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The Autonomy of the Living Knowledge in the Metropolis-University

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This article was born in a collective debate and in the political activity of the Rete per l'Autoformazione, Atelier Occupato Esc of Rome (http://www.escatelier.net) *and edu-factory collective (*http://www.edu-factory.org).

In this article we will hypothesize the passage from the elite university, through the mass university, to the contemporary *metropolis-university*. Each passage of this periodization is determined first of all from the movements and struggles, and then from the capitalistic response. Within these university transformations trends, we talk of the rise over the past two years of a new political "cycle" of university struggles, from Italy to US precarious students/researchers and graduate students, in France against CPE, in Greece against the *Bologna Process* reforms, or in China in the elite universities. Beyond the evident differences of contexts, academic governance, and forms of conflict, there are some common elements: the affirmation of a new hybrid figure of student, moving permanently between lifelong learning and the labor market; the framework of precariousness, the *déclassement* processes and the differential inclusion mechanisms; the

reconfiguration of the space-time coordinates in the metropolis and in the production of oppositional knowledge. The whole our analysis is based on the movement, struggles, self-education experiences and attempts to build up new *common institutions* – inside the university, along its borders, and in its relationship with the metropolis. This is the political point of view through which we can embody our research.

Within the paradigm of the transition: the cognitive labor

In the analysis of the university transformations, we have to start from the framework: there is a close link between changes in the capitalistic modes of production and higher education systems. Particularly, it is situated in what is hypothesized as the rise of the *cognitive capitalism*[1], of which the main characteristics are: a new organization and nature of production and labor; the central role of knowledge, information and relations not only as intangible products, but first of all as means of production; the formation of a "diffuse intellectuality", both for the expansion of education and for the spread of the knowledge production within social cooperation; the increase in the use of Information and Communication Technologies, not as a disembodied deterministic vector of development, but as a temporary objectification of social relations and struggles; and the shaping of new space-time coordinates of production and living labor in the framework of the globalization and of a transnational system. We put forward the concept of cognitive capitalism not as a theoretical postulate, but as a research hypothesis to be verified and a tool to be used in our daily political activity. We are not interested in making epochal claims about novelty, but rather in inventing concepts to understand the transitions at hand, and to act on them. Nor are we interested in

making general sociological descriptions. Rather we work within the partiality of struggles and the production of subjectivity.

In the framework of this transition, we use the term *cognitive labor* in a different way from the usual term *knowledge work* or the category of the *creative class*[2]: both these definitions are related to the sociological description of the stratification, or to the concept of *class* used for the most part in the Marxist tradition, which concerns the objective belonging to an exploitative situation in the capitalistic system. These terms, in a paradoxical complementarity with the orthodox faith in the working class (intended as the factory workers), could be dangerous because they risk binding itself to observe the class hierarchy, without act to it. On the political point of view, it is better to identify the common elements that form the whole spectrum of the composition of living labor.

Particularly, it is interesting to note the diffusion of the concept of creative class in a part of movement debate. Beyond the undoubted elements of innovation of Florida's analysis, in some ways this category is a new ideology of the middle classes as a subjective force of mediation and conservation of the capitalistic social relationships. This produces a segmentation, and not the condition of possibility to recombine the issues inside the class composition. In fact, one of the limits of some of these struggles is the unrecognized interests and condition of commonality, and the alliances inside the composition of cognitive labor. For example, the Italian case shows that the recent "precarious researchers" mobilization became feeble when it preferred alliances with the power professorial lobbies inside the academy, in order to recognize its market value inside the "creative class", abandoning the strategic link with the new student figure and the metropolitan *precariat*.

