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Autonomy vs. Insecurity: The (Mis)Fortunes of Mental Labor in a Global Network

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I. “Free” Trade and Unfair Mental Labor

Shortly after midnight on July 27, 2005, the US House of Representatives passed by two votes (217-215) the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA). The political trading to get the winning votes was perhaps not quite so free. It appears that when the official vote was tabulated at the end of the regular time allotted, the result was 180 to 175 against CAFTA. Republican leaders, however, kept extending the voting time, working the floors “in order to bully legislators into approving the bill.”¹ This document extends to the Dominican Republic and five other Central American nations (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua) the privileges granted to corporations in the 3 countries (US, Canada, Mexico) signed onto the 1994 NAFTA. And CAFTA itself is really only a stage towards an even larger vision. President Bush’s hope is to get 31 more South American nations under the more ambitious Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) which is now in various draft forms, waiting its day. Of course, all these agreements in this hemisphere are linked to the global network mapped out by the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the General Agreement for Trade and Services (GATS, 1995).

Every one of these agreements publicly frames itself in the rhetoric of increased freedom, cooperation, and international exchange. (Just check out their web sites.) So on the surface at least, it’s hard to disagree with the expressly stated intentions of the agreements. Who, after all, would really argue against cooperation and freedom? Or against open, fair, democratically agreed-upon relations between nations? Yet very few citizens of some of the countries affected by them are free enough to have any power whatsoever to agree or disagree with these “agreements.” The actual contents of all these documents set the terms for deregulating capital, overriding indigenous governments’ socialized domains of public services, and regulating labor, thus setting in practice the neoliberal theory of letting the market rule. This network of trade regulations is what we really mean when we speak of “globalization,” a euphemism whose popularization in the media corresponds to the recent historical period of rapidly increasing economic inequality around the globe. And the creation, composition, and implementation of these

agreements have had a great deal to do with the reconfiguration of mental labor in our deeply networked cultures.

Now it's also true that, in practice, the political and economic stages for implementing these forms of globalization do not always run smoothly. Sometimes the neoliberal agenda runs into pockets of resistance. For example, when the Bush administration planned to implement CAFTA on January 1, 2006, the democratically elected parliaments of several of the CAFTA countries forced a delay in Bush's plans for fear of its far-reaching changes. Costa Rica has yet to ratify the accord, a vote not expected until October, 2007. But whether through pressure or free choice, the weaker nations as a rule fold into the accord in the end.

Of course, there should be resistance. Where once "free trade" agreements focused on the reduction of tariffs and fees for international goods, these recent "service" agreements affect every dimension of social life. The underlying purpose of these complex documents is to grant the "freedom" of private capital investment managers to over-ride even those public regulations voted on by democratically elected representatives in many of the countries. These regulations often protect citizens' rights to such basic services as healthcare, education, housing, drinking water, waste disposal, and social security.

In contrast, among its many provisions, CAFTA allows for private takeover of such public services while placing intellectual property primarily in the hands of private interests (meaning corporations) so that basic health and pharmaceutical products can be controlled by profit ratios rather than human need in developing countries. Except for the increased stability gained by the ruling elites, most people experience increased destabilization and insecurity. This "race to the bottom" by transnational corporations (TNCs) to find the sites of cheapest labor possible all fueled by 30 years of various "free trade agreements" has created massive suffering, poverty, illness, and joblessness in many parts of the world.² Even in the US, these more accurately named "unfair" trade agreements have enabled what David Harvey calls the "restoration of class power" (16): economic inequality in the US now registers in about the same ratios as it did in 1928.³ Because the financial "freedoms" have produced such political and economic instabilities around the globe, we can also document the great contradiction in neoliberal practice: more authoritarianism and militarism (pace the Bush administration's unconstitutional surveillance practices, violations of human rights, the military invasion and occupation of Iraq, and a national debt now reaching nine trillion dollars).

As one might well imagine, it takes a lot of mental labor to craft, draft, lobby, and implement these many phony "free trade" agreements. They're phony, of course, because the freedom has been far too much on one side: corporate elites over the rest of the world's population. While average worker salaries have declined in the past decade relative to inflation, Bentley automobile corporation has seen a 1000% growth in sales, and they don't even make a car for less than \$150 grand.⁴ A few people are having a good ride. The point is that what counts for mental labor anymore is difficult to say. Through the rose-tinted lenses of the champions of the New Economy, it is a good and

wonderful freedom when these privatized reaches of the once (relatively) public domains of mental labor can go every which way, socially, politically, economically, you name it.

Besides all the less visible blue collar workers required to clean the hotel rooms, carry luggage, cook meals, and maintain buildings, the basic workforce underlying these complex international trade agreements is a predominantly university-educated wave of lawyers, economists, translators, accountants, financial planners, diplomats, international relations experts, lobbyists, technical writers, editors, corporate managers, business administrators, computer experts, web designers, commercial artists, and multi-media technicians. Most members of this white collar labor force are working on salaried (if not hourly wages), and this kind of mental labor would seem to be 'elevated' primarily with respect to the huge sums of money paid to some (though certainly not all) such employees and bureaucrats hired to work out the details of these agreements and their accompanying public relations web sites.

Much of this mental labor produces weightless or immaterial products (digital storage, reproduction, and retrieval shrink libraries to hard drives), and the productive processes require considerable amounts of creativity, imagination, flexibility, and autonomy. From a managerial perspective, the tension between having both a disciplined workforce and a creative workforce at the same time leads to the crux of the problem. In short, corporate mental and immaterial labor highlights conflicts between individual worker autonomy and administrative control, much as higher education management struggles with similar conflicts between academic freedom and business/corporate accounting sheets. Where once mental labor belonged to the privileged workplaces of scientists, educators, doctors, and artists, mental labor now comprises the core of the new information economy fueled by all the political initiatives for deregulation, privatization, and free market determinations of human value.⁵

Traditional views of mental labor all had something to do with public accountability: the professionalized development of disciplines of knowledge depended on what Steven Brint calls "social trustee professionalism." Professionalized mental workers were granted a degree of autonomy with respect to the knowledge they would create, control, and disseminate (not unlike the old artisans' guilds), and the accompanying privileges presumed a kind of implicit social contract to the extent that the knowledge would enter the public realm as a benefit to the society as a whole. These idealizations have now been pretty well unmasked since most expert professionals now work primarily for the benefit of private capital, and well out of view of public eyes.

