

MICHAEL BRAY  
**POWERS**  
OF THE  
**MIND**

MENTAL AND MANUAL LABOR IN THE  
CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL CRISIS

## From:

*Michael Bray*

### **Powers of the Mind**

### **Mental and Manual Labor in the Contemporary Political Crisis**

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The Marxist conception of the division between mental and manual labor is a critical yet unrecognized aspect of contemporary political struggles.

Departing from this novel argument, Michael Bray traces the conceptual and socio-political history of this labor division and emphasizes how the forms of control and organization articulated by that division in practices of production, democracy, racialization, and financialization are becoming increasingly important. Critiquing the left for its tendency to side implicitly with the powers of mental labor, Michael Bray shows that comprehending and challenging those powers is a pivotal task for anti-capitalist politics today.

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# Content

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## **Preface** | 7

Acknowledgements | 14

## **Chapter 1: Political Utopias of the Empowered Mind** | 17

The Struggle for the Knowledge Economy | 18

Utopias of the 99% | 25

The General Intellect | 27

The Cognitariat | 32

The Function of Mental Labor | 38

## **Chapter 2: The Division in Theory** | 43

The Original Class Relation | 46

Tendencies of the Division | 54

The Political-Ideological Character of the Division | 58

Mental Labor as Process and Struggle | 63

## **Chapter 3: The Labors of Progressivism** | 67

Hegemony Born in the Factory | 69

The Professional, Ascendant | 73

Class Powers and the Political Project of Progressivism | 75

Perceptions of the Governed | 84

## **Chapter 4: Mental Labor Declares War** | 93

The Rationality of (Cold) War | 96

To the Victor, the Spoils | 100

The Legitimacy of War | 104

The Coercive Supplement to Social Reproduction | 106

Happiness as a Wartime Industry | 110

**Chapter 5: The Final Progressive Settlement  
Racial Liberalism and Its Discontents** | 115

Professionalizing Antiracism | 117

Postracialism and the White Working Class | 124

The Mental Labors of Whiteness | 130

Splinters of Race and Class | 133

**Chapter 6: Machines of Mental Labor** | 137

Algorithms, Self-Regulation, and Mental Labor | 140

Powers of the Machinic Mind | 145

Finance and the Power of Risk | 151

Stack and State | 158

**Chapter 7: No One Has Yet Determined What a Mind Can Do** | 165

Power and Theory | 168

The Renewal of Workers' Inquiry | 173

Populism as Common Sense Politics | 177

Powers of the Mind | 183

**Bibliography** | 185

**Index** | 201

## Preface

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I'll show you the life of the mind!  
BARTON FINK (COEN BROTHERS, 1991)

If there were a single quote epitomizing the kind of thought this book intends to criticize and displace, it might be this reflection, on the occasion of Marx's 200th birthday, in the pages of *The Economist* (May 3, 2018):

Marx's greatest failure [...] was that he underestimated the power of reform—the ability of people to solve the evident problems of capitalism through rational discussion and compromise. He believed history was a chariot thundering to a predetermined end and that the best that the charioteers can do is hang on. Liberal reformers, including his near contemporary William Gladstone, have repeatedly proved him wrong. They have not only saved capitalism from itself by introducing far-reaching reforms but have done so through the power of persuasion. The “superstructure” has triumphed over the “base”, “parliamentary cretinism” over the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

Both the blithe dismissal of Marx and the righteous assurance of the liberal reformer (for whom *The Economist* is surely the journal of choice) are underpinned here by a belief in *the powers of the mind*. Rational discussion, compromise, persuasion, are presented as, in and of themselves, powers which can be levelled not only against Marx's supposed “theory of society driven forward by economic forces” but against those economic forces themselves. See capitalism bend to the will of rational persuasion! Through discussion and compromise, workers are enfranchised, “economic concentrations” are broken up in waves of regulatory reform, cycles are smoothed, panics contained. We can learn from Marx about certain faults of capitalism, the author(s) admit, but the proper response to those faults is a new wave of liberal persuasion.

The article ends on a somber note, registering the rise of populist unrest, but it attributes this development to the faults of capitalism, not any intrinsic limit to the project of liberal reform. To the extent reform can be blamed at all, it is in the lack of will of today's would-be reformers, who "are proving sadly inferior to their predecessors in terms of both their grasp of the crisis and their ability to generate solutions." If the superstructure is an apparent shamble, if Parliament seems particularly cretinous, time to put on our thinking caps and get to work.

One wonders sometimes at the capacity of the liberal mind to retain its equanimity. Recent years have been difficult, after all, and the supposed powers of the mind have been sorely tested. Those who claim to bear those powers have appeared both overassertive and shell-shocked, supremely confident in the forces of reason yet stunned by the apparent incapacity of the masses to enter into sober discussion and polite compromise. They might come to terms with the resurgence of an atavistic populism amongst the latterly civilized, as in Latin America, but a similar, if more rightward, drift in Europe and the U.S. has been unnerving. If the stern faces of EU officials rejecting any settlement with Syriza and the Greek referendum suggest some other force than compromise at work, the electoral victories of Brexit and Trump produced more dispirited responses. On social media and mainstream news, one could watch the "rational" reaction veer into insult: these deplorables, who voted for something they didn't even understand, well, they're going to get what they deserved! The powers of the mind, it seems, could only be undermined by rank stupidity.

The contempt, of course, is mutual. For several decades, there has been a growing resentment of the world of managerial control, credentialed expertise, happiness industries, computerized assessments, financial and professional advice. Amongst wide swathes of the dominated, as well as growing segments of the middle and upper classes (especially those who, by reasons of geography and/or lower-status credentials, are excluded from the most elite circles), the sense that "they think they know better than you" became a political rallying cry. As center-left parties turned decisively towards the interests of suburban professionals and global finance after the 1970s, as meritocracy became a "rare point of consensus" in partisan politics (Hayes 2012: 46; Geismer 2017), the powers of the mind could also come to seem a very real thing amongst those excluded from them. From this angle, every humiliation of expertise might appear to be a blow for freedom, the seizing back of popular sovereignty from an out-of-touch

elite remaking the world in their own pretentious image. Meanwhile, increasing numbers register their contempt by simply not voting.

All sides of the contemporary political crisis (save those who abstain) tend to represent themselves as saviors of democracy, conceived either as popular sovereignty (of, perhaps, the “real” people) or an elite mechanism for reasoned compromise. The former has fallen prey to its own forms of elite manipulation, fostering the racist, xenophobic, and patriarchal reactions latent (or not so latent) in the people-nation form of the modern state. The latter presents itself as the last bulwark against regression and pathology, defenders of the norms and niceties of civilization. Or else, in its softer or more desperate moments, it has invoked an empathetic solution: maybe we just need to better understand, speak the language of, the white working class, and then we will be able to see that we all share common interests.

The guiding intuition of this book is that, behind such confrontations, as well as their present incapacity to reach any satisfying denouement, lies a key, and increasingly important, aspect of the historical and political development of capitalist productive relations: the separation of mental from manual labor. That separation, at least in its capitalist form, originates in capital’s drive for relative surplus value: ever-increasing increments of “surplus time” in the workday, eked out, primarily, through increases in the efficiency and productivity of labor processes.<sup>1</sup> The management practices and technological fixed capital that facilitate such “improvements” rest, at their base, on a process that Marx anatomized and Frederick Winslow Taylor raised to a “science”: the removal of the design and oversight of labor processes from the direct producers themselves and their operation, through the intermediation of managers, as a transformed, externalized knowledge. What is critical to see, and much of what follows will focus on its multiple implications, is that the generation and monopolization of these new forms of knowledge are not simply a matter of specialization, allowing for greater insight or refinement, but are also a mechanism for wresting *control* of the labor process from laborers themselves. Knowledge and power are linked within the relations of pro-

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**1** | Which is not to say that the pursuit of absolute surplus value, the lengthening of the working day, has vanished, as the ongoing policing of bathroom breaks or the lines for security checks that tech and retail employees must often wait in prior to and after their paid workday shows.

duction, where mental labor performs the ideological and political *functions*, and borrows the *power*, of capital, not those of some autonomous, empowered mind.