So, we adopt the interpretative key, elaborated by Italian *operaismo*, of *class composition*[3]: it points to the combination between exploitative relationships and processes of subjectivation, conflicts and collective identification. To summarize: there is no class without class struggle. Moreover, with cognitive labor we do not identify a specific category of workers, as in the distinction between creative jobs and "Mcjobs". Instead, we use this category to point to the paradigmatic form of contemporary labor and the crisis of the classical dichotomy between manual and intellectual labor. We do not only suggest that in cognitive labor the physic aspect does not disappear. We point to the continuous overlapping – obviously with different degrees of hard work, position, and income – of the intellectual and manual faculties in contemporary labor forms. Besides, the composition of the workforce and the peculiar combination of faculties deployed by it, have undoubtedly changed in contemporary labor processes. For example, the classical figure of the artist does not at all correspond to the productive (and *precarized*) figure of today: as the struggles and research of *intermittents* in France show[4], the contemporary artist carries out a multiplicity of activities in which there is a continuous overlapping of manual and intellectual activities, and of which performance is only one among many others. At the same time, the workers in just-in-time factories around the world are daily faced with the manipulation of signs and symbols of global technological chains, and they are probably more similar to the data-entry "netslaves" of "net economy" corporations rather than workers of the tayloristic factories. And migrant women care workers, who are exploited in carceral and ethnicized labor regimes in Europe or in Asia, have to provide first of all relations and affects, beyond hard physical work. In the cognitive capitalism the material assumes even a growing importance, but the forms of its production change. As the statistics demonstrate, the diminution

of the workers in the manufacture sector in the "West" does not correspond to a movement towards once were defined "Third World". Rather, it is based on the increase of the productivity in the industrial labor.[5]

In the whole process, the cognitive element and measure is central to the formation of new hierarchies and class compositions. So, the cognitive labor means the cognitivization of the measure and exploitation; the congitivization of the class and wage hierarchy; the cognitivization of the labor division, in the crisis of the traditional form of international division determined by the movements of migrants. Consequently, cognitive labor does not mean a linear process of intellectualization of the living labor composition. This contrasts with the *déclassement* process, one of the struggle field of the last mobilizations. Instead, this means the central role of the social cooperation in the knowledge production, and its spillover from the places of the formal education. And when we speak of the cognitive labor composition we do not think only to some "Western" place, but we think first of all to the Indians engineers who are at the same time software developers and cab drivers in the Silicon Valley: so, the overlapping of manual and intellectual activity crosses continuously also the individual biographies.[6] Finally, in this regard the care labor is a complex work, with a co-presence of semi-slavery and wage labor, of "material" aspects and cognitive faculties, first of all the affection production. In some ways, it is paradigmatic of the cognitive labor. So, the "feminization of work" we do not refer only on the mass entry of women in the labor market, but first of all to the becoming productive of the relations, affection, care attitudes, once confined in the reproductive sphere and historically determined as feminine. In other words, cognitive labor is the watermark through it is possible to observe the whole spectrum of production and

labor forms of contemporary capitalism, in their co-presence and peculiar combination.

The transnational rise of the metropolis-university

In the new hierarchies and emerging class composition, the university is not the only place of knowledge and culture production: the academy is exceeded by flows of knowledge production that spread into the social cooperation of the metropolitan area. With this term we do not refer to the traditional Western metropolis, but to new global spaces: in fact, they have a paradigmatic development in the postcolonial zones.[7] So, the problem for us is not to re-build the ivory tower, but to act on the borders between the university and the metropolis. In other words, our aim is to transform the metropolitan area into an oppositional university. Consequently, the university is for us a site of force application, and a base for autonomy and exodus.

The hypothesis of the rise of the cognitive capitalism leads us to examine the new coordinates of space and time in production and labor. The traditional image of the international labor division, based on the geographical division between First and Third World areas, is now unusable: as we saw above, it was substituted by a cognitive division of the labor. As postcolonial scholars have shown, the classical dialectic between centre and periphery, between industrialized and developing countries, is in crisis. This does not mean the hierarchies, inequalities, and exploitative forms disappear. On the contrary, they are globally spread beyond the traditional lines of First and Third World, crossing borders and reproducing themselves inside the metropolitan areas. So, the point of view from which we have to analyze university transformations is completely transnational. At the same time, these transformations

are situated at the local level. For example, the corporatization of the university (which refers not only to the increase of private funds, but first of all to the becoming corporate of academic governance) in Italy involves the co-presence of the feudal power of the so-called "barons" (powerful professors whose positions have often been transmitted along family lines).