Indeed, the various trade agreements are all worked out in secret meetings, not available to the public, and not accountable to any democratic governing body. Since the final version of CAFTA actually runs to 2,500 pages, it is easy to imagine that when brought before democratic legislatures, such complexity works against any kind of public reading, let alone critical assessment of such capacious texts. As Pierre Bourdieu puts it, we all live under the hands of an "invisible world government" (78) of businessmen, autocrats, technocrats whose mental labor transpires in secret meetings, non-public commissions, and the gated enclaves of highly paid elites.

This is not exactly what Karl Marx had in mind when he worked out his own definition of the special quality of mental labor. Even closer to home, it might seem that there's a long way from international free trade agreements to academic working conditions and the salaried mental labor that takes place in institutions of higher education. The premise of this essay is that there's barely a sliver of a gap between them, even though most academics may try to go about the business of their teaching and research without so much as a blink of an eye towards GATS or CAFTA, or NAFTA. Indeed, higher education's exceptionalism has been built on the principle that the disinterested production and dissemination of knowledge should be free from narrow economic and political interests. That's one version of the autonomy supposedly granted to some forms of mental labor.

Of course, times have changed under the rules of academic capitalism in a digital age (see especially Bousquet, Slaughter and Leslie, Washburn, Williams). Today, in what Jeffrey Williams appropriately calls the "post-welfare university," higher education is a powerful social engine for ensuring continued economic inequality, especially when the two-tiered class structure of tenured vs. part-time/temporary has become an accepted way of life in academia.⁶ In some instances, the adoption of the neoliberal agenda by higher education has been quite direct. If David Harvey is correct, we find that in the last 25 years, economics departments in universities have been deliberately retooled to school economists in neoliberal, transnational capitalism drawing primarily on the work of Milton Friedman, ending most of the previous Keynesian scholars advocating fiscal and government regulation and social controls of various kinds.⁷

The connections between our specialized disciplinary work and the activities of national and international governing organizations should become part of a general reworking of what it means to be a "mental worker" in and out of academia. To the extent that mental labor was supposed to elevate itself above such crass material economic concerns, the economy now more clearly than ever reveals that it does not really work that way. Indeed, the traditional principles of "disinterested" research even justifies why so many of us academic workers could focus on our disciplinary specialties without ever having to worry, or even to know about, international trade agreements, global politics, and planetary ecology. Those days of academic or epistemological isolationism are now over.⁸

But the struggle for some measures of individual and collective autonomy from direct state and capital control is certainly not over, whether in terms of academic freedom, tenure, job security, fair wages and benefits.⁹ These battles must be fought with an ongoing knowledge and investigation of the links between epistemology and labor, autonomy and economy, immaterial and material labor, rather than a knee-jerk assertion that they represent different orders of being. Indeed, those links vary dramatically in different fields, different disciplines, different departments. Defending some specific places and spaces of relative autonomy while acknowledging the material dependencies on shifting ratios of public and private funding is the job of negotiating more equitable contracts for all workers, in and out of academia.¹⁰ The key task is to link the battles for

relative autonomy to the battles for economic equality, rather than to sever those dimensions.

II: An Historical Sketch of the Two Roots of Autonomy via Mental Labor

In the twenty-first century, the neoliberal version of mental labor no longer corresponds in any meaningful way with older nineteenth century versions of mental labor such as Karl Marx's association of mental labor and science. Likewise, in the new class wars, the division between mental and physical labor no longer describes a central feature of class struggle. White collar workers from adjunct university faculty to digital "net slaves" can be as poorly paid, exploited, and flexible as most kinds of blue collar work. Sorting out some of these differences may be the necessary first step to understanding the multifarious turns of mental labor in the contemporary world. Whereas mental labor might once have been a kind of ideological lynch pin for asserting various kinds of professional autonomy, economic and political circumstances radically inflect any such privileged notion. In simplest terms, the category of mental labor no longer accurately describes any substantive version of autonomy. But before we continue an analysis of present conditions, it may be useful to sketch out the roots of nineteenth century versions of mental labor.

Indeed, it is difficult to understand the current situation without some understanding of the two main, overlapping historical frames involved in the formation of the concept of mental labor. The first is epistemological; the other aesthetic; the first is based on idealized notions of knowledge; the other on idealized notions of art. The first derives from the various Kantian re-workings of Western metaphysical ideals regarding the independence of knowledge as produced by science. The second emerged in its modern form in the early nineteenth century Romantic ideology whereby creative genius, aesthetic imagination, and poetic vision could produce the grounds for an independent cultural domain whose autonomy was based precisely on its claim to transcend the vulgar materialism of the early industrial revolution. Both of these strands can be, and often have been, quite closely intertwined (science is, after all, highly creative; art is immersed in technology); at other times, they can actually be at odds with each other.¹¹

Marx's understanding of the nature of mental labor clearly derives from the epistemological strand. He equated mental labor in a general way with science. As he put it, "The product of mental labor - science - always stands far below its value, because the labor-time necessary to reproduce it has no relation at all to the labor-time required for its original production" (353). What he means is that the scientific investigation and discovery of new knowledge required so much labor time and effort that entrepreneurs in his day had little incentive to fund it because it was not cost-effective. Owners could reproduce and use the fruits of the discovery (say, the discovery of energy resources in petroleum). But, simply put, nineteenth century factories just did not have R&D divisions. In a sense, then, science required funding outside direct capital investment (very unlike today where Pfizer or IBM, for example, may fund more research than most universities).