This restructuring of the relations of production, which reached its first peak in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century era of corporatization and mass production, also radiated out, by way of its political and ideological forms and the material powers of capital, to reshape social and political relations in general. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the ideology of specialized control functions migrated into the capitalist state under the burgeoning Progressive efforts to reform it. Those efforts intensified representative democracy's presumption of the ignorance of the people, expanding into control over the social reproduction processes of the laboring and unemployed masses, though mediated through the unifying operations of the capitalist state and its legitimating discourse of the "people-nation" (Poulantzas 1978). With that Progressive project, I will argue, began the long-developing roots of today's crisis.

The appeal to the powers of the mind that appears in *The Economist's* analysis represents a failure to understand the roots and the historical evolution of those powers, but also the fact that those powers are, by and large, only borrowed. They must derive ultimately from some other base in social relations: control over resources and products, capacities for organization, or what C.L.R. James called "the always unsuspected power of the mass movement" (cited by Haider 2018: 114). Persuasion only works insofar as it articulates a position that furthers or strengthens an existing power. Compromises always express the balance of forces. The very notion of "the powers of the mind" is ideological in the sense that it articulates specifically capitalist productive relations, legitimating and (re)producing them, rendering them coherent to the very people engaged in them, while also obscuring their roots in class struggle. In this context, the idea of an "objective" knowledge, the practice of a supposedly "rational" politics, function to exclude and control the masses from whom mental labor has been separated.

The political manifestations of that separation are particularly acute today, for the same reason that it is sometimes taken to have disappeared: the disintegration of the industrial working-class as the recognized agent of production and leftist politics. Decimated by waves of automation and global logistics chains, attacked politically by the strike-breaking initiatives and regulatory and legal changes that weakened traditional unions,

the working class has not, as some would have it, disappeared but it has disaggregated, atomized, losing much of its sense of a shared identity and common cause (which was always itself partial, leaning on whiteness and maleness). Center-left parties have implicitly identified mental laborers, professional knowledge workers, as the agent to fill that void: a progressivism unbalanced by an organized working class. In the process, those mental laborers have offered themselves up, unwittingly and uncomprehendingly, as a focal point for the resentments that the borrowed power and privileges of mental labor have accrued over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In that sense, contemporary progressives (or liberals)<sup>2</sup> make the same mistake as *The Economist*, as do many of their opponents: imagining that ideas, insights, expertise, are their own source of legitimate power. Insofar as the source of today's increasingly pervasive control-functions is taken to be elite professionals or knowledge workers alone, rather than capital, they become the focal point of a suspicion and resentment that progressives have had difficulty understanding. The tendency to generalize this mistake – to see ideas as (ideally) the only meaningful source of political agency and authority – only exacerbates this failure, making manual labor and class struggle illegible. Here originates the sense of futility in progressives' responses to the contemporary crisis.

Perhaps more troublingly, here also lies the roots of a number of radical or Marxist responses. Many on the left, in other words, have embraced collectivized versions of this perspective, hailing knowledge workers, as a universal figure or avant-garde, a new revolutionary agent. These political utopias of the empowered mind rely, implicitly or explicitly, on an idea of autonomous thought as the ground of social production and transformation, while consigning the majority of the disaggregated working class to political apathy or worse. Though certainly not the only cause, a significant portion of the weakness of the contemporary left (from the center to the radical margins) might be traced to this drift into alignment with elements of the ideological notion of a "knowledge economy." To take advantage of recent stirrings, to resuscitate a mass politics of the left, requires the reversal of this drift, a critical awareness of the effects of the

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**2** | I use these terms more or less interchangeably, while preferring the former for its historical resonances. "Liberal," is also used here in the specifically U.S. sense of center-left, though that center-left is certainly liberal in the old sense as well.

ongoing separation of mental from manual labor, and efforts to begin its dismantling. This book seeks to contribute to that project by offering an initial framing of its terms.

This book was conceived and written quickly (at least by academic standards), a fact that explains some aspects of the approach taken. Its discussions focus primarily on the United States and are traced at a relatively impressionistic level, though informed by social history. More detailed elaborations of specific historical episodes, functions, and conceptions of mental labor would no doubt be of value. So too would a more global perspective on its historical development, allowing for comparative studies between nations and a clearer sense of the combined and uneven development of the separation, in which the functions of mental labor remain, to some degree, monopolized by the overdeveloped countries, while large segments of the populations of underdeveloped ones are cast off into surplus labor armies. At the same time, working through the project led in several unanticipated directions, requiring condensed efforts to familiarize myself with wide and relatively contentious literatures on complex questions. While recognizing the irony of either claiming or disavowing “expertise” in the context of the argument being made here, I also remain responsible for any errors or omissions.

These potential weaknesses have their virtues. Focusing on the U.S. allows the discussion to highlight what would be key and driving developments in any global history as well. The rise of scientific management and of military-funded research into strategic rationalities and information technologies were not unique to this country but reached a particular pitch here (shaped by the unique strengths of its capital and its state in each instance), such that they were recognized by contemporaries as prototypically U.S. phenomena, the basis for widespread processes of “Americanization.” Likewise, the broad sweep of the argument makes, I believe, a compelling case for the pervasive effects of the separation of mental from manual labor, its structuring of social and political life as a whole. In the best case, the argument here might prompt more careful, detailed exploration of specific issues, including ones not covered (ecological politics, for example, in light of its own failures at persuasion). At the same time, the hope is that the links traced here to the contemporary political crisis might play some role in informing radical responses to it.

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Chapter 1 begins the argument by analyzing the meaning and implications of today's "political utopias of the empowered mind," both those of (neo)liberal authors who celebrated the potentials of the "knowledge economy" and those of several contemporary Marxists who strangely echo that discourse. Chapter 2 provides the theoretical frame for the book, explaining the meaning and implications of the division of mental and manual labor for Marx, supplemented by Poulantzas and Gramsci's discussions of its specifically political dimensions.

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss what I identify as the two dominant (and partially opposed) ideological formations of mental labor in the 20th century. The first, developed out of early managerial discourses, presented knowledge workers as capable of establishing social peace between warring capital and labor, crystallizing in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Progressivism. Its identification of professional expertise with the public good fostered a belief in the autonomous power of science and rationality, ignoring their central dependence on the state and the power of capital. Social peace, on such terms, would always be brokered on terms advantageous to accumulation. In the context of the Cold War, on the other hand, a more aggressive defense of capitalism's global expansion was identified with the defense of freedom, as the military apparatus of the state underwrote new forms of strategic rationality that simultaneously militarized and economized politics, yielding an ideology of command and control that would be applied, in the face of economic crisis, to the home front.

Chapters 5 and 6 trace out key effects of these dual ideologies of mental labor, with a particular focus on locating the growing weakness of progressive responses. Chapter 5 traces the manner in which race came to be conceptualized through the frame of the division between mental and manual labor, first by accounting for racism as an irrational prejudice of uneducated whites and, then, by realizing "diversity" as a shared identity of professional knowledge workers. These forms of settlement have proved extremely volatile today, consigning the majority of racialized population to surveillance and incarceration, while allowing for racist mobilizations of resentment over mental labor's control functions. Chapter 6 contextualizes two common analytical and political errors of the contemporary left – the celebration of information and communications technology as vehicles for liberation and the dismissal of finance as a mere parasite on the so-called real economy – as distortions caused by the blindness of

mental labor to its own infrastructural conditions, a blindness to where the power of capital is located.

Chapter 7 attempts to identify an alternative approach to the contemporary political crisis, grounded in a few aspects of Gramsci's "philosophy of praxis." If we cannot overcome the institutionalized separation of mental and manual labor by simple fiat, what avenues are available for projects undertaking the long process of its dismantling? I point here to the renewal of workers' inquiry as a basis for clarifying the changing political and ideological character of the relations of production and identifying modes of resistance within them. At the political level, I point to the resurgence of populism as a site where the project of rendering common sense coherent can begin today. If these dual suggestions appear tentative and even in a certain tension with one another, that is a function not only of the provisional character of this book – which seeks to propose a new frame rather than provide a definitive formulation if it – but also of the tentative character of our political situation, which cannot build on the foundation of a self-conscious working class (or fraction thereof) that Gramsci could presuppose. New experiments are needed in the face of mental labor's expanding control, by way of borrowed powers, over production and politics.