There are some common trends in these transformations, in Europe summarized in the *Bologna Process*. We limit our analysis to four of these. The first is the passage in educational selective mechanisms from exclusion to *differential inclusion*. In other words, in the framework of the accreditation system the curriculum vitae does not depend so much on whether a person attended a higher education institution, but first of all it depends on *what* institution he or she attended. So, the value of the degree is related to the position of the university in the education market hierarchy, corresponding to the prestige of the institution, its brand and the possibility to accumulate advantageous relationships, measured as social capital, and not necessarily to the quality of knowledge. This is a process that has developed for a long period in US, and it is now developing in Europe too: this is one of the main aspects of the *Bologna Process*. This trend is similar in the changes to citizenship in the era of globalization. In both cases, in the university system and the figure of the citizen, the differential inclusion processes concern the production of borders and class, race and gender hierarchies in the transnational division of cognitive labor. Consequently, the increase of degrees in higher education is often accompanied by a process of *déclassement* in the labor market and in the qualification of knowledge. In the lexicon of the university management, the word *equality* is substituted with *equity*, which is equality and differential inclusion. So, the fundamental field of struggle is not along the exclusion line, but it

is the quality of inclusion. The university-metropolis is not a place to train the elite, or to diffuse mass education: it is *one* of the nodes and devices – in the lifelong learning market – regulating of the value of the cognitive labor.

The second similar trend is the casualization of academic labor. Social movements, mainly in Europe, called this process *precarization*, and the *precarious* subject lives inside this process. Anyway, the struggle against precariousness does not have for us the aim of restoring the "old" rights and work forms. On one side, cognitive activity is incompatible with the rigidity of space and time of the "fordist" model. On the other side, above all, there is an *ambivalence of flexibility*, which is highlighted by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiappello in their important study about the "new spirit of the capitalism".[8] In the genealogy of this category, which became the magic word of labor politics and of the casualization process in the Nineties, there are also workers' struggles and the mass exodus from wage labor in the Seventies. Paradoxically, when the key-words of postfordism (flexibility, mobility, innovation, unpredictability, adaptability, non-standardization, singularity) are fully acted upon autonomously by the living labor subjects, there is a crisis in the devices of capitalistic control over the workforce. The political problem is whether this intrinsic flexibility assumes the form of precariousness or promotes the autonomy of living labour, through the conquest of basic income, free mobility and communication rights, and the expansion of free cooperative activity and self-valorisation processes against the blackmail of wage labor and the market.

The third similar trend is the rise of a new student figure. As the graduate students struggles show clearly, in cognitive capitalism – where knowledge is a direct means of production – the graduate student is no longer an apprentice member of the workforce in

training, but a fully (precarious) worker in the so-called "knowledge factory". In this regard, we note also that this expression is undoubtedly effective as rhetorical figure, to allude to the centrality of knowledge production in contemporary class formation, and the disciplining of forms of *living knowledge*. At the same time, any use of this term knowledge factory has also to analyze the impossibility of the imposition of the tayloristic scientific organization of labor in the current formation. In this impossibility there emerges the potential autonomy of living labor/knowledge, embodied in the new hybrid figure of the student/precarious researcher and teacher, permanently moving between lifelong learning and the labor market.

Finally, the fourth similar trend is the imposition of a *cognitive measure* to quantify the production of knowledge and relations (through the credit system, IP, or the categories of human and social capital). This measure is fundamental to allowing the exploitation of relationships and private appropriation. According to McKenzie Wark, the education system, as cognitive capitalism in general, involves the organization of knowledge through the artificial creation of scarcity, as in the laws of classical political economy, but in a situation where there is potential abundance and richness.[9] In fact, there is a sort of knowledge spillover (determined by subjectivities and conflicts) with respect to the quantification units and the law of value. This is the main contradiction of the *political economy of knowledge* and the field of struggle between the subordination of social cooperation and the autonomy of living labor/knowledge. But the excess of the knowledge production does not mean the automatic crisis of the capitalism, but it is the field of battle between the autonomy of the living labor and the capitalistic capture. So, it is not enough to say it is impossible to measure knowledge as a good, since an artificial

measure is, in any case, a measure. The struggles around the cognitivization of the measure are nothing but the line of conflict in knowledge production.

