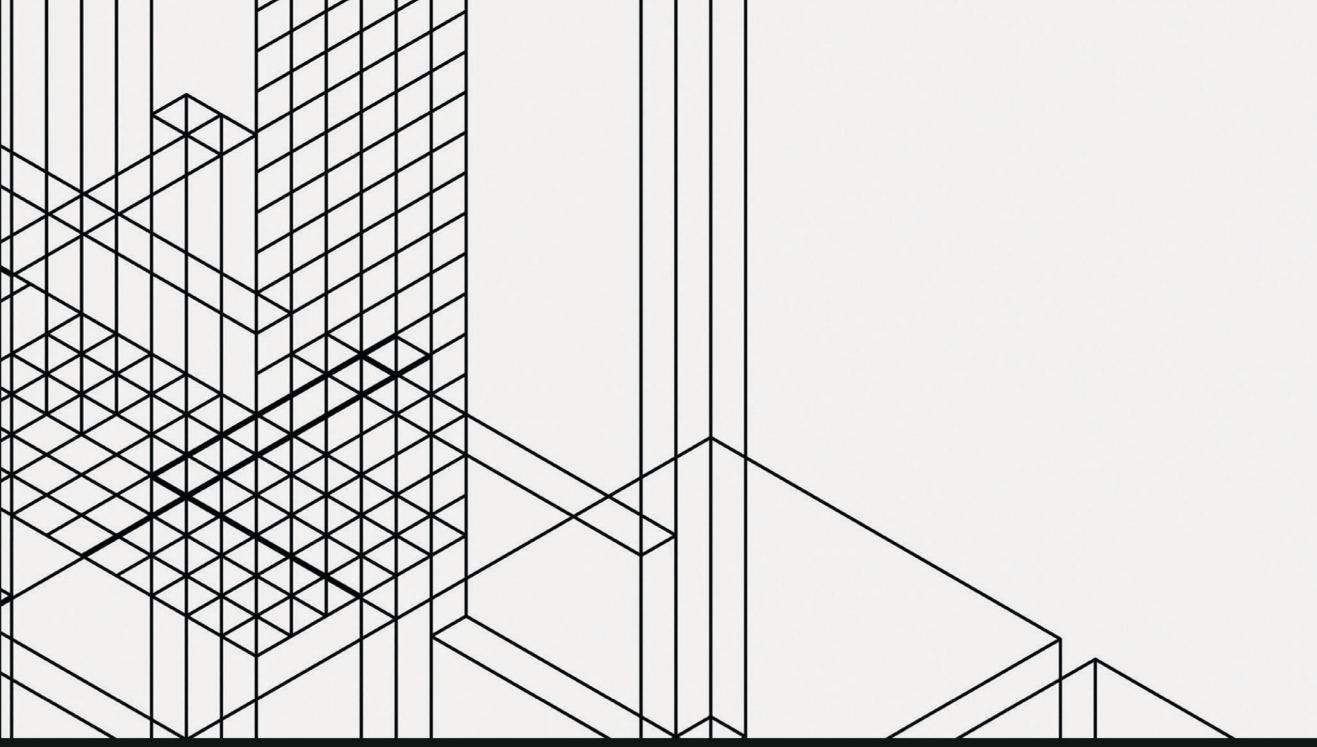

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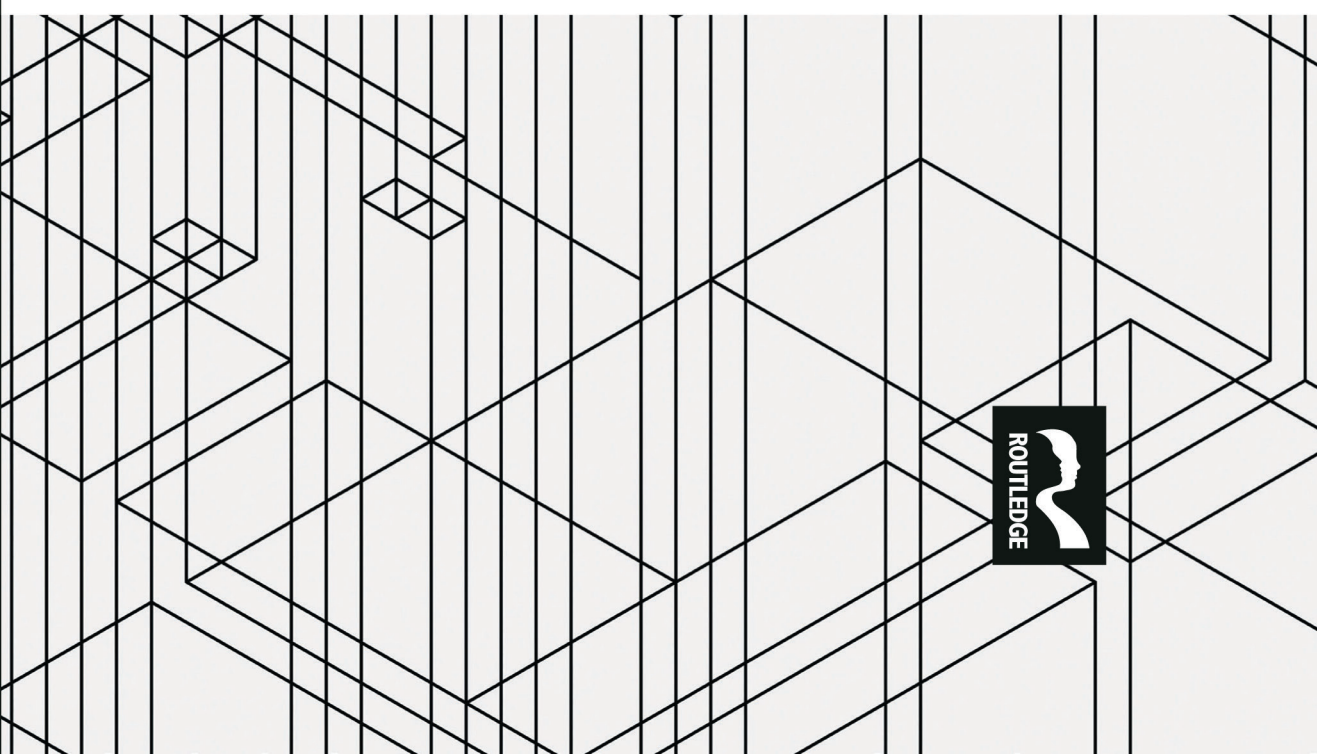
REGIMES OF CAPITAL IN THE POST-DIGITAL AGE

Edited by
Szymon Wróbel and Krzysztof Skonieczny



Regimes of Capital in the Post-Digital Age

Regimes of Capital in the Post-Digital Age provides a view of the current state of capitalism, through the interrogation of key diagnoses offered by philosophers and social theorists.

With attention to questions about the manner in which the advent of the information age has shaped capitalism, the implications of the post-digital age for social capital, and the possible forms of resistance to the problematic aspects of capitalism, it will appeal to scholars of sociology, philosophy, and social theory with interests in critical theory, capitalist society, and digital culture.

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2 Capital, or, Information

Affective Labor, Historical Materialism, and the Convergence of Forces and Relations of Production

A. Kiarina Kordela

In this piece, I attempt to clarify certain central concepts in Marx's theory that I consider indispensable to understanding today's post-digital or informatized era; then, I proceed to an analysis of this era based on these concepts. I thought it would be useful to do so by partly engaging in an appreciative yet critical dialogue with McKenzie Wark's *Capital Is Dead: Is this Something Worse?* – particularly since it is referenced in the conference's call for papers.