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The seed of this book was a paper, “The Limits of Mental Labor: Class & Politics Today,” presented at the *Historical Materialism* conference in November 2016. Thanks to Jakob Horstmann, who suggested turning it into a monograph and edited the result; this book would literally not exist without him. An early form of parts of Chapter 5 appeared on the *Historical Materialism* blog as “The White Working Class Does Not Exist: Thinking Through Liberal Postracialism” (Sept. 20, 2017). An early form of one section of Chapter 7 appeared on the *Latinx Spaces* website as “Is There a Left Populism?” (April 3, 2017). I am grateful to both for the opportunity to share work in progress.

Thank you to my parents who, while not always understanding, have never failed to offer unqualified support. And to Luifran, for his growing political engagement and updates on the internecine conflicts of local groupuscules.

This book is for Vanessa, who brooks no high-minded nonsense and yet believes in me, and for Natalia, who says that one day she will read it. May it help you question your own powers, bear, and discover new sources for the ones you will share.



## Chapter 1: Political Utopias of the Empowered Mind

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Every economy is a knowledge economy, but not every economy has been called a knowledge economy (JESSOP 2012: 68).

The ideal of autonomous thought has a long philosophical heritage in the West, of which Aristotle's unmoved mover and Kant's vision of enlightenment as the release from self-incurred tutelage are two key signposts. The rational ground that Western philosophy long sought to articulate promised an identification between the forms of knowing and the forms of being that would confirm the priority of thought (Lee 2004). In modernity, the dream of a self-grounded mode of knowledge, shorn of dependence on material or social relations, came to promise not only an escape from the limitations those relations imposed upon us but also a form of instrumental control over them. Autonomous knowledge came to be understood as the condition for empowered minds.

In recent decades, this heritage found a new form. Knowledge, it was supposedly discovered, had become an autonomous *economic* resource. And, in such guise, it could be seen as fulfilling its destiny, becoming the basis for an expansive, accelerating production of ever-new and ever-improving material and social conditions. The economy of today, it is often said, is a "knowledge economy" and, in such an economy, knowledge has been, at last, unleashed, freed from bureaucratic and governmental meddling, a power of its own, harnessed to provide an unparalleled series of innovations and improvements.

This rhyming of reason with economic expansion, however, has generally been structured by series of fuzzy assertions and equations, suggesting nothing so much as efforts to obscure or justify something left largely unstated. What precisely is meant by knowledge, how it functions

as a “resource,” or what justifies its placement at the center of the economy, have often been left more implied than articulated, in celebratory discourses wherein everyone has (or is about to) become a knowledge worker. To the extent that such rhetoric does cohere, it has often been through a substitution that seems to undermine its central claim. If, in the knowledge economy, knowledge is meant to supplant capital (such that one of its key proselytizers, Peter Drucker [1993], dubbed it a “post-capitalist society”), it does so only by identifying itself with capital, adopting its logic and goals. Knowledge, become an economic resource, falls under the tutelage of economics, articulating a utopic model of contemporary capitalism. Its silent, inverse side, the first section of this chapter will argue, is an increasing subordination and precarity of those excluded from recognized forms of knowledge.

If that is so, then the appropriation of elements of such discourse by the left must appear inherently suspect. In the remainder of the chapter, I trace the extent to which such elements, centered on the roles of knowledge (and its workers) in contemporary production and politics, have come to shape analyses of contemporary political movements, including in two of the most influential theoretical trajectories of contemporary Marxism. Such accounts, I argue, draw on specific notions of “the powers of the mind” (or of mental laborers) for their visions of communist potential and social transformation. In doing so, they also obscure the ongoing impacts of the division between mental and manual labor, consigning their strategic visions to peculiar forms of ephemerality and impotence. Tracing the meaning, history, and contemporary political implications of that division will be the work of the following chapters.

## **The Struggle for the Knowledge Economy**

The idea of the knowledge economy developed in tandem with the process of “deindustrialization” and the supposed disappearance of the working class in the U.S. Knowledge was replacing labor or else labor was becoming knowledge work. Already in 1973, Daniel Bell’s account of “post-industrial society” suggested that knowledge had become “a fundamental resource” in economic production (1973: 212). By the 1990s, this idea had become pervasive. Peter Drucker would capture the spirit of the times by hyperbolically surpassing Bell: “knowledge is the only meaningful resource today. The traditional ‘factors of production’ – land (i.e., natural resources), labor,

and capital – have not disappeared, but they have become secondary. They can be obtained, and obtained easily, provided there is knowledge” (1993: 42). More cautious, as befits its institutional responsibilities, the World Bank required a few more years to transition from its 1994 position that knowledge was “a major factor in economic development” to its 2002 view that knowledge was “the most important factor” and that “economic growth is as much a process of knowledge accumulation as capital accumulation” (1994, 2002; cited by Caffentzis 2013: 99).

The only problem was that what such claims meant by “knowledge,” how they isolated and identified its leading role in specific industries, remained uncertain. One might think, for example, that pharmaceutical companies produce medicines but, for Drucker, their “actual product” is “knowledge; pill and prescription ointment are no more than packaging for knowledge” (1993: 182). On one level, the meaning here seems clear enough: pharmaceutical production involves large investments in scientific research. But, as George Caffentzis observes, there is an “extraordinary fuzziness” in the terminology such claims employ and the measurements offered to justify them. The growth of “the knowledge-based industry sector” and increasing investments in “knowledge-based intangibles,” for example, are two central elements in the World Bank’s assessment. Knowledge-based sectors are said to include “high and medium-high technology industries; communications services; finance, insurance, and other business services; and community, social, and personal services.” Knowledge-based intangibles point to “training R&D, patents, licensing, design, and marketing” (Caffentzis 2013: 99-100). But the distinctions made to produce these measures seem dubious at best: in what sense do these sectors and intangibles really involve “knowledge” in a manner absent in other sectors or elements of production?

What brings together banks, pornographic film companies, software design and communication corporations, airplane manufacturers under the knowledge-based industry sector rubric that excludes auto companies, real estate firms, restaurants, mines, and farms? Are the former more dependent on knowledge than the latter, do the former create significantly more knowledge than the latter, and/or do the workers in the former create significantly more than those in the latter? (ibid: 100)

There is no clear sense in which that is so. Every enterprise, like every form of work, involves knowledge and learning; almost all capitalist production has, at least since the era of what Marx called “large scale manufacture,” involved investments in technologies of production and in certain forms of training and (de)skilling workers. What then motivates the differentiation of some sectors as “knowledge-based,” such that their growth is presented as characterizing the entire economy as one defined by “knowledge”? What is knowledge such that it can be said to have increased, such that it can be used to obtain other resources, including labor?

One factor, often implied, would seem to be the quantity, if not of knowledge (“So far, at least, it is not possible to quantify knowledge,” Drucker regrets [1993: 185]), then of capital invested in its production. But that would hardly seem to establish the priority of knowledge as such or its replacement of capital. Caffentzis points to the increasing interest of capital in intellectual property as a motivating factor (2013: 106-108).<sup>1</sup> Sectors defined as “knowledge-based” would then be those in which the copywriting of specific productions, methods, algorithms, designs, etc. is largest, both in numbers of copyright sought and in the amount of revenue they yield. Here too, though, a definition of knowledge is circumvented by appeal to a quantity of value. As Caffentzis suggests, an emphasis on intellectual property law allows exponents of the knowledge economy “to speak of intellectual commodities without referring to knowledge or cognition at all” (ibid: 108). But it also tacitly identifies knowledge with capital, as a quantity of value bound for valorization.

In Bell’s early account, the emphasis had been on “research and development,” science and technology. The “most crucial group in the knowledge society,” he insisted, “is scientists” (1973: 216). But two decades later, Drucker is after something more expansive, something commensurate with knowledge’s role as *the* central resource of the economy. Knowledge, therefore, is defined as “the means to obtain social and economic results,” “information effective in action,” “systematic technology” that produces results. Drucker attributes the rise of capitalism itself to the change in knowledge’s meaning from “self-knowledge” to this form of technical efficiency (1993: 28-29, 42, 46). And, perhaps most tellingly, he casts *man-*

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**1** | It should be noted that answering this question is not the intention of his essay and he touches on this point only in the context of a broader critique of theorists of “cognitive capitalism,” on which, see below.

agement as a kind of meta-knowledge, “the generic organ of the knowledge society,” responsible for “making knowledge productive,” “supplying knowledge to find out how existing knowledge can be best applied” (ibid: 42-43, 190).