Thus, in its nineteenth century idealizations, the mental labor of science was supposedly autonomous from direct capital coercion.¹² If science could produce the truth as an empirically verifiable knowledge, the independence of such fact-based truths from capital interests and state control could supply the theoretical resources necessary to break at least some of the exploitive, and powerful, links between capital and labor. Marx's analysis of class struggle was, in his mind, based on an epistemology free of direct capital control to the extent that such an analysis was objectively descriptive of the real material conditions of the subjects of history: class struggle, properly described, would serve as a scientific, thus objective description of social history. Of course, nobody paid him a lot to work out that objective history. Nevertheless, such a free or autonomous version of epistemology would, by implication, have moral and ethical consequences: the truth was a path towards social justice.

The significance of this strand for our purposes here is that it contributed to the formation of the modern university, both in Europe and the United States, (although it was perhaps more modified and adapted to suit practical needs in the era of reconstruction). With the rise of professionalism, and thus the historical origins of the Professional Managerial Class (PMC), a new group of workers claimed significant jurisdictional autonomy for determining value by administering and setting standards for the knowledge produced by the practitioners of the given profession. They institutionalized that power, especially in medicine, law, and the specialized sciences primarily through the creation of the modern disciplines of knowledge that re-structured the liberal arts colleges into departmentalized universities.¹³

The point of such non-proletarianized versions of mental labor was to create gaps, or domains of relative autonomy, between knowledge, on the one hand, and both capital and labor, on the other. The elevated status of mental labor was by these definitions its relative freedom from both crassly material business interests and grossly menial forms of physical labor. The history of the struggle for academic freedom hinges on the degrees of autonomy that faculty could carve out in the battles with university management. As Christopher Newfield explains, this struggle resulted in the system of "divided governance" whereby faculty would maintain control of epistemological decisions and administrators would have control of economic and fiscal decisions, including hiring and firing within the limits tenure allowed. In short, it was a form of mental labor quite by definition at odds with the neoliberal versions of knowledge for profit's sake, freedom for the managers of capital, and insecurity and oppression for the flexible workforce necessary for the "new economy."

I have focused on the epistemological version of mental labor primarily because it has been crucial to the modern university, but the aesthetic version has also played a significant role in marking a cultural zone of relative autonomy. Today, many have claimed that "creativity" is the main engine of capital productivity.¹⁴ The historical roots here can be easily traced to the work of the German and British romantic poets and philosophers, and much of their work was aimed at creating the discourse of aesthetics, a realm that in its imaginative creation of truth and beauty would transcend industrialized Europe's growing poverty, alienation, and demographic dislocation from rural to city.

This aesthetic ideology continues to play a crucial role even in the left's version of a cultural domain free from material modes of production: it lies behind the persistent dream of a realm of creative cultural production which could stand over and against political, economic modes of capital production.

In the texts of Wordsworth, Shelley, Coleridge and others, the romantic ideology called for a re-writing of the neoclassical versions of aesthetic taste and sensibility into an even more ambitious project of individual creative genius that could transcend the social and political contingencies of everyday life to reach universal truths.¹⁵ In its extreme forms, this romantic ideology envisioned an inverse relation between artistic creativity and capital accumulation. Alienation, aloofness, and even poverty represented the artist's justifiable sacrifice to the higher level aesthetic categories of what counted for the sacred, but unfunded and unfundable truths of art that rose above all forms of lucre and crass commercial ventures. The one-of-a-kind uniqueness of a work of art represented its autonomy from mass production as well as its later enormous market value based on its precious, irreplaceable nature.

Of course, not all the romantic poets were poor. When he was twenty-five Wordsworth received a legacy of 900 pounds from Raisley Calvert, and when he was thirty-two he received his inheritance from his uncle's estate which enabled him to live in the Lake District with a lot of free-time and autonomy to write poetry. Indeed, the rustic wanderers outside his house in Grasmere were less wandering around than displaced, jobless peasants on their way to the city to seek subsistence wages. And when the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* sold out, we can safely assume that the larger print run of the Second Edition with a private printer enabled at least a few people to make a little bit of profit (see Woodmansee). But these secondary social contingencies could not strike at the idealized core of creative art, and the growth of the poet's imagination (as he worked this out in the *Prelude*) which could serve as a realm of individual freedom resistant to the oppressive political realities of the day.

In short, there was always the irony, paradox, or double bind (depending on how you viewed it) in the tension between the ideological visions and the historical realities. And these double binds are true for both the epistemological and aesthetic versions of autonomy. On the epistemological score, the claim for objective, universal, autonomous knowledge provided the ideological justification for the formation of the PMC and its position relative to both capital and labor (see Ohmann, *Politics and Selling*). On the aesthetic end, the universal, transcendent truths of great art and literature usually mirrored the particular historical values of the middle class and sustained a view of "high" culture that rose above the "low" culture of the masses. So it was perhaps no accident that irony and paradox themselves became key terms in the work of the New Critics who established the most successful version of a disciplinary field for English and American literature departments.

Let me elaborate a bit on the fate of New Critic's accomplishment within my home disciplines of English studies if only because I think it offers a powerful configuration of how mental labor in the humanities gained disciplinary legitimation by virtue of its very

claims to transcend the merely historical and political domains. One of the remarkable achievements of New Criticism was that it combined both versions of mental labor: the epistemological version was based on the secondary, disciplinary work of the critic who could use the method of ‘close reading’ to produce stable, and relatively objective interpretations of literary texts. Humanists of the New Critical variety had a great advantage over previous literary impressionists of the belles lettres tradition because they could produce a stable body of knowledge in a field defined by the parameters of the literary objects they studied. At the same time, they could claim that the texts themselves embodied the unparaphrasable, transcendent “simulacra of experience” in the “well-wrought urn” (Brooks) or the “verbal icon” (Wimsatt). New Critics could have their mental labor both ways and in the same department. You were no longer forced to concede the “two cultures” distinction whereby the “hard” sciences had their epistemological autonomy and the “soft” humanities had their aesthetic/cultural autonomy. New Critics got both epistemological autonomy (the products of their mental labor were free of economic and political interest in the name of critical objectivity), and aesthetic autonomy (the “elevated,” spiritual work of the creative imagination as a form of elevated mental labor free of the market place).

