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Notes on the edu-factory and Cognitive Capitalism

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In the framework of the "edu–factory" discussion we want to share some reflections on two concepts that have been central to the debate: the edu–factory and cognitive capitalism. We agree with the key point of the "edu–factory" discussion prospectus: As was the factory, so now is the university. Where once the factory was a paradigmatic site of struggle between workers and capitalists, so now the university is a key space of conflict, where the ownership of knowledge, the reproduction of the labour force, and the creation of social and cultural stratifications are all at stake. This is to say the university is not just another institution subject to sovereign and governmental controls, but a crucial site in which wider social struggles are won and lost.

CAFA's support for the struggles in African universities followed from the same analysis and logic. Universities are important places of class struggle, and not only in Europe and North America. We insisted on this point against the critics of the post–colonial university, who looked down on any effort to defend educational systems that they saw as modeled on colonial education. We argued that university struggles in Africa express a refusal to let international capital:

_decide the conditions of work;
_appropriate the wealth invested in these institution which people have paid for.
_suppress the democratization and politicization of education that on African campuses had grown through the 1980s and 1990s.

More generally, in the same way as we would oppose the shutting down of factories where workers have struggled to control work and wages— especially if these workers were determined to fight against the closure— so we agree that we should resist the dismantling of public education, even though schools are also instruments of class rule and alienation. This is a contradiction that we cannot wish away and is present in all our struggles. Whether we are struggling around education, health, housing, etc., it is illusory to think that we can place ourselves outside of capitalist relations whenever we wish and from there build a new society. As students' movements across the planet have shown, universities are not just nurseries for the leaders of a neo–liberal elite, they are also a terrain for debate, contestation of institutional politics, re–appropriation of resources.

It is through these debates, struggles and re–appropriations, and by connecting the struggles in the campuses to the struggles in other parts of the social factory, that we create alternative forms of education and alternative educational practices. In Italy, for instance, with the contract of 1974, metal–mechanic workers were able to win 150 hours of paid study leave per year in which, together with teachers, mostly from the student movement, they organized curricula that analyzed the capitalist organization of work, also in their own workplaces. In the US, since the 1960s, the campuses have been among the centers of the anti–war movement, producing a wealth of analysis about the military–industrial complex and the role of the universities in its functioning and

expansion. In Africa, the university campuses were centers of resistance to structural adjustment and analysis of its implications. This is certainly one of the reasons why the World Bank was so eager to dismantle them.

The struggle in the edu–factory is especially important today because of the strategic role of knowledge in the production system in a context in which the "enclosure" of knowledge (its privatization, commodification, expropriation through the intellectual property regimes) is a pillar of economic restructuring.

We are concerned, however, that we do not overestimate this importance, and/or use the concept of the edu–factory to set up new hierarchies with respect to labor and forms of capitalist accumulation.

This concern arises from our reading of the use that is made of the concept of "cognitive capitalism" in the work of some Italian autonomists. True, we need to identify the leading forms of capitalist accumulation in all its different phases, and recognize their "tendency" to hegemonize (though not to homogenize) other forms of capitalist production. But we should not dismiss the critiques of Marxian theory developed by the anti–colonial movement and the feminist movement, which have shown that capitalist accumulation has thrived precisely through its capacity to simultaneously organize development and underdevelopment, waged and un–waged labor, production at the highest levels of technological know–how and production at the lowest levels. In other words, we should not dismiss the argument that it is precisely through these disparities, the divisions built in the working class through them, and the capacity to transfer wealth/surplus from one pole to the other that capitalist accumulation has expanded in the face of so much struggle.

There are many issues involved that we can only touch upon in these notes. We want, above all, to concentrate here on the political implications of the use of the notion of "cognitive capitalism". But here are a few points for discussion.

First, the history of capitalism should demonstrate that the capitalist subsumption of all forms of production does not require the extension of the level of science and technology achieved at any particular point of capitalist development to all workers contributing to the accumulation process. It is now acknowledged, for instance, that the plantation system was organized along capitalist lines; in fact, it was a model for the factory. However, the cotton picking plantation slaves in the US South of the 1850s were not working at the level of technological know–how available to workers in the textile mills of the US North of the time, though their product was a lifeline for these same mills.