Articulated in this way, however, what is, in fact, novel about the knowledge economy? On Drucker’s own account, such instrumentalized knowledge lies at the historical roots of capitalism and, as we will see in Chapter 3, an insistence on “science” as means for increasing economic productivity and efficiency defined the rise of managerialism at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If, as Ernst Mandel argued, Bell’s “post-industrial society” is actually “*the period in which all branches of the economy are fully industrialized for the first time*” (1975: 191, original emphasis), Drucker’s “post-capitalist society” appears as the complementary image of an era in which managerial forms of organization are extended to all forms of profit-making. Thus, Drucker’s justification for the notion of post-capitalism turns on the increasing wealth concentrated in employee pension funds, and the control of pension fund managers over their investment. Such managers, Drucker suggests, “are the only true ‘capitalists’ in the United States. The ‘capitalists’ have thus themselves become employees in the post-capitalist knowledge society [...] One implication is that capital now serves the employee, where under capitalism the employee served capital” (ibid: 67). Yet, capital is an odd servant, which imposes its own goal on its purported master. Knowledge, for Drucker, has no goal or meaning distinct from those of capital: productivity, efficiency, accumulation.

If such employees ostensibly supplant capital, they also render non-knowledge workers seemingly irrelevant in Drucker’s account. He does not deny that manual labor will persist (“Plenty of people will always be needed who can bring only muscle to the job”) but they vanish from his account after a paragraph or two, yielding to the “technicians” who will be “the greatest employment need of the next decades” (ibid: 73). In this sense, his account does appear to differ dramatically from Progressive era programs of managerialism, for which the explicit focus was on the control of manual laborers. But this difference is less than it initially appears, for what the knowledge economy thesis ultimately portends is that all workers should be managed *as if* they were knowledge workers.

Initially, this might appear a good thing, for Drucker insists on the fact that knowledge work requires a certain kind of autonomy, though, tellingly, he does not use that word. What concerns him, after all, is not

the liberation of knowledge workers but the increasing efficiency and productivity of their work, once granted the ability to direct and decide their own work-tasks (given goals that are already commensurate with capital's). Freed from niggling oversight, each knowledge worker will do more, but each must also take on more responsibility for the objectives and results of their own work and that of the organization by which they are employed (ibid: 108). This means, in turn, that objectives must become more tightly focused and manageable and that organizations must be transformed in tandem, from the hulking, conglomerated bureaucracies of late-capitalist states and corporations, to streamlined, nimble, outsourcing machines that "will focus on their core tasks. For the rest, they will work with other organizations in a bewildering variety of alliances and partnerships" (ibid: 96). Freed from their tutelage, augmented by computational and informational technologies, knowledge workers become superior instruments of economic expansion. But their power is limited to the range of what they can be assessed as responsible for: flexible firms retain the "power to make decisions about people – whom to hire, whom to fire, whom to promote," as well as the "power to establish the discipline needed to produce results" (ibid: 104).

In this light, the idea of the knowledge economy can be seen for what it most fundamentally is: not the identification of a novel economic form so much as a bid for the transformation of firms and, ultimately, society as a whole, in a manner that will make workers more productive and efficient: focused, flexible, task-oriented, team-based, innovative, collaborative across the public/private divide, distributing responsibility for their fates to individuals (and so without job security, seniority privileges, and so on). The ambiguous measures offered to prove knowledge's central economic role function as justifications for that transformation, for the managerial strategies, governmental policies, and cultural norms now more commonly known as neoliberalism. Firms structured by the ostensible imperatives of knowledge work, firms in which *all* workers were ostensibly knowledge workers, were firms that would no longer recognize the collective protections and securities that labor unions had long fought for, while they also intensified control – by means of assessments of workers' responsibility – over a knowledge consigned to deciding relatively trivial details.

To be a "knowledge worker" in such conditions (outside of the highest positions, which design and implement such models and their assessment,

wielding the powers of the firm) was not a piece of luck, but a misfortune, as the ever-increasing inequality in knowledge economies has made clear. If the US economy, for example, grew 230 percent from 1979-2011, riding waves of bubbles and crashes, the income of the bottom 80 percent of its citizens grew only 16 percent. Over that same period, consumer debt soared from \$263 billion in 1978 to \$3,330 billion in 2015, as working families sought to offset stagnant incomes (Cahill and Konings 2017: 121). One of the “intangibles” of knowledge turned out to be its capacity to design leaner systems of automated production and global logistical systems, allowing for outsourcing and offshoring beyond even Drucker’s dreams. As we will see later, the intensified routinization of “knowledge work” was another result.

Since the introduction of this narrative, of course, efforts have been made to articulate some kind of general benefits of this knowledge economy, if often in aspirational, meritocratic form (“opportunities for advancement and recognition” [Drucker 1993: 96]). The speed and availability of information, not its commodification, is stressed (Carlaw et al., 2012). Here too lies the emphasis on the wider availability of education, the increasing ranks of postsecondary students. Yet, once inserted into the vision of *effective* knowledge, education too had to change: “the school will have to commit itself to results. It will have to establish its ‘bottom line,’ the performance for which it should be held responsible and for which it is being paid” (Drucker 1993: 209). To be effective, education too has to be adaptive, flexible, directed not towards knowledge as an “end in itself” but as a form of instrumentalized autonomy. “Lifelong learning” becomes a model, not of some contemplative “life of the mind, but of a frenzied, anxious quest to become employable, to remain up-to-date in one’s “skill set,” innovative in one’s self-presentation, invested, above all else, in one’s “human capital” (Jessop 2012). All this too became part of the responsibility of workers, and an individualizing justification for failure.

Brighter versions of this universalizing story are also told. Richard Florida’s celebratory discourse of the “creative economy,” for example, saw value in all forms of knowledge and creativity. Even those forms which do not directly obtain economic results are effective in producing the kinds of diverse, artistic, walkable, sustainable, user- and dog-friendly, urban environments to which productive creative workers flock, fostering creative synergy. Economic development and urban renaissance (that is, gentrification) become coextensive. Further, Florida insisted, “[e]very job can and

must be *creatifed*; every worker must be able to harness his or her own inner entrepreneur” (Florida 2012: 388). Yet, his account of how precisely this might happen remained vague and underdeveloped.<sup>2</sup>

As the gentrification of urban cores and the celebration of innovation and creation have continued apace, the submerged counter-discourse of economic polarization or a “dual economy” has returned with greater force, highlighting the growing differentiation of roughly twenty to thirty percent of the population – highly skilled workers, managers, professionals, with college degrees – from the rest of the workforce.<sup>3</sup> Innovations in and applications of information technology, telematics, and microelectronics have not led to the universalization of empowered knowledge work but to the increasing intensities of labor driven by Toyotism and logistics, to unemployment, underemployment, increased flexibility and precariousness, lower wages, and the spread of colonial and postcolonial forms of “superexploitation” into the global North (Sotelo Valencia 2018).

Even Florida has grown uncertain about the narrative. His most recent book, *The New Urban Crisis* (2017), reads like the chastened musing of a once-utopian reckoning with his vision’s failure while still trying to remain cheerful. The “knowledge-based cities” where he had predicted a million creative workers would bloom, have, in fact, extended striated and segregated geographies wherein the “advantaged knowledge workers, professionals, and media and cultural workers [...] were doing fine” but everyone else (“a staggering 66 percent of the population”) “ended up worse off” (ibid: xviii). Crushed by the startling realization that the benefits of a “creative economy” might go only to those recognized as creative, that a knowledge economy could bring harm to those cast aside as ignorant, unskilled, or simply superfluous, Florida has little left to offer. He resuscitates a few aspects of his old hopes, now buttressed by a call for statist policies (infrastructure investment, housing subsidies, school reform) he once deemed obsolete and an appeal to capitalists to have a heart (please pay service workers more!). The universality of knowledge work has not

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**2** | Perhaps not surprising, given his earlier co-authored account of “creatifed” industrial work, which a more nuanced and critical study has rightly described as a “romanticized caricature of work under lean production” (Rinehart, et al. 1997. See Kenney and Florida 1991).