Perhaps even more importantly, the ideological components of the theory directly impacted the material labor of teaching. The number of published authors at any given time in the profession is, of course, a relatively small minority of faculty members, but especially in the case of the New Critics, their adaptation of both epistemological and aesthetic versions of autonomy carried over perfectly into the daily teaching practices of many faculty. In simple terms, a textbook like Cleanth Brooks’ *Understanding Poetry* granted considerable authority to any teacher whose disciplinary skills and knowledge could lead students towards the determinate meanings of literary texts. A professor could lecture successfully to large classes of returning GIs who had little experience with the mysteries of poetry, and the secondary critical knowledge gained by such methodically precise close reading of literary texts could be accomplished without ever having to interfere with the claims for the spiritual transcendence of poetic experience.¹⁶

The pedagogical gains were accompanied by equally powerful curricular gains. Even in the formative period of the 1940s-60s, there were, of course, other kinds of critical writing besides New Criticism, and no doubt many teachers engaged different kinds of critical assumptions. Nevertheless, the New Critical assumptions enabled the creation of relatively standardized English curricula across the country. Indeed, the New Critics gained great power in the material world of the mid-twentieth century institutions of higher education insofar as they established the English literature curriculum based first on the separation of reading from writing (literature from composition), and the organization of the literary field into clearly defined periods and genres. It was a good bargain with the devil because much of their curricular accomplishments persist to this day. Trouble is, neither the epistemological nor the aesthetic versions of mental labor correspond in any meaningful way with what’s actually happening in the Educational Management Organization (EMO, Bousquet), the “post-welfare university,” and the vast reaches of the neoliberal economy in general. Both versions need to be deeply reworked, and in order to do that I will briefly turn to some of the most promising work done on

reconfiguring the relations between mental labor and autonomy that took place in Italy thirty to forty years ago, although it is still being carried on today, even though the 1980s wave of neoliberalism suppressed most labor movements and social movements.¹⁷

III: Autonomy by the Autonomists: Working with the Weightless and the Immaterial

Of the many labor movements in the twentieth century, certainly one of the most instructive has to be the work of the Italian autonomists of the 1960s and 70s. Nowhere was the empowerment of social collectivities against the dictates of both the state and capital worked out in such an effective integration of theory and practice. The *Autonomia*, as it was called, also provides a good historical model of a movement that brought together students, workers, women's groups, environmentalists, radical youths, labor leaders, and media figures, all of whom created in different but related circumstances a range of relatively "autonomous" collectives. Despite each groups' concern for specific forms of recognition and rights (gender, race, ethnicity, etc.), what they all shared was a belief in the injustice of economic inequality, the workers' right to refuse to work, and the need to contest the conditions of their employment. Yet many of these social collectives would be simply invisible in the terms of traditional class analyses if only because changing economic conditions have involved a redefinition of social class. They will also be invisible if we look to identify them in either of the two traditional versions of mental labor I outlined above, mainly because autonomy and social commitment to particular social and political goals merge rather than separate into different realms. There was no fundamental division between the civic and the political as there often has been in much of the cultural left in the US and the UK.

The Italian autonomists created "new democratic forms of social organization and political action in horizontal, nonhierarchical networks" (Hardt 2.3). Nothing quite like this appeared in America, even as the Women's Movement, Civil Rights, SDS, the Weathermen, the New American Movement, Greenpeace, the New Left, and the Labor Movement all played important roles in social activism. The fragmentation and divergences in tactical, organizational, and theoretical differences in America were less successfully integrated and mobilized than the *Autonomia*. For instance, in the US student versions of autonomy often meant freedom from the repressive establishment, liberation from a tyrannous state government (a freedom that perhaps too often played into neoliberal aims of trusting the market by freeing trade from big government regulations). Some segments of the counter-culture were more interested in liberating drug use such as marijuana from restrictive state regulations. It was sometimes difficult to avoid tensions. On the one hand, the core labor movement of the Old Left sought more government regulation of capital, more legitimation of workers' rights, more socialized protections; on the other hand, the New Left's focus on social movements, identity politics, and cultural recognition sought freedom from unfair state legislation and institutionalized prejudice. In short, autonomy in terms of redistribution of wealth sometimes did not match up very well with autonomy in terms of cultural recognition for minorities (see Fraser). The *Autonomia* did a better job of integrating these differences, and that is the lesson I wish to draw from in considering the misfortunes of mental labor.

The work of autonomists such as Maurizio Lazzarato, Paolo Virno, Franco Piperno, Antonio Negri, and others remains indispensable to the tasks of rethinking the problems of mental or immaterial labor. First, their notion of “immaterial labor” is not a synonym for mental labor, even though there are clear resemblances and crossovers. The basic difference is that, whereas mental labor supposedly designated a realm independent of capital, immaterial labor is a notion intending to describe particular features of the way “mental” labor has been inserted into the regimes of capital production. For this purpose, Lazzarato and his colleagues have drawn on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and others of the Leningrad circle who first began to develop such a theory of “aesthetic production” and “a theory of the social cycle of immaterial production” (146). The fruitfulness of this conjunction, as I see it, was an attempt to integrate and transform the two historical versions of the autonomy of mental labor, both the aesthetic and the epistemological, into a new theory of the social and economic function of modern working conditions.

In the information economy and the knowledge industry, even the idealized versions of mental labor no longer correspond in any meaningful way with work independent of capital interests since much of it is the very backbone of the neoliberal market economy. Lazzarato’s notion of immaterial labor addresses exactly this transformation of knowledge and aesthetics. Indeed, for Lazzarato, the concept of immaterial labor refers to the altering of the workplace when multimedia communication and digitized information creates new power relations in the organization of work.

As Lazzarato defines it, there are two dimensions of immaterial labor, and, interestingly, these correspond roughly to the two older versions of mental labor I described in the previous section, although each has been modified to fit the new circumstances of the information economy. The epistemological version of mental labor now supplies the technical expertise in cybernetics, semi-conductors, and computer skills; the aesthetic version of mental labor serves capital accumulation through the necessary forms of innovation and creativity required to produce marketable new tastes, fashions, markets, and artistic standards. But both the technical and the aesthetic now provide the primary resources for neoliberal, “free market” capitalism. Let’s look at each a bit more closely.