Does that mean that the Southern slaves were industrial workers or, vice versa, the Northern wageworkers were plantation workers? Similarly, to this day, capitalism has not mechanized housework despite the fact that the unpaid domestic work of women has been a key source of accumulation for capital. Again, why at the peak of an era of "cognitive capitalism" do we witness an expansion of labor in slave–like conditions, at the lowest level of technological know–how–child labor, labor in sweatshops, labor in the new agricultural plantations and mining fields of Latin America, Africa etc.? Can we say that workers in these conditions are “cognitive workers”? Are they and their struggles irrelevant to and/or outside the circuit of capitalist accumulation? Why has wage labor, once considered the defining form of capitalist work, still not been extended even to the majority of workers in capitalist society?

This example and these questions suggest that work can be organized for capitalist accumulation and along capitalist lines without the laborer working at the average level of technological/scientific knowledge applied in the highest points of capitalist production. They also suggest that the logic of capitalism can only be grasped by looking at the totality of its relations, and not only to the highest point of its scientific/technological achievement. Capitalism has systematically and strategically produced disparities through the international and sexual/racial division of labor and through the "underdevelopment" of particular sectors of its production, and these disparities have not been erased, but in fact have been deepened by the increasing integration of science and technology in the production process. For instance, in the era of cognitive labor, the majority of Africans do not have access to the internet or for that matter even the telephone; even the miniscule minority who does, has access to it only for limited periods of time, because of the intermittent availability of electricity.

Similarly, illiteracy, especially among women, has grown exponentially from the 1970s to present. In other words, a leap forward for many workers, has been accompanied by a leap backward by many others, who are now even more excluded from the “global discourse,” and certainly not in the position to participate in global cooperation networks based upon the internet.

Second and most important are the political implications of an use of "cognitive capitalism" and "cognitive labor" that overshadows the continuing importance of other forms of work as contributors to the accumulation process.

There is the danger that by privileging one kind of capital (and therefore one kind of worker) as being the most productive, the most advanced, the most exemplary of the contemporary paradigm,

etc., we create a new hierarchy of struggle, and we engage in a form of activism that precludes a re–composition of the working class. Another danger is that we fail to anticipate the strategic moves by which capitalism can restructure the accumulation process by taking advantage of the inequalities within the global workforce. How the last globalization drive was achieved is exemplary in this case.

Concerning the danger of confirming in our activism the hierarchies of labor created by the extension of capitalist relations, there is much we can learn from the past. As the history of class struggle demonstrates, privileging one sector of the working class over the others is the surest road to defeat. Undoubtedly, certain types of workers have played a crucial role in certain historical phases of capitalist development. But the working class has paid a very high price to a revolutionary logic that established hierarchies of revolutionary subjects, patterned on the hierarchies of the capitalist organization of work.

Marxist/socialist activists in Europe lost sight of the revolutionary power of the world's "peasantry." More than that, peasant movements have been destroyed (see the case of the ELAS in Greece) by communists who considered only the factory worker as organizable and "truly revolutionary." Socialists/marxists also lost sight of the immense (house) work that was being done to produce and reproduce industrial workers. The huge "iceberg" of labor in capitalism (to use Maria Mies' metaphor) was made invisible by the tendency to look at the tip of the iceberg, industrial labor, while the labor involved in the reproduction of labor–power went unseen, with the result that the feminist movement was often fought against and seen as something outside the class struggle.

Ironically, under the regime of industrial capitalism and factory work, it was the peasant movements of Mexico, China, Cuba, Vietnam, and to a great extent Russia who made the revolutions of the 20th century. In the 1960s as well, the impetus for change at the global level came from the anti–colonial struggle, including the struggle against apartheid and for Black Power in the United States. Today, it is the indigenous people, the campesino, the unemployed of Mexico (Chiapas, Oaxaca), Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, Venezuela, the farmers of India, the maquila workers of the US border, the immigrant workers of the US, etc. who are conducting the most "advanced" struggles against the global extension of capitalist relations.

Let us be very clear. We make these points not to minimize the importance of the struggles in the edu–factory and the ways in which the internet has led to the creation of new kinds of commons that are crucial to our struggle, but because we fear we may repeat mistakes that may ultimately isolate those who work and struggle in these networks. From this viewpoint, we think that “the no–global” movement (for all its difficulties) was a step forward in its capacity to articulate demands and forms of activism that projected the struggle in a global way, creating a new type of internationalism, one bringing together computer programmers, artists, and other edu–workers in one movement, each making its distinctive contribution.