**3** | For sample accounts from two eras, see Burris 1993; Temin 2017.

arrived. It was never intended to. Yet, the story of the knowledge economy lingers on, a denial of the power whose functions it performs.

### **Utopias of the 99%**

In theory, such a situation ought to be advantageous for the left. A growing awareness of persistent inequality, after four long neoliberal decades, increasingly pervades the social landscape, accented by a deepening distrust of traditional political elites. The remarkable U.S. Presidential election of 2016 (both in Trump's ultimate victory and Sander's unexpected strength in the primary) was only the latest in a series of "populist" expressions of discontent and longing for change, beginning at the turn of the century in Venezuela and Bolivia, spreading through much of Latin America and then, unevenly, across Europe and the United States. Syriza and Corbyn, Law and Justice, Fidesz, and Le Pen, at minimum all seem like clear signs that the hegemony of neoliberalism and the knowledge economy is cracking.

Center-right parties have, in their way, been most successful at adapting to this shift, at least so far. Having always been dependent on nationalist and racist elements, they can direct frustration and resentments over the knowledge economy down those paths. Trump's election has proven both that party elites can lose control of that process and that they can learn to live with the products of that failure. The "center-left," meanwhile, has proved unworthy of the moment. Having heavily invested long ago in the vision of a meritocratic, knowledge economy as the way to retain the vestiges of a left identity whilst embracing neoliberal political economies, they have been loath to abandon that vision.

And the radical left? While the rolling wave of social movements, epitomized by the "movements of the squares," has been a promising development, the majority of these movements have been marked by a striking ephemerality. They rise up in response to a crisis or a series of injustices, surge into public awareness and debate, and then seem to vanish in the face of inevitable state-led repression. Partly, as Zeynep Tufekci has recently argued, the character of these movements seems to derive from their substitution of networked communication and social media for the long organizational histories that underpinned prior ones. "Modern networked movements can scale up quickly and take care of all sorts of logistical tasks without building any substantial organizational capacity before

the first protest or march” (Tufekci 2017: 70). But they also lack the organizational capacity to actually threaten those in authority. Without capacities for decision-making or consensus building, without even the intention to develop these capacities (given a certain fetishism of horizontality and participation), they suffer from what Tufekci calls a “*tactical freeze*.” They struggle to respond to changing situations, to capitalize on apparent victories by pressing forward to other demands or the adoption of new tactics. “[T]he initial tactic that brought people together is used again and again as a means of seeking the same life affirmation and returning to their only moment of true consensus: the initial moment when a slogan or demand or tactic brought them all out in the first place” (ibid: 77).

This freeze, however, is not simply a product of the use of social media or the sudden inflation of protests to movement size. Rather, the initial tactics that brought them together likewise rhyme with the characteristic labor processes of knowledge workers in the knowledge economy, with the kinds of comportment, practices, and expectations into which high-performing students and the children of professional workers are trained or habituated. The flexible, team-based, project-centered autonomy of knowledge work’s labor process finds its analogue in the horizontalist, leaderless, consensus-centered model of social movements, and can produce similar results. As Tufekci notes regarding the open, participatory model of “assembly” that Occupy and other movements employed:

Voluntary speaking as a mode of decision making is another impediment to participation because people willing to speak up, especially in a challenging way in public, tend to be from privileged backgrounds, people who already like to wield authority and power, and [...] are mostly men. (ibid: 100)

This is not to say that participatory forms of practice are intrinsically anti-democratic, but without organizations and institutions that facilitate the input and foster the capacities of the dominated, they will privilege those schooled into them based on expectations of their managerial or political roles as knowledge workers. Such forms of organization and decision-making can appear to those practicing them to articulate the maximally democratic forms of political struggle, while foreclosing their ability to involve and inspire the majority of a leftist movement’s potential social base. As Tufekci and others have noted, Occupy and other such move-

ments were never actually leaderless but they obscured a clear sense of who their leaders actually were.

The difficulties facing efforts to foster involvement and inspiration today should not be understated. The movements of the squares are symptomatic of a problem rather than culpable for not solving it. As the knowledge economy has done its work, dissolving the traditional bases of class identification, casting off greater numbers into insecure, underpaid, or informal forms of earning their livelihood, incarcerating and placing under penal surveillance many others, encouraging a sense of disenchantment and disinvestment from political institutions and processes, fostering suspicion of and resentment towards knowledge workers while spreading a shared sense of solely individual responsibility, it has produced a situation in which most visible political struggles and parties, including those of the radical left, are disproportionately composed of knowledge workers. The difficulties of this situation are only compounded by the kinds of discourses that it tacitly encourages: those which foster the notion that knowledge work is, in fact, general, that the knowledge economy (and the practices considered typical of it) are a real basis on which to ground visions of social transformation.

Still, this cannot be reason for attempting to transform those conditions, *in theory*, into positive conditions for transformative agency. In the rest of this chapter, I sketch out two perspectives on these movements that betray, at the level of theory, some of the same limitations. Heroizing these struggles against neoliberalism, they simultaneously carry forward key presuppositions of the “knowledge economy.” No doubt, the adaptation of such presuppositions in these perspectives inverts the direction of Drucker and Florida’s accounts in key respects: rather than capital becoming their servant or everyone becoming a knowledge worker, here mental laborers become, implicitly or explicitly, a new collective agent of social transformation. But the end product of such arguments is a simplification of social contradictions and a vision of revolution that reproduces the authority of the mental laborer, weakening its own critical force.

### **The General Intellect**

When Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* appeared in 2000, it was widely received as a theoretical expression of the *altermondialisme* movement that culminated in the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle, an envi-

sioning of its future trajectory. Though the argument of the book encouraged that reading to some extent, it also developed out of (and departed from) a longer theoretical tradition of Autonomist Marxism.<sup>4</sup> Even as the movement itself waned, intellectual and activist interest in that theoretical tradition grew in the U.S. and elsewhere, encouraging a wide range of translations into English, as well as a series of, at last count, four sequels to or extensions of *Empire* by its co-authors (Hardt/Negri 2004, 2009, 2012, 2017). The rise of the movements of the squares has re-centered this tradition, and its contemporary articulations, as an influential model for radical theory.

The specific strength of the Autonomist tradition, itself derived from Italian *operaismo* or “workerism,” is its centering of workers’ struggles in the evolution of capitalist societies. Rather than a totalizing system that evolves according to its own internal logic, capitalism is understood as a system of domination driven to constantly renewed innovations as a means for responding to and managing resistance. To an extent, *Empire* (and other works inspired by it) maintains this perspective but in a hyperbolic form, generalizing resistance to the “multitude” as a whole, while conceiving that multitude on the model of universalized, networked knowledge work. This expansion is grounded on a core set of analytic terms – “general intellect,” “immaterial labor,” “cognitive capitalism” – that derive much of their force from a particular reading of a passage in Marx’s *Grundrisse* (1973).<sup>5</sup> In that passage, Marx argues that “the development of fixed capital<sup>6</sup> indicates to what degree general social knowledge

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**4** | Wright 2017 is a useful history of this tradition. It should be noted that George Caffentzis, on whom I drew in the discussion above, also identifies with this tradition, though he, like Sylvia Federici, emphatically criticizes the “post-*operaismo*” trajectory described in this section. Indeed, the quotes in the section above were often directed *against* Negri, et al, precisely for absorbing the perspective of the “knowledge economy” narrative.

**5** | See, amongst others, Vercellone 2007, 2009; Boutang 2011. For an early formulation of this approach to the *Grundrisse*, see Negri 1991.

**6** | Capital investment in fixed assets: the tools and machinery of production, as well as buildings, etc. This is to be distinguished from “constant capital,” which, for Marx, includes all of the means of production, including those, like raw materials, replaced in each production cycle, though the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably.

has become a direct force of production, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it" (Marx 1973: 706). From this, proponents of the general intellect thesis derive the idea of knowledge and communication, science, technology and affective interrelations, as a collective production in which all have participated and participate, and which has become the dominant productive agent and source of value in contemporary capitalism.

