced and relocated to beyond socially-contracted space as the division of populations and peoples.

That is, borders are also, in another sense, temporal. From Locke to Marx, the very condition of the ostensible peace of the social contract would be connected up with the temporal limitation of the work contract, in turn constitutive of the difference between the ‘freeman’ and the slave. But, what happens when such temporal limits are frayed by technics? If I might put it like this, technics ‘comes home’, as it were. It becomes an intimate *habitus* in the intersection of war and society. Even if this particular war is conducted in more or less soft form, it is as the continuous war of democracy against the outbreak of war within its borders – which is to say, the outbreak of another kind of war, something other than the competitive clash between the formally equal, understood as a prelude to a contract.

And yet, if the proliferation of ‘social software’ and related copyfights suggests anything, it is that while the concept of work preserves its Lockean associations with right and enclosure, its temporal boundaries give way to an always-on, always available net-working. Some time ago, Tiziana Terranova noted the disaffection of ‘netslaves’, experiencing ‘24/7 sweatshops’ and ‘ninety-hour weeks.’ She fruitfully related this to various (post-) *Operaio* concepts such as the social factory, general intellect and, not least, affective labour. For her, the question was:

How to speak of labour, especially cultural and technical labour, after the demolition job carried out by thirty years of postmodernism? [6]

Mario Tronti explains the problem somewhat differently, less an instance of competing theoretical camps (say, ‘postmodernism’ versus marxism) than the meshing of politics, technics and life:

There is a reluctance to confront the bitter theme of the political consequences that the revolution within work has had upon society. The fragmentation of the left social bloc begins with the loss of the centrality of the working subject. This, in turn, was effected technically. [7]

Yet, the ‘centrality of the working subject’ presupposed certain borders, according to which – to recall Benjamin’s remarks – an armistice had been declared and equality bestowed. That is: it is on the ground of the distinctions between paid and unpaid work, the geopolitical divisions of labour, and more besides, that this conjuncture of work and subjectivity occurred and its political centrality was established. Whatever else might be said, the internet is not simply ‘animated by cultural and technical labour,’ and not only by a chain of labour stretching around the world that produces, among other

things, the chipset and the keyboard. It is animated, should one have occasion to speak of labour and life beyond its anthropological dimensions, by the very impossibility of discerning an ordinary labour in man. In another sense, and considering the mechanisation of the working body that capitalism puts into motion, Silvia Federici insists that ‘the human body and not the steam engine, and not even the clock, was the first machine developed by capitalism.’[8] Further (and Terranova appears to dismiss this question altogether), whether workers achieved the status of human beings, said to possess the very essence of what was said to be human, was so often a question of whether their labour could be said to be humanising.

This is one reason why Lockean understandings of property rights have been revived on the net. As Fred Scharmen notes of MySpace, the ‘component parts of the online soul are small pieces of marketing data.’[9] In this shift from habeas corpus to habeas data, which nevertheless maintains the sense of the former as the presentation of the juridical subject (liable to punishment, surveillance, bearing contractual obligation, rights and so on), Locke’s abstract individual finds its most cogent expression. Despite all the talk of intangible commodities and immaterial labour as the circumstances that might sunder neo-classical understandings of property rights, the ‘labour theory of rights’ has in fact become more, rather than less, explicit. Property in land was never, in fact, conditioned by scarcity (as Johan Söderberg has noted), but by enclosure deemed rightful through the exertion of labour.[10] Locke argued: ‘He by his labour does, as it were, inclose it from the common.’ Indeed, Locke’s argument was, in many ways, an argument for colonisation – alongside Blackstone’s *Commentaries*, it became the template for validating colonial property rights. Colonists enclosed the land and made it productive. What counts as labour and production here is, obviously, decided by whether it might be amenable to being counted – calculable, measurable, exchangeable, abstract, parcellised.

And, on the net, the demand that rights flow from labour functions as an insistence that such labour is human labour, after all – that it is not degraded, alienated, etc. Played out along the axes of a labour deemed to have the capacity for self-possession and therefore self-management – especially because of the intersection between language and labour – one can (but not in all cases) dispose of any questions as to what work is by insisting that it means authorship, self-positing, the conscious, reasoned intent that is said to distinguish the work of man from that of bees (or machines). Hence the often intense debates on the net over recognition of authorship and its reward, particularly at the juncture between ‘social software’ and institutional practice. One can easily recount the instances: anxieties and musings about whether blogs amount to proper (academic) work which may, therefore, be appropriated by oneself or others (either copyrighted, attached to a CV or ‘stolen’); whether *Battlestar Galactica* webisodes were promotional material or creditable parts of the series; and, following from this, whether the work of fansites, blogs and wikis are promotional material which rightfully can be (as occurred with fandom.com) managed by studios.

Likewise, remunerated or not by actual money, it would be absurd to suggest that exchange and competition – not least in their democratic register – have not predominated as expectation or model on the net, albeit in a particularly intimate and self-managed form. Even where utopian possibility was pronounced in proto-communist terms, the elaboration of a ‘gift economy’ as an economy – that is, marked by exchange, reciprocity and contract – suggested that much of the gifting was perhaps the surreptitious anticipation of reward and, so, hardly a gift at all.[11] Therefore, the invention of the term ‘Web 2.0’ merely provides a handy label for processes that have been occurring for some time. It also makes apparent certain assumptions about *network* as confined to and having the character of intellectual work. Tim O’Reilly explicitly stated that ‘Web 2.0’ is the ‘harnessing of collective intelligence.’ Henry Jenkins asked:

if these grassroots efforts [of fansites, social software and suchlike] are generating value (and in fact, wealth) and their creative power is being tapped by major corporations, at what point should they start receiving a share of revenue for their work?[12]

Leaving aside the questions this raises about corporate control over such efforts, where does one locate the ‘origin’ of such creativity, since the proposition of creativity so often assumes an originary (and often individuated) authorship? There is a prelude to this. Laments over the degradation of human labour through technics turns out to be the reassertion of a recent and relative privilege (of so-called ‘creative work’) deemed lost. And it is in that process of mourning that a more intense recourse to the language of credit, right and authorship has occurred. Flattened into the language of an unperturbed ‘immanence’, such mourning can segue into an appeal for a properly self-managed labour and the celebration of a coming ergological society – a renewed productivist vitalism that regains the centrality of the concept of labour by conceding that while everything might be becoming laborious, ‘work makes free’, or it could.

It did not take long, for instance, for the political valorisations of, say, immaterial workers as the new revolutionary subject to shift into an explicitly hipster-entrepreneurial gear, notable in Richard Florida’s talk of the ‘creative class’. Alongside these revivals of Lockean notions of property, labour and right on the net, there are increasing and predictable suggestions to ‘switch off’. Displacing questions about work into fears of technology as an ‘inhuman force’, the tendency here is toward moral panics and the proliferation of surveillance and control (mostly of children), and often through software (such as i-Kids mobile phones with a parent-prescribed set of numbers that can be received or dialled and which can act as a leash to Government-subsidised distributions of ‘net nanny’).