But there is another element, in the condition of possibility of this struggle: in a (partial, nothing is completely new of course) different way to industrial capitalism, today knowledge – which is central productive force – cannot be totally separated from its producer and transferred to firms. The knowledge transfer and the theft of intellectual property are great problems for corporations. [10] Some scholars say that constant capital is becoming the human being. We limit our analysis to saying that the crystallization and objectification of knowledge in the system of machines is not obsolete, but articulated in a peculiar and new way: dead labor/knowledge needs to be given life more and more rapidly, and in this process an excess of living and social knowledge continuously escapes. It is precisely this excess of living knowledge that determines the new temporality of cognitive capitalism. Based on this new relationship between fix and variable capital, today the use of technology is immediately a field of battle in which to contest the capture of living labor in dead labor and re-appropriate the production of knowledge in an oppositional way.

The flight lines and the organization of the common institutions

Based on this contradiction, struggles in the metropolis-university are conflicts in knowledge production: between autonomy and subordination, between the imposition of capitalistic time and the affirmation of subjective times in knowledge production. The self-education courses and the construction of experimental, autonomous and "nomadic" universities, which are spreading out in Italy[11] and at a transnational level[12] for some years, are not

simply a way to diffuse antagonistic messages, but a flight line and a form of exodus from the crisis of academy, in its state and corporate forms. They are an attempt to organize an oppositional university not in the far future but in the present. The self-education courses address first of all the new time coordinates in cognitive capitalism. In fact, the spread of the corporate model in the university, the reforms processes of the last few years in Europe, the central role of the credit and IP system, are the attempts – to use the words of Walter Benjamin – to impose artificially an homogenous and empty temporality, against the heterogeneous and full temporality of knowledge production; the objective time of capital and the market, against the subjective time of social cooperation and autonomy of living labor.[13] To use the words of Karl Marx, it is an attempt to reduce living knowledge to dead knowledge, to reduce the times of the living knowledge to the abstract labor time.[14] Situated on this battlefield, oppositional knowledges organizations are trying to re-appropriate for themselves autonomous time in production and life forms, creating new *commons* against the new capitalistic enclosures. From this point of view, knowledge is common only insofar as it is a product of social cooperation and not in the sense of good that exists in nature – in fact, on this crucial point there was sometimes a confusion in the movement debate in the last year.

Chandra T. Mohanty points out that oppositional knowledges are caught permanently between radical challenges and the risks of cooptation.[15] Specifically, the institutionalization and capture of oppositional knowledge is intrinsic to the governance model, fully developed in the corporate universities (in Italy it is mixed with feudal government forms). This model allows a degree of self-managed knowledge, separated from struggles, and compatible with the maintenance of market logic: its profit motive and units of

measurement. So, it is a form of differential inclusion of alternative experiences, deprived of their autonomy. From this point of view, governance is a response to the student and "precarious" movements, an attempt to reduce them to stakeholders. So, we claim credits for our self-education seminars, with the aim to inflate the credit system and to knock over the imposition of the cognitive measure of production. This oppositional knowledges production also means the refusal of institutional knowledge transmission; for this reason the right to study of the classical welfare system is comparable to the right to work. In fact, there is no oppositional knowledges and production of common goods without struggles.

The category of the common needs clarification. In fact, it is radically different and incompatible with the traditional category of universalism, because it is based on partiality, singularity and multiplicity, and not on the reduction to homogeneity. This displaces both the liberal cult of the individualism, and the socialist myth of the collective. From this point of view, translation becomes a fundamental terrain of battle. As Jon Solomon and Naoki Sakai write: "Seen from this perspective, the modern regime of translation is a concrete form of 'systemic complicity' whose primary function is population management within the purview of imperial domination. In other words, it is a globally-applicable technique of segmentation aimed at managing social relationships by forcing them to pass through circuits on the 'systemic' level". [16] So, the concept of common assumes the differentiation of spaces, times, and subjectivities in transnational space, and poses translation as a central question of the communication of struggles and the links between different ways of liberation.

On these bases, the conflicts in the crisis of the welfare do not mean to come back to the welfare-state system, or the mass

university, as the left parties and unions argue. The problem is to build up the *commonfare*, involving the central questions of the basic income, the free mobility and communication, to enlarge the autonomous spaces and the self-managed flexibility of the living knowledge/labor. Among the rubble of the university, we have a great possibility if we try not to heal the crisis, but to deepen it. In other words, we have exit from marginality, to re-appropriate money and funds, and to organize the self-education experiences and the autonomous and nomadic universities as *new common institutions*. This is the exodus line. And this means flight and cognitive labor struggle.

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