As a literal interpretation of the text this is problematic, though the text itself (an unedited notebook not intended for publication) is ambiguous. Marx seems to move back and forth in this discussion between an account of what is the case in capitalism and what potentials lie latent in its development, waiting to be unleashed, without clearly delineating the movement from one perspective to the other. Yet, he states clearly enough that the "general knowledge" figured here is not something fully possessed by most. Rather, "[w]hat capital adds is that it increases the surplus labor time of the mass *by all the means of art and science*" (ibid: 708, emphasis added). The "theft of labor time," which lies at the core of capitalist value, counters "the artistic, scientific, etc. development of the individuals," which would require "time set free" (ibid: 705-706).<sup>7</sup>

For proponents of the general intellect as the contemporary source of value, however, Marx seriously underestimated the capacities that capitalism's increasing centering of "immaterial labor" would come to enable (Smith 2013). What Marx took to be a potential of communist society, then, theorists of cognitive capitalism understand as a fracture internal to the current phase of capitalism. The "rise of mass intellectuality" with the postwar expansion of education and training, led to wage laborers becoming a "depository of cognitive competencies that cannot be objectified in machinery," including "the faculty of language, the disposition to learn, memory, the capacity to abstract and relate, and the inclinations

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**7** | Further, Ernst Mandel (1975: 259) offers an entirely different reading of the key passage from the *Grundrisse*: Marx, Mandel suggests, is identifying the "development of fixed capital" as determining and limiting the degree to which social knowledge is integrated into production. "Scientific activity is only a productive force if it is directly incorporated into material production," but whether it is or not is dependent on the prior logic of capital valorization. Science, in other words, is *not* an immediate productive force in capitalism.

toward self-reflexivity” (Vercellone 2007: 6). The general intellect encompasses “the increasingly *social* nature of production,” organized “in expansive cooperative networks,” taken to follow from this.

Workers are no longer merely instruments that capital uses for transforming nature and producing commodities. Having incorporated the productive tools and knowledges into their own minds and bodies, they are transformed and have the potential to become increasingly foreign to and autonomous from capital. (Hardt and Negri 2017: 115)

Such incorporation ostensibly grounds the multitude’s potential for both resistance and “the construction of alternative social relations” (ibid: 78). Communism is already present in the increasing centrality of “cooperation, social and scientific knowledges, care, and the creation of social relationships” (and also “machinic algorithms”) in production (ibid: xix, 41).

Thus, while the idea of the general intellect departs from the utopic image of individual knowledge workers animating Drucker and Florida’s visions, it often sounds as if it had merely substituted a collective subject for it, leaving the conception of the knowledge economy (or “cognitive capitalism”) otherwise intact. It appears, that is, to suggest that the division between mental and manual labor has, in fact, been supplanted, knowledge work *has* been generalized, and so the interests of knowledge workers, their strategies and tactics, are now identical with those of the oppressed and dominated, broadly and diversely conceived. But this ignores Marx’s subsequent observation that the products of this general intellect – “all the means of art and science” – become, in the hands of capital, means for increasing exploitation.

Instead, the overwriting of this separation in the labor process is achieved, theoretically, through a peculiar overwriting of the division between capital and labor (Floyd 2011). The universalization of the general intellect proceeds by way of an ontological subjectivization of fixed capital. The ensemble of productive tools and knowledges that mass intellectuality incorporates – “artificial languages,” theorems of formal logic, theories of information and systems, epistemological paradigms, certain segments of the meta-physical tradition, linguistic games, and images of the world” (Read 2003: 131) – are fixed capital, which thus “tends to be constituted and represented within variable capital, in the brains, bodies, and cooperation of productive subjectivity” (Hardt/Negri 2000: 385). “Subjectivity as fixed

capital” becomes the grounding condition of “immaterial labor,” generating out of these dead forms of communicative production “continual interrelations of communication” (Read 2003: 127).

On one level, this ostensible incorporation of fixed capital seems to signal the total subordination of living labor to capital: “subjectivity as fixed capital would seem to be entirely interior to capital—produced by capital as a functional component” (ibid: 132). But, in a further twist, labor power is also understood as inherently *self-valorizing*: value, which for Marx is the product of “abstract labor” (labor insofar as it is subordinated to the social relations of capitalist production) becomes instead an immediate product of “living labor.” Having been wholly subsumed by capital, and the control-functions of mental labor, the subjectivity of labor power becomes simultaneously product *and* producer. “The production of subjectivity ceases to be only an instrument of social control [...] and becomes directly productive, because the goal of our post-industrial society is to construct the consumer/communicator—and to construct it as active” (Lazzarato 1996: 143). The mediated products of capital are depicted as immanent capacities of living labor (Floyd 2011: 73), such that capital can, in turn, be understood as wholly external to labor’s (self-)production, violently extracting profit as a form of rent.<sup>8</sup> Only exodus or flight is required (Hardt/Negri 2017: xix).

While these ideas of the generalization and autonomy of “immaterial labor” grant such theories a feeling of “optimism about a new intellect” (Boutang 2011: 3), they do so only by the peculiar conflation of living labor with both mental labor and with capital. Indeed, when reading Hardt and Negri, one can sometimes feel that such optimism has substituted in, by a kind of fiat, for a sober reckoning with the extent to in which a subjectivity produced by the control-functions of mental labor can so simply and emphatically exceed them, turn them productive, despite their forms having been shaped by the imperative of producing abstract (surplus) value. To say that desire always exceeds such forms is one thing; to say

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**8** | “Cooperation, or the association of producers, is posed independently of the organizational capacity of capital[...] Capital becomes merely an apparatus of capture, a phantasm, and an idol. Around it move radically autonomous processes of self-valorization that not only constitute an alternative basis of potential development but also actually represent a new constituent foundation” (Hardt/Negri 2000: 282).

that it submits them wholly to itself, makes them the ground of its own autonomy another. By such a fiat, the difference between the revolutionary “entrepreneurialism of the multitude” can be hard to distinguish from everyday knowledge work: “When we look at young people today who are absorbed in machinic assemblages, we should recognize that their very existence is resistance. Whether they are aware of it or not, they produce in resistance” (Hardt/Negri 2017: 123). Autonomy, once again, seems indistinguishable from its opposite.

Likewise, the argument that all labor today involves immaterial or “cognitive” labor leads to another pervasive ambiguity. While recognizing that such labor is “most visible” in knowledge work (Read 2003: 148), autonomist theories generally point to their inclusion of affective labor, including reproductive or care work, under those categories and/or to the way in which immaterial labor is at work in consumption as well. But these inclusions seem to both undermine the ostensible novelty of “cognitive capitalism” and to obscure divisions within it. If the work of social reproduction is immaterial labor, then what is new about it? “And, equally important, what is gained by assimilating all forms of work – even as a tendency – under one label, except that some kinds of work and the political problematic they generate again disappear?” (Caffentzis/Federici 2009: 130) To the extent that this position mirrors the thesis of a knowledge economy, this theory seems in danger of implicitly affirming its primary effects. To the extent it differs from it, it seems to render itself powerless to confront those effects, dissolving them into an ambience of collective knowledge work that is always already a form of resistance.

### **The Cognitariat**

The notion of a dual economy pointed to above is not intended to deny the increasing economic pressures on many knowledge workers, even those who have done well. Knowledge workers are not capitalists; they do not, generally, have the security or stability that large-scale wealth entails. In that sense, it would be better to speak, as Nick Dyer-Witheford (2015: 75) does, of a *triadic* pattern: “lucrative high-tech capital, professional informational work and grinding proletarian labour.” The middle strata of this triad is in constant flux, differentiated by its own internal hierarchies, and parts of it are in real decline or have, indeed, ceased to be part of it. Pressures have become acute on college students and young people who have

recently graduated, especially in countries reeling from debt crises and austerity measures. “[I]n education or not, young people are serious candidates for unemployment or casual labor” (Antunes 2013: xviii). But this relative decline in the prospects of *some* prospective knowledge workers must be contextualized within broader socio-economic patterns, especially the continued and even increasing rewards garnered by a still significant portion of professional information work, if accounts of it are not to yield their own utopic figures.