Therefore, it may be better to ask what technology’s displacement and dispersion of work might mean for reformulating the very sense of work itself, against concepts of work as appropriation of the world, or work of one’s self (self-positing and self-possession), or work as the rejection of what is deemed foreign, including what is regarded (as Werner Hamacher argues) as ‘foreign to work.’[13] That is, all along the various registers of not-work, not proper work, inappropriate and inappropriable, unemployed, populations deemed superfluous, propertyless, without value – ‘what in work does not correspond to an ergological figure ... and does not come back to itself.’ Undoubtedly, there are aspects of net-work that are significant in this respect: from the ‘wasting of time’ at work in the form of ‘notworking’, to the risk that ‘exposure’ on the net might overflow, depose or even expose its (self-)marketing aspects.

And so, the political question which I alluded to earlier – the question that is not posed by presenting it as a *question of technology* – is not that of reinstating the nobility of politics – or humanity – over technics, along the lines of, say, Andrew Feenberg’s arguments for democratic control over technology, or Graham Longford’s calls for a ‘democratic reinvention of cyberspace.’[14] Nor, along similar lines, is it a matter of suggesting that the invocation of ‘the YouTube community’ in the announcement of YouTube’s sale to Google was the cynical deployment of sociality for commercial appropriation, as John McMurria has argued.[15] Contrary to McMurria and others, neither democracy nor community nor society can exist without recourse to borders and, in each of those cases, the mythologised semblance (and therefore denial) of those borders. Particularly with democracy, juridico-commercial subjectivity is conceived as the very idea of political subjectivity, right down into the confluences between equality and abstract labour and the structural rifts they are constituted through: that is, inequality and concrete indifference.

Indeed, insofar as blogs and other ‘user-generated’ sites assume the model of democracy or community, the question of exclusion (of what/who is included and what/who is not), becomes depoliticised. That is, less a question of differences than numerical calculations. Thus, the purportedly

open character of blogs and social networks takes its cue from money as the universal equivalent, assuming the same structure of concrete indifference (and exclusion). It is no coincidence that one 'how to blog successfully' site recommends regarding blogs as pieces of 'real estate' – the model of landed property is insistent. Even if such property is digital, it is made intimate, as the technics of self – and through the conduit of a 'labour theory of right.' In this way, relation, and non-relation, are no longer questions, an experiment in politics, but a market to be expanded.

The specificity of the political, then, is difference – but it is also the cut of difference that can, perhaps, cut both ways. But it will have to be politics conceived otherwise. Neither the difference of competition which puts difference *to work*. Nor the difference of a dialectics which *works out* differences. Nor, for that matter the difference as the work of self (as in Schmitt's existential theology of friend and enemy, toiling on the vocabularies and borders of identity and self-determination). On the contrary, it will have to be difference and relation posed as a question, each time. To be sure, the argument which follows cannot be that people should not be paid, or have an income. But this is not an ontological predicament. Aestheticisations of poverty are no less theological or odious than is Protestantism's work ethic. Rather, conflicts on the net, as elsewhere, need not continue to have recourse to a labour theory of rights to be political struggles. What is at stake here is by no means confined to the internet. Which is to say: it is no coincidence that migration is increasingly and explicitly controlled through reference to labour. From Bush's insistence that undocumented migrants must 'earn' an amnesty, to the coupling of work contracts and legalisation in the EU, the connection between the emerging criteria of 'netizenship' and citizenship are yet to be detailed in their connections, but those connections are pronounced.

Struggles need not posit labour as a condition of right – or, for that matter, understand labour as a condition of life – even as the meshing of technics, life and politics cannot be denied. Which is to say: there is an impasse here, which needs to be cut through. And no amount of pragmatism, in the demand for, say, just compensation can turn aside from its pragmatic repercussions: not least the validation of a border between ostensibly contractarian, self-managed subjects and those deemed incapable of contracting and therefore lacking subjectivity itself (i.e., treated as things, *pragma*). [For more on these aspects, see Angela Mitropoulos, 'Under the Beach, the Barbed Wire' in *Mute* Vol2#2] This is the condition of post-Fordist policing (or is it a war?). Moreover, as Adorno and Horkheimer remarked, 'Realistic dissidence is the trademark of anyone who has a new idea in business.' [16] One could add that dissident pragmatism is the very form of the startup. Unquestionably, without work life would grind to a halt, but life does indeed grind to a halt in so many ways that the question of what is life and what is labour (and for whom does the adhesion of labour as life become a condition of life or threat of death) should become *the* questions.

There are various ways such differences can be played out, perhaps as the difference between wage and profit, even as this unravels in some cases through subcontracting and so on. Or, more 'creatively', in the difference between the 'creative commons' (of subjects defined as authors) and the undercommons – of those who no longer, if indeed they ever did, figure politically as workers; deemed not to have the origin of movement within themselves, mere prostheses of 'creative' labour taking place elsewhere.[17] Or, in a more complex way, through the difference between 'here and now' conflicts over digital content and the insistence that technology is the historical repository of 'dead labour' as Marx suggested (and an archive, as Derrida argued[18]) and, therefore, what amounts to the incalculable justification of filesharing, editing and reprisal. Yet whatever the particular lines drawn in this other kind of softwar might be, politics here will be a matter of working through the question of work itself, in its differences.

- [1] [1] Clausewitz, *On War*, 1873.
- [2] Arthur Kroker, *Born Again Ideology: Religion, Technology, and Terrorism*, 2006.
- [3] Michel Foucault, '*Society Must Be Defended*': *Lectures at the College de France, 1976-76* (Trans) David Macey; (Eds) Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, Picador, 2003.
- [4] Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol.1 1867.
- [5] Walter Benjamin, 'The Critique of Violence' in *Reflections* (Ed) Peter Demetz, Schocken, New York, 1986.
- [6] Tiziana Terranova, 'Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy', 2000. Available at <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/technocapitalism/voluntary>
- [7] Mario Tronti, *La Politica al Tramonto*, Einaudi, Rome, 1998. With many thanks to Brett Neilson for the pointer and translation.
- [8] Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, Autonomedia, New York, 2004.
- [9] Freddy Scharmen, "'You must be logged in to do that!' - Myspace and Control' May, 2006. <http://www.sevensixfive.net/myspace/myspacetwopointoh.html>
- [10] Johan Söderberg, 'Reluctant Revolutionaries: The False Modesty of Reformist Critics of Copyright', 2004. <http://info.interactivist.net/article.pl?sid=04/09/29/1411223>
- [11] Richard Barbrook, 'The Hi-Tech Gift Economy', 1998. http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3_12/barbrook/
- [12] Henry Jenkins, 'Taking the You Out of YouTube?', 2006. http://www.henryjenkins.org/2006/11/googtube_tv_20_or_bubble_20.html
- [13] Werner Hamacher, 'Working Through Working', 1996. *Modernism/modernity* Volume 3, Number 1, January 1996, The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 23-56.
- [14] Andrew Feenberg, 'Democratic Rationalization: Technology, Power, and Freedom', 1992. http://dogma.free.fr/txt/AF_democratic-rationalization.htm
- [15] John McMurria, 'The YouTube Community', 2006. <http://jot.communication.utexas.edu/flow/?jot=view&id=1995>
- [16] Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (Trans) John Cumming, Herder and Herder, New York, 1972.
- [17] For a discussion of the undercommons, see Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's 'The University and the Undercommons', *Social Text*, Issue 79, Duke University Press, 2004. Available at <http://info.interactivist.net/article.pl?sid=05/04/23/1535258&mode=nested&tid=8>

[18] Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'Archive*, Galilée, Paris, 1995.