The cybernetic, computer, and technological skills are an offshoot of the epistemological version of mental labor, only now the borders between “pure” (autonomous) science (Marx’s view of mental labor) and “applied” (commercialized) technology can no longer be drawn with any precision. The direct labor involved in producing various forms of “weightless” electronic information now occurs at most all levels of capital production and requires specialized technical skills. Scientific forms of mental labor are thus integrated into the core of corporate productivity ranging from industrial manufacture to commodity sales, marketing, and distribution (in which consumption dictates the shape of production, rather than the reverse as in Fordist models of mass production).¹⁸

The second category of immaterial labor deserves special attention because the activities referred to here relate more directly to the traditional “high level” aesthetic values except they are now mass marketed across all geographical and political borders in the creation

of taste, fashion, public opinion, artistic standards or what Lazzarato calls “mass intellectuality.” (133). The old categories of mental and physical labor just will not hold, but as he also admits, even the distinctions between “material labor and immaterial labor,” risks failing to grasp the new nature of productive activity” (133). This admission is a good qualification because “immaterial” really refers to two dimensions: the weightless, immaterial products of digital production, and the internalized subjectivities required of information workers whereby cooperation with peers in and between office cubicles is matched by cooperation with management prerogatives and directives regarding wage, hiring, and funding decisions.

Consequently, with respect to the second dimension of immaterial labor, we have a potential management problem. In the digital world, productivity depends not on repetition but innovation, creativity, transformation.¹⁹ So you need regulated autonomy (oxymoron intended). This corporate circumstance requires the creation of worker subjectivities suitable for cooperation and creativity, yet still limited by the regimes of production determined by management. According to Lazzarato, under these circumstances the specifically “immaterial” dimension of the new labor force refers to internalized identities, the formation of subjectivities that participate in cooperative innovation, rather than material labor, at, say, attaching a bolt to a fender on an assembly line.²⁰

Many kinds of contemporary information workers must have considerable degrees of freedom for learning and innovation. But such degrees of relative autonomy can lead to some troubling criticism of management decisions. That is, the direct control of the shop floor by a foreman who can directly oversee how the worker assembles the fender is useless when employees are working on immaterial, multimedia products that are often difficult to see let alone discipline. The freedom/constraint ratios must be internalized, made immaterial in the subjectivities of the employees. It’s as if Althusser’s version of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) had turned into the Ideological Corporate Apparatus (ICA): in the shift from loyalty to nation-states to fealty to corporate branding, private capital in the information economy requires the interpellation and hailing of active subjectivities whose creative inventions still fit within the regimes of production.

Productivity is thus much more dependent on a double bind internal to the workplace: on the one hand, management not only recognizes that workers must have a degree of freedom and autonomy to make decisions, which requires a redistribution of authority quite unlike the old physical labor factory foreman who could directly reprimand poor performance. How else can you get an attractive web site designed and implemented? But, on the other hand, there is even more need to organize management decisions around rapidly shifting economic market forces.

IV: Immaterial Labor’s Insecurity as Managerial Leverage

How does management achieve these double but seemingly contradictory goals?²¹ The answer I draw from the autonomists is relatively simple: job insecurity is not a liability to corporate production but a crucial re-enforcer of management ability to integrate

innovation and control. The mental or immaterial laborer must by necessity become an entrepreneur, selling his/her goods to the marketplace. In Lazzarato's terms, the new intellectual workers become, "polymorphous self-employed autonomous" individuals each of whom must competitively present themselves as entrepreneurs "inserted within a market that is constantly shifting and within networks that are changeable in time and space" (139). In principle, such hyper-individualism militates against solidarity in the workforce. This vast array of vulnerable, individual entrepreneurs (in contrast to powerful corporate entrepreneurship) all confront the material liability of working to insure their temporary employment contracts by meeting various, and often quite different, managerial needs and objectives.²²

The power of controlling subjectivity by management thus emerges from precariousness itself which now works in their favor because it gives them power over an increasingly insecure and hyper-exploited work force.²³ As Tiziana Terranova explains, under these conditions, management has sought "a mode of control that does not require an absolute and total knowledge of all the state of each single component of the system or a rigid specification that rules behavior exactly and sequentially" (119) as it did on the shop floor. She calls this the model of "soft control." Nevertheless, these soft controls can still yield some pretty hard consequences: no matter how much your knowledge that the company you work for is directly exploiting workers in other countries on the basis of the many "free trade" agreements that legitimate various maquiladora enterprises, your subjectivity must be one where you keep such moral qualms to yourself if you want to keep your job.

Moreover, in this new economy, performing labor for the production of weightless or immaterial products is no guarantee of decent wages.²⁴ The transformation in labor means that insecurity and low wages do not just correspond to physical labor: economic inequality and job insecurity provide powerful forms of coercion for many immaterial laborers. Since vulnerability increases management control of the immaterial labor workforce, and since immateriality now extends both deeply inside and vastly outside higher education, the main hope of resistance (and relative autonomy) is to develop entirely new lines of solidarity.

There are two main ways to think about collectively working to alter these circumstances. The first strategic answer is to develop worker solidarity across fields united by job insecurity and economic inequality. The old division between secure mental labor versus insecure physical labor is meaningless and non-descriptive. Entirely new lines of solidarity can be located in coalitions among all kinds of low paid, temporary, contingent, flex workers some of whom produce "weightless" products, some of whom produce services such as secretarial work, and some of whom produce the heavy material of traditional industries.²⁵ Of course, it is not quite as easy as saying "SEIU, AFSCME, AAUP unite!" (although that might not be such a bad idea). Nevertheless, we would be well-advised to see that the forthcoming World Universities Forum in Davos, Switzerland (January, 2008) can be linked not only to the World Economic Forum but also to the more sweeping goals of the World Social Forum, the Free Higher Education movement, Workplace, Global Exchange, and many other social activist groups working towards

more economic and social equity in the world.²⁶ The immaterial, digital network here provides access to lines of very material kinds of social solidarity which have begun to arise around the world in opposition to the current financial order.