One temptation towards such figures has been that the movements of the squares appeared to some as disproportionately composed of just such “graduates without a future” (Mason 2013), once or would-be knowledge workers, undergoing a form of “proletarianization” (Dean 2016: 17). In that frame, they have come to appear as a new, potentially revolutionary subject. Most famously, perhaps, Paul Mason has argued for a fusion of the unrest of such graduates with the intrinsic potential of information technologies, which he holds to be in fundamental tension with market economies: “information is abundant, not scarce” (2015: 162, cp. Mason 2013). As the product of that fusion, the “new agent of change in history” is “the educated and connected human being,” the “networked individuals who have camped in the city squares [...] on the streets of Rio and São Paulo” and who represent “the working class ‘sublated’ – improved upon and replaced” (Mason 2015: xvii, 212). The “improvement” here appears to turn on education, which Mason equates with a moralized commitment to the common good: “The most highly educated generation in the history of the human race, and the best connected, will not accept a future of high inequality and stagnant growth” (ibid: 29). It is displaced knowledge workers who may deliver on the innovative, egalitarian promise of a networked, knowledge-based world.

Jodi Dean (2014) offers a more compelling argument for the political potential of these graduates (whom she dubs members of the “cognatariat” or “knowledge class”<sup>9</sup>) insofar as she is more attuned to the ambivalence of information technologies. Explicitly rejecting Mason’s presumption of their intrinsic conflict with market mechanisms, Dean argues that today, in “communicative capitalism,” productivity “derives from its expropriation and exploitation of communicative processes.” Having undergone

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9 | See also the Introduction to Dean 2016, which repeats a number of passages from this article.

real subsumption to capital, “communication does not provide a critical outside” (Dean 2014: 4). Rather, all our interactions – financial transactions, GPS locations, exercise routines, photographs, blog musings, affective engagements with distant or not so distant “friends” – become “raw material for capital.” As with the real subsumption of other forms of labor, this transforms the character of communication: there is “a shift from the primacy of a message’s use value to the primacy of its exchange value, to its capacity to circulate, to be forwarded and to be counted” (Dean 2014: 6). The quantitative flow of messages, the monetizable “hubs” of the networks they form, eclipses their meaning.

Yet, while stressing the subordination involved in the fixed capital of communication, Dean retains the idea that revolutionary transformation will be modeled on the potentials intrinsic to the forms of knowledge work: “a new common of collective struggle,” a struggle over data, knowledge, and affective processes, “the relations we create in common” (Dean 2014: 10, 12). Here, her account overlaps with post-Autonomist ones. If the shift from subordination to resistance is not asserted by fiat, neither is it clearly articulated. At minimum, Dean recognizes the necessity of forms of directly political activity – the seizure of capital and state and so on. Rather than arguing that *everyone* is (already) part of it, the “cognitariat” seems to function as the fusion of a universal class and, in its proletarianized fractions, a vanguard for collective struggle.

It is this direct connection, seemingly taken for granted, between “communicative” workers and the revolutionary potentials embodied in technologies of communication (as collective products) that I want to put into question.<sup>10</sup> After all, if communicative labor is really subsumed by capital, then what reason is there to think that those who perform it might have some unique, intrinsic revolutionary capacity or potential? Edna Brophy (2017) usefully speaks of “abstract communication” as the result of the real subsumption of communicative practices. If there is reason to think that the imposition of such abstraction will foster varying forms of resistance, just as abstract labor in general does, is there also reason to think that such resistance will be made fundamentally new by the communicative character of the labor or the machinery? Put differently, if what is involved is a process of *proletarianization*, why is it also the formation of

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**10** | For a discussion of the technological aspects, see chapter six.

a *new* “knowledge class”? Did prior revolutionary organization not involve cognition or communication?

I do not mean to question the worsening position of many in formerly stable and secure forms of “knowledge work.” Stagnant wages, rising student loans, increasing competition for positions enabled by both increased rates of higher education and increasing credentials required for relatively low-skilled work, the automation of office work, the push to render semi-professional work to the same kind of flexibility regimes as low-wage service work, increasingly individualized and isolating forms of assessment, and so on, all put increasing pressures on many who might once have expected a secure post-college career trajectory.<sup>11</sup> Still, a disconnect between the expectations and the reality attached to specific credentials is not wholly new, being a common theme in sociological reflections on the revolts of the 1960s (for example, Bourdieu 1979). More importantly, it is unclear, especially in increasingly individualizing times, that the general response to such a disconnect would tend towards revolutionary transformation. At least equally likely would seem to be efforts by such graduates to “reproduce their own status” (Quart 2018: 109), to demand or to settle for a return to the powers and privileges that their credentials once promised. Many students and graduates who once participated in the struggles of the 1960s, after all, have been willing to make their peace with the “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2017 [1999]).

In Dean’s own discussion, a sign of the utopic construction involved in attributing this revolutionary role to the knowledge class appears in her tendency to simplify the character of the movements she reads as foreshadowing that role.<sup>12</sup> She streamlines her presentations of them in a way that tends to overstate both the centrality of the knowledge class in general and of their “proletarianized” fraction. Thus, she argues “that highly educated young people were over-represented among OWS [Occupy Wall Street] activists and supporters and that many were underemployed, indebted or had recently lost their jobs” (Dean 2014: 2). Yet, while the

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**11** | See Quart 2018 for a particularly effective overview of these pressures and their effects on individuals.

**12** | “The protests [...] are protests of those proletarianized under communicative capitalism [...] These revolts make sense as [...] the political struggle of a knowledge class.” (Dean 2014: 1)

study of Occupy participants that Dean cites does note that “many of our respondents had substantial debt or had experienced recent job loss,” additional observations include that they were “relatively affluent” (more than a third had incomes over \$100,000), that 71% had “professional” jobs of some kind, and that immigrants and people of color were significantly under-represented (Milkman/Luce/Lewis 2013: 10-14). Whatever else one can say, this hardly sounds like a movement of the straightforwardly “proletarianized.”

Dean’s discussion of André Singer’s article (2014) on the widespread Brazilian protests in June 2013 makes the problem clearer. She characterizes Singer’s account as positing, based on the mismatch between the high-education and low-income levels of those involved, “a new proletariat or precariat taking to the streets” (Dean 2014: 2). But Singer’s conclusion is quite different. Rather than endorse the notion of a new “precariat” (a possibility he raises), he suggests that “perhaps the best way to describe the social composition of the demonstrations is to envisage *two relatively equal blocs*. These comprised, on the one hand, middle-class young adults, and on the other, people of the same age but drawn from the lower half of the Brazilian social pyramid” (Singer 2014: 29, emphasis added). The latter are somewhat more educated than one might expect – university enrollments in Brazil doubled between 2001 and 2011 – but this does not, for Singer, produce a singular knowledge class or cognitariat identity.

Instead, Singer argues that there was a “crossover of classes” in the June protests, reflected in their ideologically and politically “multifaceted” character, “in which everyone from the extreme left to the extreme right was to be found,” as well as a “latent tension” that occasionally led to violent clashes (ibid: 30, 32, 37). To the limited extent that there was a coalescence of viewpoints and goals, it was shaped, not by the common proletarianization of educated young people from different backgrounds, but by the identification of those from lower classes *with the worldview of the traditional middle class*, a position which “may be a desired goal for those who have begun to move towards it thanks to better educational opportunities” (ibid: 37). That identification was the basis for the ultimate predominance of a “post-materialist” centrism, emphasizing self-expression and quality of life over economic security. This centrism seeks to escape the right/left dilemma “by means of ‘greater social participation’—something nobody disagrees with in theory, but which, once it is removed from the realm of

distributional conflicts, can only be of interest to those whose material problems have been solved” (ibid: 35-36).