Angela Mitropoulos <s0metim3s AT optusnet.com.au> lives in Melbourne, Australia

Creative Gulag

By Bryan Finocki

The creative creativity gulag has finally arrived, (some of us have been expecting this for some time) brought to you by the architecture team responsible for some of those magical regenerative touchstones Londoners will remember for transforming their communities into hubs of 'imagination', crap coffee and expensive housing. Release your creativity. ha ha ha

from <http://subtopia.blogspot.com/2007/02/fantasy-prison.html>

Creative prison

[Image: Will Alsop, The "Creative Prison" Project, 2006. Photo via Metropolis.]

Back in 2005, English architect Will Alsop announced that he was working on a project to explore alternative prison design in the U.K. Looking at the problem of incarceration in England as a spatial one where prison space is overwhelmed and generally poorly designed, Alsop teamed up with activist arts group Rideout (Creative Arts for Rehabilitation), and together devised a kind of design studio to examine how the design of prisons informs their effectiveness and challenges attitudes to current prisoner rehabilitation. To do this, the process would need to be mainly driven by prison inmates themselves, and so inmates from HMP Gartree prison in Leicestershire were selected to participate.

Well, the results can be found in a new exhibition that is showing at the Yard Gallery of the Architecture Foundation in London called "Creative Prison" (more will supposedly be available at www.creativeprison.com in the future). Described on Rideout's website, the show features Alsop's designs, sculptural interpretations of them by prisoners working under the tutelage of sculptor Jon Ford, a short film by squint/opera imagining the interior of the speculative prison, and other videos by Shona Illingworth that apparently reflect more upon the current conditions of incarceration as experienced by inmates today.

[Image: Will Alsop, The "Creative Prison" Project, 2006. Photo via BBC.]

An article in the New Statesman begins by saying that asking inmates to design their fantasy prison has produced innovative results. A fantasy prison. Hmmmm...what a contradiction in terms. Nevertheless, emphasizing rehabilitation and education through ways in which the outside world might be able to interact more appropriately with the prison population, Alsop came up with a fictional facility drawn mostly from the prisoners' ideas as well as successful real-life schemes from around the country. "The group," the article tells us, "named this imaginary place HMP Paterson, after the reforming pre-Second World War commissioner of prisons Alexander Paterson" and worked "from the assumption that inmates would be from the "super-enhanced" category C - those who had earned trust and privileges. Any transgression of Paterson's rules would result in a return to a normal, Victorian-style building."

[Image: Will Alsop, The "Creative Prison" Project, 2006. Photo via BBC.]

The layout of the prison mimics that of a college campus with separate living modules, or “blocks,” as Alsop calls them (though I prefer module since block is still such a carceral-centric term). While being typically brightly colored like most of Alsop’s work, the inmates would “live in clusters of between 12 and 15” and would “be able to control how long they spent in their cells at the end of a day of work or training.” Each block would include a communal kitchen, common room and an enclosed garden.

[Image: Will Alsop, The "Creative Prison" Project, 2006. Photo via 24 Hour Museum.]

Alsop explains: "You are locked in the block, not the cell." [...] "You give the prisoner the key so they can lock themselves in if they wish. The biggest threat to them is being attacked by other prisoners."

[Image: Will Alsop, The "Creative Prison" Project, 2006. Photo via BBC.]

The general premise is that this prison campus allows for people to essentially share the features of the facility. “A swimming pool, for example, straddles the jail wall. Cameras, tags and heat-sensing equipment would work in tandem with security barriers to protect the community, while eliminating the need for a fortress-style wall.”

[Image: Will Alsop, The "Creative Prison" Project, 2006. Photo via 24 Hour Museum.]

Other important features suggested by the inmates included a Visitors Center where families could interact with inmates in a photo shop, in front of unique backdrops so that families could have pictures of themselves without the stigma of some prison wall looming in the background, the process by which would also allow families to share more time together in a familial context. There were of course proposals for skate parks and elaborate speaker systems for richer musical enjoyment.

[Image: The Prison Alternative, by Matt Wittman, 2003.]

A friend of mine, Matt Wittman, a landscape architect who did his thesis at UC Berkeley modeling prison alternatives, proposed an original tower scheme that envisioned inmates existing in a vertical institution, where the more problematic inmates lived closer to the top (somewhat detached from the community) and worked themselves towards a gradual rehabilitative descent back to ground level, experiencing different forms of education, vocational and therapeutic programming on floors along the way.

[Image: The Prison Alternative, by Matt Wittman, 2003.]

The idea was to eventually graduate at ground level earning greater freedoms through out different stages of progression, ultimately towards more wide open access to the prison grounds where interaction with the community at large became more interwoven. From here the inmate would in a matter of terms, wean themselves from the prison by slowly building their own place back in the community again within the proximity of rehabilitative relinquishment.

Of course, there is the argument, as I have explored before, that architects should not be assisting in the design or building of prisons at all anymore, because by doing so only adds to the systemic problem of a prison-industrial-complex, which has produced an entire industry of incarceration, a landscape of recidivism underwritten by policy which overcriminalizes and by business practice which literally rakes in billions of dollars by building and maintaining prison facilities. Raphael Sperry, president of ADPSR (Architects, Designers, Planners for Social Responsibility), who started the admirable Prison Design Boycott, makes a great point when he argues that architects may better effect prison reform by throwing their support behind more political actions that are seeking to unravel the profit and political power motives that mainly drive the expansion of the prison industry and the

subsequent production of criminality and recidivism. There are root issues that need to be addressed in addition to the spatial complicity for which architects perhaps play into when designing prisons.

[Image: El Paso County Criminal Justice Center, Correctional News, 2006.]

Amidst all of this, it is no surprise that a newly renovated prison project in El Paso, Colorado is almost a perfect resurrection of the famed panopticon. Divided into four separate wards, the circular structure allows minimal prison personnel to supervise the facility from a central vantage. You can read all about the construction process here, the folly of creating too much transparency, and the loss of privacy inmates forfeit to afford a panoptic structural regime.

Anyhow, I applaud Alsop's project for trying to address the issue of how we as a society house and pretend to reform our incarcerated populations. And certainly for working with inmates themselves, who no doubt should hold a prominent voice in that debate and ultimately in the exploration of achieving more humane solutions for accommodating them. Many members of the public feel that we shouldn't even bother to care about the way we treat inmates, and that they simply should be locked up for good, in the most dismal of conditions, out of sight and out of mind. But a society is only as good as it treats its least respected people on the totem, and the modern prison industry shows nothing more than how systematically inhumane, unthinking, unfeeling, uncreative we have become in the face of rehabilitating our criminal society.

But perhaps it is as much our criminal system that is in need of rehabilitation as it is our prison structures themselves. When you think about the banlieues outside Paris, the miserably failed public housing through out the United States, the common place detention facilities now facing the world's refugees and immigrants, the state of our militarized public schools, it's almost as if we have completely accepted the prison structure, the carceral institution, as a common denominator architectural form in the evolution of global urbanism. So, we try to work within that context and make the prison infrastructure more humane, more efficient, practical and aesthetically positive, but aren't we still complying with the bigger picture failure of accepting this structural model in the first place, of further accommodating it? That is to say, we can innovate alternative prisons, but shouldn't we be putting equal if not more emphasis on devising alternatives to prisons altogether? So, yeah, what would a fantasy prison look like, but how about - what would a fantasy rehabilitative society look like, can we imagine this without stooping to the production of more prison space?