Although many of the differences in the new workplace can no longer be described in terms of mental vs. physical labor, the multiple new (and old) types of labor get segmented in very real material and social coordinates that can be described according to the degree of stability granted on the basis of wage, benefits, and hours on the job. As Tiziana Terranova argues, the key distinctions in the digital workforce with its amplification of the “immateriality of information” also register in the unequal distribution of the physical substructure of the digital network around the globe. The seemingly immaterial communication network is sustained by a “concrete assemblage of technical machines, the DNS servers, which are arranged in a hierarchical structure. Thirteen root servers, ten of which are currently located in the USA, two in Europe and one in Asia” (44). Besides geographical location, the segmented and hierarchical workforce includes a huge range of both paid and unpaid labor, as well as a widely different kind and quality of remuneration for different kinds of work. The networks and flows of the new economy may sound so positive and freeing in the ears of the wealthy, but the mobility of the super-rich globe trotters is of a very different order from the mobility of, say, the “freeway flyers,” flex workers, cheap teachers running between their part-time gigs to make a living.

In the university, this means that the traditional tasks of creating and maintaining zones of epistemological and pedagogical autonomy from the market must be carefully re-worked.²⁷ Such domains of contestable academic freedom are not just an intellectual matter but a material task of insuring job security: there is no autonomy for over-worked, underpaid, temporary teachers. Cheap teachers and cheap factory workers share considerable interests and needs for socialized protections from the reaches of private capital. The twentieth-century models of “divided governance” in which epistemological and aesthetic autonomy could be granted to faculty while financial power would be given exclusively to administrators no longer works very well. The idealized mythologies clearly seem helpless before the rush of market forces that gives all power to management. Tenure, academic freedom, and job security in higher education are all part of the larger struggles of exploited workers across a much broader spectrum of labor fields and economic inequalities than those just within the academy. In this re-description of the fate of immaterial labor, the old epistemological and aesthetic versions of autonomous mental labor can no longer sustain university labor as either transcendent of, or in ignorance of, the GATS/CAFTA/NAFTA agreements that organize the flow of capital and the exploitation of workers around the globe.

The second strategic answer will seem to turn things around (and that is the point). Rather than a liability, it is a potentially good thing that epistemology and aesthetics, knowledge and art, technical skills and creativity now find themselves at the heart of capitalist production.²⁸ In principle, that is, the vast new array of immaterial laborers keeps open the possibilities of linking knowledge and creativity to the political imagination for envisioning alternatives to the current regimes of economic inequality.

The autonomists have not missed this feature of the new workforce in the moral predicament of most immaterial laborers. To a larger degree than ever before, since immaterial labor, creativity, and innovation now propel capital development, such workers can exercise relative degrees of control over the production of wealth for more widely social purposes: wealth can thereby be redistributed towards equality rather than towards inequality. Recall that in nineteenth century versions of wage slavery, worker oppression was re-enforced through the prevention of workers from gaining an education, and thus participating in the production of knowledge and art. However unevenly distributed, an educated workforce is a reality in many parts of the world.

In concrete terms, this means that in thinking about new lines of solidarity in our networked cultures, the social values of relative autonomy, independence, creativity, and social justice can be integrated and coordinated, rather than fragmented and disorganized. Working for job security, livable wages, environmental sustainability, socialized education and health care all call for a lot of creative work. Those like myself who enjoy tenure and decent wages have a social obligation to materially support those movements and coalitions. If we don't, no matter how creative our work, we're just contributing to the very problems we may be trying to escape. A highly literate and creative workforce is always open to shared insights about economic injustice even if the owners of capital would prefer that we just fulfill our contracts in their terms.

But we have also reached a stage where the super rich themselves are realizing that the neoliberal program of free markets, privatization, and deregulation is reaching crisis proportions. The United States bears enormous responsibility for precipitating these crises from its failure to sign the Kyoto agreements, its refusal to support the World Millenium Development Goals, its efforts to unilaterally control international finance through its hegemony in the WTO, IMF, World Bank nexus, its utter failure to address world-wide poverty, and its increasing authoritarianism and militarism around the world. But one consequence of these failures is that even many of the leaders of the neoliberal movement are now beginning to sound more like neo-Keynsians (to flip the neo around) calling for institutional regulations that might in fact somewhat curb the current array of exploitive international trade agreements and re-write them to serve more public and democratic forms of social justice.

Consider, for example, one of the ways for redressing the disturbing maldistribution of global wealth proposed by the celebrated economist, Jeffrey Sachs, who in the 1990s was seen by some as the neoliberal savior of the economies of Bolivia, Poland, and elsewhere. As the current Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University and as a founder of the Millennium Development Goals, he is now regarded by many as one of the most publicly influential academics in the world. In his controversial 2005 best-selling book, *The End of Poverty*, he estimates that it would only take about \$150 billion dollars a year over a twenty-year period to eliminate all forms of extreme poverty from the face of the earth.²⁹ I don't know whether this is true or not. But what if it is? That amount is about one third of the current US Defense Department annual budget. Of course, there are innumerable ways to raise such a relatively trivial amount of money. For instance, according to Merrill Lynch's 2006 survey, the 9.6 million people in the world who own

more than 1 million dollars in assets also collectively own roughly 37.2 trillion dollars of material assets. If that is even approximately true, it would only take less than one half of one percent of annual interest on those assets (all owned by less than one half of one percent of the total world population) to end starvation in the world in relatively short order.³⁰ Or, in Sachs' own calculations, it would only take 0.7% of the GNP of the industrialized nations of the world to supply this investment (the US currently directs only 0.16% to global economic development).