What is critical in Singer’s account is how it opens up possibilities for understanding the tensions within these movements, which Dean’s account elides, tensions that reflect something of the increasingly polarized character of contemporary societies.<sup>13</sup> For Singer, the libertarian and participatory characteristics of the movement in Brazil appear as a sign of the movement’s de-radicalization, its drift into an aspirational identification with the “classless” well-being of the educated middle-class. Others have likewise diagnosed the main horizon of the global occupations as “a better management of the bourgeois state” (Woland/Blaumachen 2014: 12; cited by Dyer-Witheford 2015: 162). From this perspective, the key function of *all* discourses of a knowledge society would be to de-radicalize protest, to guide it towards an aspiration to reinstall the privileges of knowledge work (and, perhaps, someday, to its universalization).

Interestingly, Dean’s own theory brings into question the political efficacy of her “new prole.” For them, she notes, images take primacy over arguments or demands, individuality over solidarity (Dean 2014: 7), preventing them “from foregrounding our commonality and organizing ourselves politically” (Dean 2017: 4). “New proles often have a strong libertarian bent. They tend to present themselves as post-political or anti-political” (Dean 2014: 9-10). This emphasis on individual insight, development, achievement, creativity, and so on, appears, for her, as an articulation of the increasingly psychotic individualism that capitalism propels us all into, undermining the symbolic authority needed to stabilize its own coherence. In that sense, the revolutionary potential of the “cognitariat” is threatened by the same debilitating individualism that has beset the left since the 70s and which led it to respond

to the attack on the welfare state, collapse of Keynesianism, and emergence of a neoliberal consensus by forfeiting its historical solidarity with workers and the

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**13** | Also, it is difficult to know how, precisely, Dean figures knowledge workers as a *class*. When she defines them as such, she refers to Christian Fuchs’s account of contemporary class formations. Yet Fuchs does not refer to “knowledge workers” as a class, but as a fraction of a larger formation—“the class of all who are in some sense exploited.” (Fuchs 2010: 187)

poor, retreating from the state, and losing the sense that collective solutions to large-scale systemic inequalities are possible are necessary (Dean 2009: 35).

In the place of such collective solutions, the left came (and is this not also a description of an Occupy general assembly or a University faculty meeting?) to reduce “politics to communicative acts, to speaking and saying and exposing and explaining, a reduction key to a democracy conceived of in terms of discussion and deliberation” (ibid: 32).

For Dean, the essential response to this dilemma must be organizational. Much of her recent work (2012, 2014, 2016) is a concerted and powerful effort to argue for the reawakening and re-conception of the question of the party. But, while I agree on the importance of that question, any answer to it must reckon with an implicit aspect of her critique that never comes wholly into focus. To the extent that she, like Hardt and Negri, tacitly identifies the communicative activities of the “knowledge class” as the model for a form of relationality of which we are all equally dispossessed and not as activities themselves shaped by the character of capitalist mental labor, liberation appears tacitly as the realized autonomy of knowledge work, paired with a vague gesture towards its universalization or collectivity. Capitalism’s hold on knowledge continues to appear as something external to it. It “seizes and tags” (Dean 2009: 12) knowledge rather than structuring its very forms, practices, and effectivities. The same danger holds then: any party premised on such an approach would inadvertently reproduce the power that knowledge already wields in capitalist social relations of exploitation and appropriation. Political resistance, developed from this perspective, becomes an obstacle to its own ideals.

### **The Function of Mental Labor**

The concept of the knowledge economy is premised on the idea that knowledge as such is a form of (benevolent) power. Ideas can change the world, reform capitalism. Ideas can also be a resource, driving economic expansion or knitting humans together in complex networks of affect and common holdings. It is this latter notion – that knowledge is relational, both collectively produced and productive of collectivity – that distinguishes Negri and Dean’s positions from those for whom it represents a kind of apotheosis of entrepreneurial individualism. In this way, knowledge becomes not a means for reform but the substance of revolutionary

aspirations. Communist desire is the desire for the freeing of that common production, the overcoming of the external expropriation or dispossession that capital visits upon knowledge from outside.

This last point signals the problems that undermine such aspirations. Placing capital *outside* the relationality of a knowledge and communication really subsumed by capital obscures the relational character of knowledge as it actually exists in contemporary society, specifically the power relations through which knowledge is articulated *and* from which its own power derives. “What capital adds is that it increases the surplus labor time of the mass by all the means of art and science” (Marx 1973: 708). A grounding intuition of this book is that the link between knowledge and the capitalist system of domination should be drawn internally to both, along the lines of the capitalist separation of mental from manual labor as Marx articulated it, not only within society in general, but within labor processes of production and reproduction. At this foundational level, the ideological and political fusion of knowledge and the power of capital, of science and exploitation, is established. A politics that attempts to break free from that fusion without having reckoned with it, that identifies with the positive elements of the knowledge economy without a critique of its (intended) real effects will be undone by them.

At the same time a central difficulty in the development of such a critique must be acknowledged: there is something essential about the assertion that, as Gramsci put it, *everyone* is an intellectual. There is no labor that does not involve conception and preconception, there is no life that is not reflected on, built out of knowledge produced in common. Any political view that does not hold to those claims will itself become a form of meritocracy or technocracy. This is the positively utopic element of Hardt and Negri and Dean’s utopias, an image of the end of those control functions which persists in the margins of every liberatory movement. But common sense, the form of knowledge we collectively produce in class societies, is also, as Gramsci argued, a panoply of contradictory and confused ideas, shaped by our own (collective) experiences but also by the dominant ideologies and institutions within which we live and think. The fixed capital we incorporate into our minds and selves is not so easily autonomized.

The difficulty lies in affirming this potential of the common under different social conditions without ignoring or obscuring the relations of power and control that define the social functions of knowledge and

the social positions of knowledge workers today. A thought that seeks to become effective must draw its material power from somewhere other than thought. If it does not, reflexively, get a handle on the sources of its own authority and control, if it does not transform the material institutions, the inertial forms, the dependent paths, that give it purchase on the world, through which it moves and draws its meaning, they will overdetermine its meanings and its effects. The dystopia of mental labor is the reproduction of the position of control, authority, and privilege with and from which it already thinks, embodying the forms of power and the forms of blindness they bequeath. The weight of this tradition cannot be overturned simply in or by thought, especially a thought which simply declares that here, now, already, those privileges have been cancelled or exceeded. We should recall the second part of Gramsci's famous decree: "All men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: *but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals*" (Gramsci 1971: 9). The social functions of knowledge workers are not something that can be changed (only) by adopting a "new" form of thought but through the actual transformation of the relations and institutions that shape and determine those functions. A left composed principally of knowledge workers cannot, any more than capitalism, simply be *persuaded* to change; it must itself be transformed by a collective power that rivals its own. The question is if and how we might enable such a transformation.

The division between mental and manual labor produces strange political effects. As we will see, this is partly because its political effects do not map in any direct or simple manner onto class position. While the "manual" working class largely consists of people without college degrees, for example, there are a large number of people – 17 million small business owners (or "petite bourgeoisie"), – who do not have a college degree and are not part of that working class. Two-thirds of small-business owners in general describe themselves as conservative, 86 percent are white, 92% say they vote regularly in national elections, and their average salary is \$112,000. "There are also 1.8 million managers, 8.8 million supervisors, and 1.6 million cops whose jobs don't require a college degree" (Moody 2017: 176). Even if the numbers for those without a college degree skewed somewhat lower in these categories, they would still stand well-apart from the averages for those without a college education, almost half of whom do not vote and who tend to be to the left on issues of economy and the role of government. Evidence suggests that the support for right-wing popu-

lisms also comes disproportionately from this field of relatively well-off, quasi-independent people without a college education, likely motivated, in part, by imbalances of power between them and their more properly credentialed peers.

My contention will not be that a leftist politics oriented by the division between mental and manual labor would convert such people to its cause. At best, it might weaken some of their resolve. More important would be its impact on those do not vote, who find political processes as they exist without meaning, who generally have little access to institutions or organizations that foster their own political capacities and perspectives. The democratization of knowledge, politics and production is not an ideal that can be either presupposed as given nor put off until some far-off point when the people have been properly educated and moralized. It must begin now, in a process as critical of the powers of mental labor as those of capital. In what follows, I attempt to further that critique by sketching key episodes and tensions in the historically evolving social functions of mental labor across the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the ways in which they inform the contemporary political crisis, and, most tentatively, the avenues by which transformation might begin.