If you are more interested in the "Creative Prison" project there is apparently a book that was created in the process -- *The Creative Prison: Creative Thinking in the Prison Estate* -- of which you can order on the Rideout website.

Fictitious Capital For Beginners: Imperialism, 'Anti-Imperialism', and the Continuing Relevance of Rosa Luxemburg

ByLoren Goldner

The liquidity crisis currently wiping billions off global stock markets is just the tip of a very big iceberg. Beneath the credit crunch and incipient insolvency crisis lie the economic and political crisis of the USA's global reign, claims Loren Goldner. But will this mean global depression, wars and intensified authoritarianism, or a renewed opportunity for communism? Goldner returns to the theories of Marx and Luxemburg to examine today's financial and military imperialism, and its left wing anti-imperialist mirror

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All images: Matthew Hyland

In February of this year the Chinese stock market, which had long been suspected of being in a runaway bubble phase, took a plunge. In the following days that tremor was felt in stock markets around the world. China in recent months has reached the 'shoe shine boy' phase of popular stock speculation (a major American investor famously decided to get out of the stock market just before the 1929 crash when a shoeshine boy gave him advice on stocks), and after the (not so welcome) correction, the Chinese market resumed its upward rush to new highs, followed with relief by investors everywhere.

With the slightest historical perspective, we can see that the world shock set off by such a hiccup in a still relatively small market (in terms of what savvy people call 'total market capitalisation') is something quite new, unthinkable only a few years ago. China's stock market can have such an impact because people are aware that any pause, not to say downturn in the country's economic boom (averaging over 10 percent GDP growth for years on end, whereas Britain in its 19th century heyday was considered quite impressive at 3 or 4 percent) could bring the contemporary worldwide financial euphoria to an end. Increasingly insiders and pundits talk openly of the 'when, not if' of a global downturn, or even (for some) cataclysm.

With a bit more historical perspective, we can recall the late 1980s myth of the Japanese economic juggernaut, when the Imperial Palace in Tokyo was briefly priced at a higher value than all the real estate in California. And we recall that juggernaut hit a wall in 1990 in a stock market and real estate meltdown that lasted some 16 years. It does not seem impossible that we will look back on a meltdown of the current Chinese juggernaut in somewhat the same way, but the consequences will be more far reaching.

These, however, are relatively surface, almost journalistic observations about phenomena arising from the real issues of how the world economy actually works, or more precisely, doesn't work for much of humanity.

In fact, what we are seeing today is just the culmination of a process underway since the late 1950s, (the proverbial 'from a scratch to the danger of gangrene'), whereby an ever-increasing mass of nomad dollars, corresponding to no real wealth in the world economy, are tossed around like a hot potato by central banks always counting on the 'bigger fool' to be holding them when they finally deflate. The central banks of Asia (China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan) currently hold over \$2 trillion of these nomad dollars, and China alone is expected to have \$2 trillion by some time in 2008.

We can call these dollars, which represent uncollectible debts arising first or all from five decades of chronic American balance-of-payments deficits, 'fictitious capital', a concept which, when unpacked, leads straight to the heart of 50 years of capitalist history and to the illumination of our own precarious present.

The following aims to show that, far from being a remote economic concept, fictitious capital leads us straight to the central political questions of today, and above all those questions confronting the international left. To see this clearly, we must connect these fictitious dollars to the dynamics of contemporary geopolitics and the closely related class struggle.

IMPERIALISM AND SUPER IMPERIALISM

Some 90 years ago, V.I. Lenin wrote a book, *Imperialism* (1916), which purported to explain the origins of the First World War and the abject capitulation of the socialist parties in 1914 (with a few noble exceptions) to social patriot support for their own bourgeoisie in that war. Lenin portrayed a world economy of monopoly capital and giant cartels fighting for control of the planet. But the political payoff of Lenin's analysis (quite apart from his questionable economics) was multiple: he argued that the imperialist powers (i.e. Europe and the US, and later the newly arrived Japan) were exporting capital (an idea borrowed from the British Fabian Hobson) that could not be profitably invested in the capitalist heartland, and that the super-profits from this capital export helped to buy off an aristocracy of labour in the Western working classes, explaining the accommodation in each country of this aristocracy to its respective national bourgeoisie.

Lenin's little book would probably have been forgotten had he not led the Russian Revolution a year later, and helped found the Third (Communist) International in which his theses, after his death in 1924, were enshrined as writ, with repercussions extending, through the international impact of Stalinism, for decades.

Lenin had already skirmished, and generally unhappily, with a revolutionary contemporary, Rosa Luxemburg. In her *Accumulation of Capital* (1913), a work much more grounded in Marx's problematic than Lenin's pamphlet, Luxemburg argued that imperialism expressed the continuing presence of what Marx had called primitive accumulation, a certain increment of loot which capitalism required to compensate for a disequilibrium internally generated by its dynamic. The implications of Luxemburg's analysis were that the goods and machinery capitalism was exporting to peasants and petty producers in the heartland and in the burgeoning colonial world were in fact exchanged for a huge increment of unpaid wealth (cf. her unforgettable descriptions of the looting of American farmers, African tribesmen, Egyptian and Chinese peasants), a looting that was extended to capitalism's own working class through taxation to pay for the pre-1914 arms race, driving real wages below the level required for the working class to reproduce itself. Far from constituting an aristocracy, the working class within capitalism was, for Luxemburg, increasingly subjected to a complementary form of the primitive accumulation which the system visited on petty producers of the non-capitalist world. These complementary aspects, inward and outward, of looting in fact anticipated the fascism which emerged in Germany and elsewhere two decades later.

Hyland Cranenberg

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I have minor differences with Luxemburg (as will be shown below) but her posing of the problem takes us much farther than Lenin in understanding today's world.

This debate from 90 years ago is important because, despite the post-modern platitudes of figures such as Hardt and Negri, or e.g. the protestations of the much more rigorous orthodox Marxism of the school around Paolo Giussani in Italy, imperialism is still very much with us. While this might seem obvious, the serious theoretical amnesia and retrogression on the international left in the past three decades oblige us to quickly sketch some recent history. Iraq of course speaks for itself as a classical imperialist adventure. But beyond the obvious, let's begin by pointing to the US military presence, overt and covert, in 110 countries and its largely successful counter-insurgency in Latin America and the Caribbean. We can include the various "revolutions" backed overtly or covertly by the US in Serbia, Georgia and the Ukraine (the US embassy in Kiev has 750 employees). All this is connected, once again, to a geopolitical strategy aimed at controlling the borderlands of Russia and China, a classic remake of the 19th century "great game". In this perspective, the US backed the extension of NATO to include most of the former Warsaw Pact states, right at Russia's doorstep. The US (sorry, I mean NATO) intervened in the wars in ex-Yugoslavia and militarily humiliated Serbia. Most recently, the US is assuring everyone that its proposed anti-missile systems in Poland and the Czech Republic pose no threat to Russia, and is pushing the independence of Kosovo against growing Russian opposition.