Now, even to put such ideas into circulation hardly means that I expect them to happen (Sachs does). It does, however, register as one of many provocative ideas that need to be circulated widely, and that is an educational task for many immaterial laborers. Such tasks have very material consequences: "Whether at the level of individuals or nations, the 'immaterial' rests on very real structures, such as education systems and laboratories, not to mention banks and firms" (Bourdieu 33). For some (myself included) it might at first come as shocking how minor (and how reasonable!) the problem of the redistribution of wealth might actually be in material terms, but I also have historical reasons for doubting that any such changes will happen without a much broader base of support. Sachs' proposal depends an awful lot on a top-down management approach to social problems, and history tells us that we should not rely on the benevolence of the rich to solve the problems of economic injustice. Indeed, as Harvey explains, members of the elite classes have generally preferred to "crash the system," (rather than give up some of their money and redistribute wealth towards the economically disenfranchised), and then buy up the left-over devalued assets at rock bottom prices. Sachs' proposals as outlined in the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)³¹ will also require bottom-up or populist forms of social solidarity from workers and the dispossessed that have almost always been the real source of social change for a more just world governed by political democracies. And for that to happen we need systemic changes through democratically sustained regulations to protect public interests in crucial social service areas in many areas of the world—no handouts from the rich will accomplish those tasks alone. And it has been far too easy for nations to sign up for the MDGs as a principle and then behave in contradictory ways.

The real problems, of course, are not simple dollar amounts regarding poverty but systemic, institutional, economic organizations and trade agreements that fail to meet basic human entitlements for water, food, shelter, health care, and education. These problems call for concerted collective theorizing, research, and action. For this to happen we must "construct meaningful mechanisms of social solidarity" (Harvey 171). Higher education in the United States has a crucial role in exactly those tasks, but it needs to start at home since the transformation of a 1975 75%/25% ratio of tenure/tenure track to temporary faculty into an inversely configured 2005 25%/75% ratio has not supported the creativity and innovation that so many have been championing. Indeed, the knowledge and creativity we produce in the precincts of higher education circulates with, in, beside, and sometimes against the net of global trade agreements whose "freedoms" often function to conceal such knowledge from many citizens of the world. In other words, instead of the false dichotomy between a "disinterested" scholarship of mental labor and a committed social activism of physical labor, we must, as Pierre Bourdieu puts it,

“invent a new relationship between researchers and social movements” (14).³² Perhaps then the fields of science, art, literature, politics and history could be more vigorous forms of inquiry into basic human interests for taking intelligent social action in the world.

Part of the educational goal of creating an international, critical cosmopolitanism (such as advocated by Kwame Anthony Appiah) is to directly combat the opposition: narrowly provincial, ethnocentric, uneducated fundamentalism based on prejudice, ignorance, and fear that now thrives in and beyond the United States. It’s certainly not easy in these times, but many progressive educators continue to work to make education and the work of immaterial labor a collective task of producing knowledge, art, creativity, innovation, and technical skills that address and contest the fundamental problems of human suffering and economic inequality. Now that’s an academic workplace worth fighting for.

Notes

1 According to Global Exchange, “CAFTA . . . would devastate farmers, privatize essential public services, and accelerate the race to the bottom on wages in the US and all over Central America” (para. 1).

2 For instance, the false promises of the NAFTA agreement of 1994 have indeed been exposed as lies: rather than promote US jobs and improved Mexican economy exactly the reverse has happened. Without going into too many of the details that could be mounted in support of this contention, Global Exchange describes “the massive failure of NAFTA, the agreement that cost a million US jobs and increased poverty in Mexico. NAFTA also caused the loss of 38,000 US family farms, while pushing 1.5 million Mexican farmers off their land.” And as David Harvey explains, “almost all global indicators on health levels, life expectancy, infant mortality, and the like show losses rather than gains in well-being since the 1960s” (154).

3 Two main indices can be cited: the ratio of average CEO salaries to average worker salaries is now more than 400-1, about the same as in 1928. Most of the European social democracies have maintained CEO-worker ratios of about 40-1, just about what it was in the US in 1975 (See Fantasia and Voss 16). Secondly, the difference in top 10% and bottom 10% ownership of resources is about the same in 2005 as it was in 1928. (See Harvey 188.)

4 According to Hammonds: “In 1993, Bentley sold 993 cars to its well-heeled customers. But by 2006, the company sold 9,386 automobiles, an increase approaching 1,000 percent — a story not matched by any auto company anywhere, luxury or otherwise” (para. 2).

5 As Harvey explains, “Commodification presumes the existence of property rights over processes, things, and social relations, that a price can be put on them, and that they can be traded subject to legal contract. The market is presumed to work as an appropriate guide—an ethic—for all human action” (165). He quotes Karl Polanyi’s remark that “To

allow the market mechanisms to be sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment, indeed, even of the amount and use of purchasing power, would result in the demolition of society” (167).

6 We are really much closer to the situation Walter Benn Michaels describes where “American universities are propaganda machines that might as well have been designed to ensure that the class structure of American society remains unchallenged” (17). See also Bousquet, Berry, Williams.

7 In Harvey’s words: “by 1990 or so most economics departments in the major research universities as well as the business schools were dominated by neoliberal modes of thought” (54).

8 A significant qualification is in order here. Higher education’s exceptionalism was always a myth to the extent that academic disciplines were closely tied to professional and business interests outside the academy (see Barrow; Larson). And as Richard Ohmann so eloquently documents in *Selling Culture*, the advertising-business matrix was enormously influential in the late nineteenth century. In short, these kinds of mental labor were deeply part of capitalism during this period.

9 In this regard, see especially the AAUP’s new movement and statement on academic freedom that was recently circulated to more than 350,000 mental workers globally.

10 In *The Knowledge Contract*, I address the problems of contracts in higher education more fully.

11 Andrew Ross addresses many of these issues in “The Problem of Mental Labor.”

12 Bruno Latour’s critique of the “myth of the modern” is based on the modern attempt to separate Nature from Society, as he puts it: “the modern Constitution invents a separation between the scientific power charged with representing things and the political power charged with representing subjects” (29).

13 The stories of the rise of the disciplines, the professions, and the university have been well-described elsewhere. See, for example, Larson, Bledstein, Ohmann, Veysey, Barrows.