For this political "re–composition" to become possible, however, we need to see the continuity of our struggle through the difference of our places in the international division of labor, and to articulate our demands and strategies in accordance to these differences and the need to overcome them. Assuming that a re–composition of the workforce is already occurring because work is becoming homogenized— through a process that some have

defined as the "becoming common of labor"— will not do. We cannot cast the “cognitive” net so widely that almost every kind of work becomes “cognitive” labor, short of making arbitrary social equations and obfuscating our understanding of what is new about "cognitive labor" in the present phase of capitalism.

It is an arbitrary move (for instance) to assimilate, under the “cognitive” label, the work of a domestic worker — whether an immigrant or not, whether s/he is a wife/mother/sister or a paid laborer— to that of a computer programmer or computer artist and, on top of it, suggest that the cognitive aspect of domestic work is something new, owing to the dominance of a new type of capitalism.

Certainly domestic work, like every form of reproductive work, does have a strong cognitive component. To know how to adjust the pillows under the body of a sick person so that the skin does not blister and the bones do not hurt is a science and an art that require much attention, knowledge and experimentation. The same is true of the care for a child, and of most other aspects of “housework” whoever may be doing this work. But it is precisely when we look at the vast universe of practices that constitute reproductive work, especially when performed in the home, that we see the limits of the application of the type of computer–based, technological know–how on which “cognitive capitalism relies.” We see that the knowledge necessary for reproductive work can certainly benefit from the use of the internet (assuming there is time and money for it), but it is one type of knowledge that human beings, mostly women, have developed over a long period of time, in conformity with but also against the requirements of the capitalist organization of work.

We should add that nothing is gained by admitting housework into the new realm of cognitive labor, by redefining is as "affective labor" or, as some have done, "immaterial labor," or again "care work." For a start, we should avoid formulas that imply a body/mind, reason/emotion separation in any type of work and its products.

Moreover, does replacing the notion of "reproductive work," as used by the feminist movement, with that of "affective labor" truly serve to assimilate, under the “cognitive” label, the work of a domestic worker (whether immigrant or not, whether a wife/sister/mother or paid laborer) or the work of a sex worker to that of a computer programmer or computer artist? What is really “common” in their labor, taking into account all the complex of social relations sustaining their different forms of work? What is common, for instance, between a male computer programmer or artist or teacher and a female domestic worker who, in addition to having a paid job, must also spend many hours doing unpaid labor taking care of her family members (immigrant women too have often family members to care for also in the countries where they migrate, or must send part of their salary home to pay for those caring for their family members)?

Most crucial of all, if the labor involved in the reproduction of human beings—still an immense part of the labor expended in capitalist society— is “cognitive,” in the sense that it produces not things but “states of being,” then, what is new about "cognitive labor"? 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?

Isn't it the case that by stating that domestic work is "cognitive work" we fail, once again, to address the question of the devaluation of this work in capitalist society, its largely unpaid status, the gender hierarchies that are built upon it, and through the wage relation ? Shouldn't we ask, instead, what kind of organizing can be done —so that domestic workers and computer programmers can come together— rather than assuming that we all becoming assimilated in the mare magnum of "cognitive labor"?

Taking reproductive work as a standard also serves to question the prevailing assumption that the cognitivization of work, in the sense of its computerization/reorganization through the internet— has an emancipatory effect.

A voluminous feminist literature has challenged the idea that the industrialization of many aspects of housework has reduced housework time for women. In fact, many studies have shown that industrialization has increased the range of what is considered as socially necessary housework. The same is true with the infiltration of science and technology in domestic work, including childcare and sex work. For example, the spread of personal computers, for those houseworkers who can afford them and have time to use them, can help relieve the isolation and monotony of housework through chat rooms and social networks. But the creation of virtual communities does not alleviate the increasing problem of loneliness, nor helps the struggle against the destruction of community bonds and the proliferation of gated worlds.

In conclusion, notions like “cognitive labor” and "cognitive capitalism" should be used with the understanding that they represent a part, though a leading one, of capitalist development and that different forms of knowledge and cognitive work exist that cannot be flattened under one label. Short of that, the very

utility of such concepts in identifying what is new in capitalist accumulation and the struggle against it is lost. What is also lost is the fact that, far from communalizing labor, every new turn in capitalist development tends to deepen the divisions in the world proletariat, and that as long as these divisions exist they can be used to reorganize capital on a different basis and destroy the terrain on which movements have grown.

This text will soon be published by Autonomedia as part of the edu-factory-reader Global University. Hierarchies and Self-education in the Knowledge Market.