The US, officially and unofficially, is at the same time "greatly concerned" about China's new presence in Africa and elsewhere in the Third World, particularly where oil is involved. Western experts have had the cheek to warn China against "unfairly exploiting Africa's natural resources". A great power rivalry over raw materials in Africa, Asia, and Latin America? Haven't we been here before?

In East Asia, the US maintains 35,000 troops in South Korea, important bases in (and a close alliance with) Japan, naval fleets ready to defend Taiwan, all aimed at containing what the CIA openly identified as the main future rival of the US: China. When China recently showed the world the efficacy of its new anti-satellite missiles, the US, with hundreds of nuclear warheads aimed at China, growled about the hypocrisy of China's claims to be pursuing "peaceful emergence".

In the Middle East, current US dominance of world oil production, a fundamental weapon in keeping potential rivals down, has dictated everything from support to the hilt for Israel to helping foment the (how short lived!) anti-Syrian "Cedar Revolution" in Lebanon, and close ties with NATO partner Turkey as a counter-weight to Iran. The US has more military hardware in the little Gulf state of Qatar than in any other country in the world except Germany.

I have limited myself thus far mainly to the geopolitical and military level. But let's not forget the over 200 multinationals, most of them American, which still constitute the lion's share (and an increased share) of world production.

To this we can add the weight of the US through "international" institutions such as the UN, the IMF and World Bank, the latter two imposing "structural adjustment" programmes on 100 developing countries, producing over 60 failed or near-failed states; we can add the "fact" that the income ratio of the West to the developing world has greatly increased in the past 30 years, in spite of important development in countries such as China, Brazil and more recently in India during that time. It is no secret that the military overreach described above is the 21st century extension of the proverbial gunboats of earlier times for the enforcement of IMF and World Bank dictats. Capital, except in "free market" fantasy, never exists without a state and without the "special body of armed men" (as Engels

termed the military and police) who, when necessary, collect debts for the state.

Some sceptics have asked what imperialism means when a country such as China, with an average per capita income of \$1,200 a year, has lent something rapidly approaching \$2 trillion to the alone superpower, and this takes us right back to Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg.

Michael Hudson's excellent book, *Super Imperialism* (1972; new edition 2002) anticipates, and answers that question. Hudson shows that US imperialism since World War II has not, indeed, followed Lenin's model (which was always flawed), but has perfected the strategy of managing empire through bankruptcy. The \$1-2 trillion in the Bank of China consists of little green pieces of paper (dollars and dollar-denominated bonds) exchanged for real Chinese goods produced by the exploitation of Chinese workers, pieces of paper then re-lent to the US consumer so he/she can buy those goods. That money will never be seriously repaid, particularly if US policy makers get their way and the Chinese revalue their currency (from 7.8 renminbi = \$1) to the desired level of 4 renminbi = \$1, cutting in half the value of those reserves to themselves. The Japanese, who saw their dollar holdings reduced in value by Nixon's dissolution of the old Bretton Woods system in 1971, can tell the Chinese a thing or two (and the Chinese know the stakes very well and have discussed them publicly).

But the mere enumeration of the dimensions of imperialism today still does not adequately get at the dynamic of the system, both geopolitically and above all in terms of the international class struggle. For what we are living through is a potential passing of the baton of empire from the US to Asia, quite analogous to the shift from British to America-centred world accumulation between 1914 and 1945 (the latter being the true stakes of the wars, depressions and social upheavals of those years).

We further note that just as the previous world imperial system cracked, just after World War I, there occurred from 1917 to 1921 the biggest revolutionary offensive in the history of the world working class, and we can say with guarded optimism that the cracking of US world hegemony confronted with the rise of Asia (a transition whose success is far from assured) just might witness a still bigger working class offensive, hopefully with happier results. That, underneath all appearances, is what is at stake today, and the success of such an offensive is obviously opposed by both the declining US hegemon and by a constellation of forces from China to Latin America by way of the Taliban coalescing under the banner of anti-imperialism.

Finally, just as the weakening of British (and secondarily French) world domination in the early 20th century frayed and finally broke on the weak link Russia and its two (1905, 1917) revolutions, so today the fault line of the contemporary game for the world lies along the borders of Russia and China from the Baltic to Korea and Japan, and it will be in the looming confrontation between Asia and the US that the future working class upsurge will emerge and either triumph or be crushed under the emergence of a new centre of world accumulation.

But to see the true dimensions of the contemporary stakes, let's get down into the deep economic questions. None of the preceding would be fully intelligible without being connected to the crisis of world capitalist accumulation underway since the early 1970s.

Contemporary sceptics and willful amnesiacs who question whether imperialism has any meaning today throw Rosa Luxemburg's *Accumulation of Capital* into the same historical dustbin as Lenin's book. Whatever her minor flaws (to be discussed momentarily), she was absolutely right about the permanence of primitive accumulation - what much of imperialism and the contemporary world is about - in capitalism. Primitive accumulation means accumulation that violates the capitalist law of value, i.e. non-exchange of equivalents, beginning with the emptying of the English countryside in early modern history (16th to 19th centuries) by what would today be called economic reforms.[1]

Much of the Marxist 'economics' (an oxymoron for the Marxist critique of political economy, an undertaking having a different 'object of study' than any 'economics') of the 1970s and even some authors today focus on the mathematical formulas in the first part of vol. III of *Capital* to adequately describe the root cause of capitalist crisis. And as important as these chapters on the rate of profit are, they make the big assumption that the concrete processes of social reproduction to which they refer are in fact being reproduced. (Social reproduction, in a nutshell, means replacing if not expanding used up machinery, materials and infrastructure, on one hand, and permitting today's working population to raise a future generation of people capable of working with contemporary technology on the other.)

Luxemburg, in her *Anti-Kritik* rebuttal to critics of her 1913 masterpiece (and on this I follow her 100 percent) argued that the issue here is not a matter of mathematics, but one of concrete analysis of real processes. When Western capital sucks Third World labour power, whose costs of reproduction it did not pay for, into the world division of labour, whether in Indonesia or in Los Angeles, that's primitive accumulation. When capital loots the natural environment and does not pay the replacement costs for that damage, that's primitive accumulation. When capital runs capital plant and infrastructure into the ground (the story of much of the US and the UK economies since the 1960s) that's primitive accumulation. When capital pays workers non-reproductive wages, (wages too low to produce a new generation of workers) that's primitive accumulation too. Lenin never discussed these things (if I recall, he rarely mentioned social reproduction) but Rosa Luxemburg wrote a whole book about it. To critics who want to dismiss these 'old' ideas with a complacent wave of the hand, I can only say that it's their loss.[2]

The problem is that the contemporary international left has inherited from the years just before and after World War I a theoretical framework, which is now mainly a highly problematic 'mood', in which Lenin's wrong-headed view, vulgarised by decades of further distortions by Stalinism, Maoism, Third Worldism and now by 'alterglobalism', has largely if not totally eclipsed Luxemburg's, particularly in its portrayal of the working class of the advanced capitalist sector (to my mind still the main force capable of positively superseding capitalism) as a quantitatively negligible among the international forces for positive change.