14 See especially Richard Florida’s *The Rise of the Creative Class*.

15 Ross describes this process: “The noble ethos of the unattached artist was conceived in the struggle to break free from aristocratic patronage and was clearly compromised by the simultaneous emergence of a mass commercial audience from the womb of the bourgeois public. Most fatefully, from the perspective of the artist wage, this ethos was soaked in the full torrent of Romantic thought about the separation of art and culture from the commodity production of industrialization” (14). Ross’s essay provides a good overview of “The Problem of Mental Labor.”

16 I thank Jeff Williams for pointing out to me the significance of the qualifications and differences between the minority of published scholars and the majority of teaching instructors in higher education.

17 What stands out in the global scale of things is the almost simultaneous collapse of all these movements right around 1980. In Italy, the symbolic turning point was the defeat of the worker's movement at the Fiat plant in Turin. But as David Harvey has pointed out, the years 1978-80 represent a revolutionary turning point in world history in the international turn to neoliberalism. Harvey points out the rise to power of Deng Xiaoping in China (1978), in 1979 Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister in the UK and Paul Volcker was appointed head of the US Federal Reserve, and in 1980 Reagan was elected President of the US. I would also add, especially for higher education, the 1980 Bayh-Dole Act that gave universities patent rights, and the 1980 Yeshiva Decision that claimed private university faculty could not strike because they were actually "managers" rather than workers. As an historical marker, one could arguably say the beginning of the 1980s really marks the point where the two historical definitions I described above for mental labor really no longer serve a descriptive purpose for understanding the changing conditions of what Lazzarato calls "immaterial labor."

18 As Lazzarato puts it, "business is focused on the terrain outside of the production process: sales and the relationship with the consumer" (140), which is another way of saying that this is a measure of how consumption drives production, rather than vice versa.

19 Richard Florida's influential study, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, clearly takes as its central concern this historically exceptional rise of creativity and independent work at the heart of capitalist production. His central claim is that 30% of the new work force fit this "creative" description, and that this group now represents a class. Florida puzzles over this "great paradox": how could it possibly be that "the members of the Creative Class do not seem themselves as a class—a coherent group of people with common traits and concerns" (xi). His paradox, it seems to me, stems from his over-generalization and incomplete recognition that there are ideologically competing interests in this class, and, more importantly, enormous differences in income and wealth, so the group itself does not fit the economic coordinates of a class despite his graphs to the contrary.

20 Lazzarato elaborates: "The management mandate to 'become subjects of communication' threatens to be even more totalitarian than the earlier rigid division between mental and manual labor (ideas and execution), because capitalism seeks to involve even the worker's personality and subjectivity within the production of value. Capital wants a situation where command resides within the subject him- or herself, and within the communicative process" (135).

21 I have for purposes of this essay, focused on the double bind at the level of management, but it is, I believe, reflective of the larger contradictions in the global economy such as David Harvey describes between neoliberal openness, deregulated

capital, on the one hand, and neoconservative authoritarianism and militarism, on the other; or as Paul Smith describes the central dialectic of American culture as that between “hot” progressive, innovative, energetic expansion and cold, “primitive” fundamental authoritarianism, anti-intellectualism, and ignorance.

22 As Lazzarato puts it, workers must compete in a world where “Precariousness, hyperexploitation, mobility, and hierarchy are the most obvious characteristics of metropolitan immaterial labor” (136).

23 As Bourdieu explains: “Thus has come into being an economic regime that is inseparable from a political regime, a mode of production that entails a mode of domination based on the institution of insecurity, domination through precariousness: a deregulated financial market fosters a deregulated labor market and thereby the casualization of labor that cows workers into submission” (29).

24 This is the main point that Florida glosses: he gets around the wage problem by what I see as a highly dubious (and condescending) distinction between the “creative class” and the “super creative class.” That the “super” class has enormously more money is the point; not that they are somehow more creative. Florida’s focus on the type of work rather than the wage differentials tends to mask the fact that “creative workers” from opposite ends of the economic spectrum can be in a class war against each other’s interests, to the extent that poorly paid “creative workers” share more class solidarity with working and serving classes than with the super rich.

25 See Dan Clawson’s *The Next Upsurge* for an articulate view of the possibilities of linking new forms of labor unionism across a wide spectrum of workplaces with social movements for social and economic justice.

26 See, for example, Tom Mertes’ new collection, *A Movement of Movements*, and the collaboratively produced, *We Are Everywhere*, edited by Notes from Nowhere.

27 Along these lines, see the AAUP’s new statement, “Academic Freedom in the Classroom,” which was recently distributed globally to more than 350,000 mental workers.

28 This part of my argument is clearly closest to Florida’s valuation of the creative, independent worker.

29 Kwame Anthony Appiah also cites Sachs in his recent book, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. Appiah comments that: “Faced with impossible demands, we are likely to throw up our hands in horror. But the obligations we have are not monstrous or unreasonable” (173), at least if Sach’s figures are even approximately true.

30 Hammond uncovered this data: “The number of people with more than \$1 million in assets rose 8.3 percent to 9.5 million in 2006, according to Merrill Lynch and Cap

Gemini's annual survey of world wealth. Collectively, these people own \$37.2 trillion in assets” (para. 3).

31 These consist of 8 primary goals in the areas of extreme poverty, universal primary education, promote gender equality, reduce child/infant mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensure environmental stability, and develop a global partnership for development. The last goal relates most directly to the international trade agreements that I have highlighted in this essay, and the stated purpose is to: “Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, nondiscriminatory trading and financial system (includes a commitment to good governance, development, and poverty reduction both nationally and internationally)” (see Millennium Project). For it to be open and nondiscriminatory would of course mean respect for democratic governing bodies and procedures, and therefore such forms of cooperation and agreement would, in principle, be much different than the ones we now have.

32 As Bourdieu elaborates: “And we must work to design new forms of organization capable of bringing together researchers and activists in a collective work of critique and proposition, leading to novel forms of mobilization and action” (14).

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