Lenin's theory of imperialism and its bastard offspring reached the peak of their influence in the 1960s and '70s, when various national liberation struggles (Algeria, Indochina, Angola, Mozambique) and the Cuban Revolution constituted a 'tricontinental' constellation that seemed to be fulfilling the prediction that 'socialism' was the only way forward for the underdeveloped world. This ferment had taken off from the 1955 Bandung (Indonesia) conference of the 'non-aligned' (non-aligned in the Cold War) nations, with the cachet of such early anti-colonial figures as Nkrumah (Ghana), Sukarno (Indonesia), Nehru (India), and Nasser (Egypt). Unfortunately, the bureaucratic development regimes that triumphed in the 'tricontinental' countries were not socialist, and the western working class, which could have removed the weight of imperialism from their path, was absent at the rendez-vous. The Third Worldist 'tricontinental' world view was in shambles circa 1978-79 when Cambodia, Vietnam, China and the Soviet Union which had all at various times claimed the 'anti-imperialist' mantle, came close to going to war with each other. What followed hard on this debacle was the past three decades' triumph of the neoliberal 'Washington consensus' in which the state centred development based on the old model was proclaimed unviable. During the high tide of the 'Washington consensus' the world has witnessed both an assault on the working class everywhere as well as on the old 'anti-imperialist' bloc, seriously reshaping both.

Hyland Crop

During this post-1977 period, the old lines of division between the "advanced" and "developing" world have blurred considerably. In the years of the "Washington consensus" China and more recently Vietnam (from a very low base) have grown at rates unprecedented in the history of capitalism; India (from a similarly low base) has recently embarked on a similar path; "new industrial countries" such as Korea and Taiwan have appeared; "flying geese" countries such as Malaysia and Thailand, perhaps now Bangladesh (lowest wage country in the world, but now a textile power) have been pulled into the Asian boom; the Soviet bloc has collapsed and the European Union has absorbed most of its former Eastern European colonies; international labour migration to the West from Africa and Latin America has reached unprecedented levels, and Middle Eastern oil producers have been investing more of their revenues in regional development.

But most importantly, the bedrock of the world economy has shifted from the post-1945 North Atlantic connection between the US and Europe to the Pacific connection between US "consumers" and Asia's producers, and above all China's. China's boom has in turn, through a frenetic demand for oil and raw materials, set off commodity booms in Latin America and parts of Africa.

At the same time, first the American and more recently the European working classes, which from 1965 to 1977 carried out the most sustained period of wildcat strikes in history, have been rolled back by a relentless combination of de-industrialisation, outsourcing and high-tech induced unemployment.

And while most of the past 30 years appear in capitalist terms to have been a "boom" period, they have in fact been years of a steadily spreading precariousness for workers, peasants and marginal populations everywhere (even booming China has lost 20 million industrial jobs in the past decade). Accompanying the glitz of new "creative classes" from California to London to Warsaw to Shanghai and Mumbai, a huge upward shift of wealth has occurred. And the key to the whole period is, once again, fictitious capital.

Let us see how this is the case. I have invoked the good name of Rosa Luxemburg as the theoretical framework closest to my interpretation of Marx primarily because of her focus, inside and outside the pure capitalist system (cf. below) on the problematic of reproduction and non-reproduction. But, as indicated earlier, my framework differs somewhat from hers, and clarification imposes itself here. As will be seen, her framework has everything to do with the phenomena of imperialism and "anti-imperialism" in the post-World War II era.

IMPURE CAPITALISM

Let's review what I consider some basics, which are not always self-evident. In this way we can go from contemporary history to abstract theory and back, and see the present in a new way. But to do so requires an examination of some basic ideas of Karl Marx.

Vol. I and most of vol. II of Marx's *Capital* are a phenomenology of a closed capitalist system in which there are only capitalists and wage labourers, and most of the focus is on the single firm. When, in the last section of vol. II, Marx shifts to the "total social capital" and expanded reproduction, he is moving beyond that heuristic model.[3]

That demarcation of the interaction of the "pure system" (capitalists and wage labourers) with, on one hand, the vast modern population of unproductive consumers who live off surplus value and do not produce it, i.e. the FIRE (Finance-Insurance-Real Estate) sector, state civil servants, managerial strata,

the military sector, the law enforcement/prison sector, and, on the other hand, with nature and with petty producers (today found primarily in the Third World), is fundamental for clarity. These strata in the advanced sector are dominated today by the same creative classes mentioned above. None of the latter populations are present in vols. I and II of Marx's *Capital*, except for some interesting asides and the important chapters in the middle of vol. II dealing with insurance, bookkeeping and other faux frais (false costs) of production (the latter having today burgeoned beyond belief relative to Marx's time). Capital is a circuit, (in vols. I and II), with simple reproduction, (i.e. an abstract assumption of zero growth) and is a spiral in expanded reproduction. A commodity, whether from Dept. I (what Marx designated as the production of machines) or II (consumer goods) which does not complete the circuit, i.e. is not productively consumed in Dept. I (new means of production) or Dept. II (new labour power) ceases to be capital.[4] These definitions, which have been laughed out of the mainstream theories of economics and which get surprisingly little attention even from some self-styled Marxists, allow us to reconceptualise the contemporary world economy and make clear distinctions between real wealth and costs that are merely costs of maintaining the status quo.[5]

Rosa Luxemburg also had the great merit of emphasising capitalism as a transitional mode of production between European feudalism and socialism. This may seem a truism, but it is much more than that. In her survey of the rise and fall of classical political economy from the Physiocrats to the Ricardian school, she points out that only a socialist (i.e. Marx) could solve the problem of the source of profit and of expanded reproduction. To wit: capitalism must be seen as a necessarily incomplete, transient mode of production, which lives in part off the pre-capitalist modes it looted and continues to loot, and whose full crisis is only visible to someone seeing beyond it to a higher mode. Capitalism is therefore a system in which no practical viewpoint, either of an individual capitalist or of the total social capital, or finally of labour power as a commodity (the class-in-itself) can be concretely universal, that is capable of practically acting on real problems. All viewpoints on capital within the system, including class-in-itself struggles of individual groups of workers, are negation of the negation viewpoints, and only the perspective that looks prior to and beyond capitalism can be a self-subsisting positive with a universal (class for itself) programme. From the Italian pirates of the 11th century to the slave labour in the Dominican Republic or Brazil today, capitalism has never stopped its looting of labour power and resources outside the closed (vols. I and II) system of exchange of equivalents. Thus the ongoing presence of capital's initial looting of non-capitalist sources of wealth, for Luxemburg, also points to the possibility of its barbaric end (of which interwar fascism was more than a foretaste), if it is not positively superseded by proletarian revolution.

Next, and this is fundamental, capital does not appear to capitalists as self-expanding value or a social relationship of production (bedrock terms of Marx having no practical meaning or even existing from the negation of the negation viewpoints of central bankers, hedge fund managers or trade union bureaucrats within the system); it appears to them as titles to wealth, namely to profit, interest and ground rent, whose value is determined over the course of a business cycle not by the fine points of the opening chapters of *Capital* vol. III but as a capitalisation of anticipated future cash flow. Marx, of course, only introduces such titles to wealth — stocks, bonds, leases — after first presenting the heuristic pure system, setting it in motion in the final chapters of *Capital* vol. II (expanded reproduction), and then discussing the determination of price and the rate of profit in the opening sections of *Capital* vol. III. Capital as capitalists know it, up to and including all the new financial products of the past 25 years such as derivatives and hedge funds, are aliens on the total cash flow representing, ultimately, the total surplus value produced in the pure system AND supplemented by LOOT (non-reproductive exchange) outside and eventually inside the system. We know very well that over long periods of a capitalist cycle these aliens can depart widely from the price/value determinations that ultimately regulate the cash flow on which they draw, until they are deflated in the periodic crash.

But the source of that total profit/total surplus value is an empirical question, not to be settled by abstract resort to different takes on the transformation of value into prices (an important but overplayed debate among Marxist academics) or possible flaws in the reproduction schema of *Capital* vol. II. Are capital plant (means of production, infrastructure) and labour power being reproduced or not? Does the consumption of an electronic battlefield or a new prison or a yacht expand or contract social reproduction? Such a question immediately takes us from the realm of pure theory (however fundamental) to the concrete historical operation of the system.

The relationship between the value of the myriad capitalist titles to wealth and the surplus value and loot on which they draw is, of course, not an arbitrary one.

Let's go back to the pure system, only capitalists and workers, no banks, no other distorting titles to wealth. Let us further imagine that the entire world is capitalist and that everything exchanges at its value. In such a world, with rising productivity over time, a greater and greater mass of capital is set in motion by a smaller total amount of living labour, the exploitation of the latter being (for Marx) the source of all profit. Hence (with many ups and downs along the way) the rate of profit capable of sustaining all those titles, unless adequately supplemented by what I have called loot, declines historically.

But, as Luxemburg points out in her *Anti-Kritik*, the falling rate of profit does not prompt the capitalists to hand the factory keys over to the working class. Her framework enabled her to see how capitalism could ultimately destroy society barbarism, in her words, or the mutual destruction of the contending classes as the *Communist Manifesto* put it in 1847 by being required to turn more and more to primitive accumulation and non-reproduction, a prophecy we see materialising before our eyes today.

Hyland graph

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Capital, for Marx, (and here we open up a dimension not discussed by Luxemburg) through the pursuit of profit by a myriad of individual capitalists, ultimately destroys itself, becomes a barrier to itself, by pushing the productive forces to a point where the socially necessary time of reproduction, based on the reproductive value of labour power, can no longer serve as the numeraire, the common denominator, for the daily functioning of the system. Capital requires living labour to exist, and for labour power's value to be the numeraire, and it simultaneously, through innovation, expels living labour from the production process and undermines the numeraire. That is the pure model's fundamental contradiction.

Of course, the pure model of capitalism has never existed and never will exist. As we know, titles to wealth (profit, interest, ground rent), central banks regulating the markets of such titles, and a state enforcing such titles all pre-existed the full blown triumph of capitalism, i.e. the transformation of means of production and labour power into commodities as the dominant source of wealth.

Once we add titles to wealth to the pure model, as Marx does in the middle and concluding sections of vol. III of *Capital*, we see a different picture. It is precisely because of these titles and because of capitalism's ability to loot non-capitalist populations and nature that we do NOT, over long cycles, see any mechanical fall in the capitalist rate of profit. Such titles tend to correspond to the underlying

value, or fall below it, mainly at the end of one cycle (through deflation) and the beginning of the next one. The deflationary crisis acts as a form of retroactive planning that re-equilibrates the capitalists' titles to wealth with the underlying rate of profit generated within the pure system. This was obvious in the 19th century, when such a crisis occurred every ten years or so (1808 - 1819 - 1827 - 1837 - 1846 - 1857 - 1866 - 1873, etc.) It is less obvious in the period since 1914 when the state has much more actively attempted to preserve capitalist valuations against devalorisation by techniques usually associated with Keynesianism. We are of course, in 2007, in the midst of probably the biggest fictitious credit bubble in the history of capitalism. What we have been living through, particularly since the early 1970s, has been a huge operation of credit pyramiding, managed by the world's central banks, aimed at PRESERVING the paper value of existing titles to wealth, and a significant transfer of working class wages and capital not invested in either plant or infrastructure to help prop up those titles. That latter phenomenon is what I call the self-cannibalisation of the system when the primitive accumulation mechanism turns inward, i.e. non-reproduction, as referred to above.

Luxemburg of course did not live to see either the post-1933 American or German versions of quasi-permanent military production, supported by the taxation of the working class, and still less the post-1944 Bretton Woods system, in which the US financial markets and the US State acquired the ability to tap wealth from every part of the capitalist world (until recently, minus Russia and China) through dollar seigniorage (the latter referring to the free lunch acquired through the US's maintaining empire through bankruptcy).[6] And quite obviously, credit has increased a thousand times in significance since Luxemburg's time, as a way of temporarily prolonging business cycles, while changing nothing of the fundamental contradictions in play.

The implicit final stage of this process is, once again, the self-cannibalisation of the system, if and when the sources of loot outside the closed system are exhausted. We have not yet seen this in dramatic form in the case of the era of US world hegemony. But history does provide the example of the Nazi period in Germany, when Hjalmar Schacht, Hitler's finance minister, ran up a huge debt pyramid to finance German rearmament in the 1933-1938 period, while holding real wages at 50 percent of 1929 levels. The difference between Germany then and the US today is that Germany had been shorn of most of its external sources of loot after its defeat in 1918, and hence had to seize some new ones militarily after 1938.

Something similar could happen in the US-centred system if and when the US loses its ability to tap wealth throughout the world with dollar denominated accumulation, and one can, without exaggeration, see US foreign policy today as a worldwide extension of the underlying dynamic of German expansion under Hitler, minus the total internal implosion of American society - so far.

Thus I would correct Luxemburg to the extent that the external relations of the pure system are not so much about the sale of a surplus product on the model of the sale of industrial goods to independent farmers or peasants (though that of course also takes place) as the more important circulation of an ever increasing fictitious bubble (fictitious capital) through international loans in exchange for whatever loot can be acquired from petty producers' labour power or from nature. I argue that this fictitious bubble is initially lawfully generated WITHIN the pure system and is discussed in Marx's middle chapters of vol. III. This is the NECESSARY, internally generated reason that the system requires permanent primitive accumulation.

Let's see why this is the case. Back to the closed system, to which we have added capitalist titles to wealth, capitalisations of an anticipated cash flow. These titles of course go together with a capital market, a central bank and a state enforcing them, and ultimately a state debt (again, all vol. III phenomena).

Because capitalism is an anarchic system, (a "heteronomic" system in Kant's sense) a practical perspective on the total social capital which could keep these capitalisations (most immediately, stocks) rigorously in line with the underlying (current reproductive cost) value of the assets on whose cash flow they depend is a chimera. Increases in labour productivity, particularly those which ripple quickly through the whole system, such as canal and railroad construction in the 19th century, or the air, shipping and communications innovations of recent decades, are not immediately registered in the capitalised value of all assets. Over time, such innovations create, rather, a fictitious increment "of overvalued capitalisations (titles to cash flow) which must be periodically purged in a deflationary collapse, as we saw in the dotcom frenzy of the 1990s and the dotcom crash of 2000. The actions of the central bank in regulating credit markets aim at preserving at least some of the capitalised titles to wealth from the devalorisation (deflation) demanded by increased labour productivity. The credit markets, the central bank and the state debt are all designed to "manage" the increasing disparity between total titles to wealth "the fictitious bubble" and their pure system value as long as possible, though official ideology would rarely if ever state the problem so baldly.

I would argue, therefore, that this internally generated, "pure system" ball of hot air, FICTITIOUS CAPITAL (fictitious relative to the real current reproductive value of assets) is, more than real goods, what is "exported" in exchange for loot. As long as sufficient loot compensates for the fictitious gap, accumulation can continue. This is my (minor) disagreement with Luxemburg.

The fictitious bubble in the contemporary world is first of all the huge (\$3-4 trillion, at current, conservative estimates) dollar "overhang", the net US external debt (\$11-12 trillion held abroad, minus \$8 trillion in US assets overseas), held mainly in central banks. Everything, from a capitalist viewpoint, must be done to prevent its deflation. The US government is busy depreciating it by its "managing empire through bankruptcy", and its foreign creditors fret at the erosion of their holdings. But they re-lend the money to the US government and US financial markets, making possible more domestic US credit, more consumption, and more imports from America's creditors, because for now the collapse of the dollar would be their collapse as well, and they as yet see no alternative.

If the preceding is correct, it constitutes an alternative view of imperialism to that of Lenin (still upheld today by myriad Trotskyists, for starters). The political issue for the left as I see it is not so much imperialism, which I take as a given, but the ideology of "anti-imperialism", in which a diffuse "Porto Alegre"/World Social Forum mood today enlists such "progressive" forces as Hugo Chavez, Hezbollah, Hamas, the Iranian mullahs, the Taliban, the Iraqi "resistance", and perhaps tomorrow Kim Jong-il; yesterday it included Saddam Hussein. Post-1945 and particularly post-1973 developments have been blurring the lines on the old "anti-imperialist" road map.

We see US world hegemony disintegrating faster than we generally imagined possible (almost recalling the speed of the collapse of the Soviet bloc). Out of this disintegration, what will emerge? Proletarian revolution? I hope so. But what could also emerge, as the US emerged in 1945 on the ruins of the British empire, is a new centre of world accumulation, most likely, as indicated, centred in Asia.

Suppose, in some yet to be concretised scenario, China and Japan (who, despite the rhetoric, have ever closer economic ties), along with the tigers (e.g. Korea, Taiwan) and the "flying geese" (Malaysia, Thailand, etc.) manage to constitute an economic bloc, an Asian currency. Given geopolitical realities, and above all US opposition (as evidenced during the 1997-98 Asia crisis, when it nixed the creation of an Asian Monetary Fund proposed by Japan), it's hard to imagine this happening without some equivalent of World War II in whose outcome the US, Russia and India will all have a stake. If this reorganisation became the basis of a new phase of capitalist expansion, comparable to the US centred expansion of 1945-1975, would it somehow be any more "progressive" than the US dominated phase?

The question, then, along the way, is how to situate the various world forces in play as the US declines.

Chavez, the latest 'anti-imperialist' hero, recently made a world tour that included such... progressive... states as Belarus, Russia, Iran and China. Latin America is booming right now because of exports to China. Parts of Africa, again, are reviving for the same reason. This currently comes back to the 'indebted US consumer', and a collapse of the dollar empire would stop the music 'for a while. But as a Japanese minister, weary of the growing dollar reserves in the Bank of Japan, said not too long ago: 'give us 15 years, and we won't need the US'. With the dollar declining by the day on world exchanges, how much longer will the Chinese, the Koreans, the Japanese, the Middle Eastern oil sheiks, the Russians, the Venezuelans, and the Medellin drug cartel 'all major holders of dollars' be willing to hold onto a depreciating asset? And if out of this debacle a new pole of capitalist accumulation does emerge, whether or not it includes 'old' imperialist powers (e.g. Japan and Russia), will it be 'progressive'?

That, to me, is THE question which the theoreticians still working off the Leninist model of 'anti-imperialism' have to answer. How much longer can the international left be offering 'critical support' or 'military support' to the Taliban before it finds itself, as so many times in the past, the ideological midwife of a new reactionary constellation?

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FOOTNOTES

[1]

The 'law of value' was part of Marx's qualitative break with the classical political economy of Smith and Ricardo. All three emphasised the centrality of the social time required to produce a commodity, though Marx's understanding was also quite different. All agreed in rejecting swindle and arbitrary price markups as an explanation of profit, but against Smith and Ricardo's inability to explain capitalist profit otherwise, Marx demonstrated that it came from the time the worker had to work each day in excess of the value of his or her labour power (i.e. of the time necessary for simply reproducing the worker as worker). Later theories of 'monopoly capitalism', most famously Lenin's, also threw the law of value and socially necessary labour time out the window as a phenomenon of Marx's time which capitalism had transcended in their own, in its supposed 'monopoly phase', in which cartels supposedly controlled prices and collected 'super-profits'.

[2]

Some people on other occasions have objected to my use of the term 'primitive accumulation' for contemporary capitalism, insisting that for Marx the term meant only the initial separation of producers from the means of production. I would just like to say that if 'primitive accumulation' is too specifically linked to that initial separation in the 16th-17th century, then we have to develop another term to describe the forms of capitalist loot (in contrast to profit generated by 'normal' exploitation). In addition to Luxemburg, I also take the term from its usage by the Soviet left opposition theorist Preobrazhensky (in *The New Economics*) and his argument for 'socialist primitive accumulation' in

the 1920s: organising a managed decline of the Russian peasantry through selling industrial goods dear and buying agricultural goods cheap. (Let's not get distracted by the unhappy outcome of that strategy).

I'll say again that when capital interacts with nature and petty producers outside the wage-labour relationship, and when it pushes wages and capital expenditure below reproductive costs inside that relationship, it is violating the 'exchange of equivalents' which Marx saw as the 'heuristic' framework for separating capitalist profits and accumulation from swindle, monopoly, selling goods above their value, and other wrong headed explanations of profit. And if we don't want to call that non-reproduction 'primitive accumulation', fine, but let's first admit that such phenomena exist, and (since the 1970s) are increasingly important, and moreover indispensable to the system.

[3]

'Expanded reproduction' refers to normal capitalist accumulation, in which a part of the annual surplus is reinvested in new equipment and new labour power, in contrast to the heuristic 'simple reproduction' assumed for most of vols. I and II, in which such expansion is artificially bracketed.

[4]

OK, a tank, a guided missile, a McMansion or a Ferrari belong in neither department, but are consumption of the capitalist class.

[5]

Marx in *Capital* vol. III introduces those factions of the capitalist class which derive their income from the financial markets and from rents, but the masses of people today who are outside the 'pure system' in the capitalist heartland, such as FIRE-sector employees, state civil servants or corporate managerial strata, are for the most part implicit in all of *Capital*. That hardly means that, with their huge unproductive consumption today, they are any less important.

[6]

If the US, for example, compels China to revalue its currency by 10 percent, 10 percent of the Chinese goods its dollar holdings represent become free tribute to the US.

Loren Goldner is a writer and activist based in New York City. His latest book *Herman Melville (2006)* is available through Amazon. Most of his work is available on the *Break Their Haughty Power* website: <http://home.earthlink.net/~lrgoldner/>