As the title of McKenzie Wark's recent book indicates, she contends that "capital is dead," that is, that what we experience today "is no longer capitalism but something worse" (Wark 2019, 90). This death of capitalism is caused by "the emergence of information as a material force of production" (54), which, in turn, has caused "sufficient transformations in the forces of production to break out of the fetters of a strictly capitalist mode of production" (53–54). Reading this makes me wonder: what is a strictly capitalist mode of production? Historically, capitalism has involved various modes of production, and the dominance of each mode of production over the others characterizes distinct historical phases of capitalism – which is why we speak of mercantile or industrial or today's informatized capitalism. Yet, regarding the latter, Wark argues that "what has emerged, in addition to and laminated on top of a capitalist mode of production, is something *qualitatively* different […] which generates new forms of class domination, new forms of the extraction of surplus, even new kinds of class formation" (54; emphasis mine). I have no intention to challenge Wark's very compelling depiction of this new class – which she calls the "vectoralist class" – and its mode of class domination, which owes to its ability to "control[] the patents, the brands, the trademarks, the copyrights, but more importantly the logistics of the information vector" (47). But when Wark juxtaposes "the vectoralist class [which] owns the vectors of information" to the "capitalist class [which] owns the means of production" (55), I think that a conceptual slippage occurs between what constitutes the capitalist class in any possible phase of capitalism and historically specific manifestations of the capitalist class. We could say,

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between the abstract and the concrete capitalist class, or, to use the words of both Wark and our conference's call for papers, between the "essence" and the historical "different appearances" of the capitalist class. The capitalist class in the *abstract* is the class, to put it in Wark's aforementioned expression, that profits from the "extraction of surplus" – regardless of the forms in which this surplus-value is extracted. By contrast, the concrete capitalist class is defined precisely *by the form* of the extraction of surplus-value. This is why the industrialist is a historically different type of capitalist than the merchant; today, the vectoralist is a different type of capitalist than the industrialist. In short, the capitalist class today is the one that owns the vectors of information precisely because the capitalist class is always the one that both profits most out of the extraction of surplus and owns the forces of production, which today, as Wark herself told us, consist of information.

But what is information in the era of informatized capitalism if not the means of production? As we saw, Wark herself attributes what she deems to be the new era after capitalism to "the emergence of information as a *material force of production*" (54). If information is the material force of production, then what are these other means of production? The following passage seems to intend to clarify this point: "A capitalist class owns the means of production, the means of organizing labor. A vectoralist class owns the means of organizing the means of production" (114). And further, referring to "the world's biggest corporations these days," she adds:

> a lot of their power and property is in vectoral form. Many of them don't actually make the things they sell. They control the production process by owning and controlling the information. Even when they still make the stuff, a quite remarkable amount of the company's valuation comes from portfolios of intellectual property, or propriety data about their customers, and so on.
>
> (115)

So, one could think that Google is a vectoralist corporation, unlike, say, a company producing cars. But if you watch on YouTube any video showing a contemporary assembly line of a car, all you see is a fully automated or robotic process of assembly, and the few and scarcely appearing humans all work in front of the screen of a computer, monitoring the assembly line. Beyond the control of information in the form of patents, brands, trademarks, copyrights, and such, the information vector and informatized capitalism include an informatized mode of production of what Wark calls *stuff*. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri remark, it would be wrong to assume that even "an auto factory built by Ford in Brazil in the 1990s might be comparable to a Ford factory in Detroit in the 1930s." For, unlike the latter, the factory in Brazil today is "based on the most advanced and most productive computer and informational technologies available," so that the "technological infrastructure of the factory itself would locate it squarely within the informational

economy" (2000, 287). In other words, whether in the USA or in Brazil, the car assembly line team labors on computers, which means that the vectoralist class organizes both the means of production and the labor. The distinction between information and the means of production in the era of informatized capitalism is as untenable as is that between the capitalist and the vectoralist classes.

To clarify, I am not saying there is no difference between channeling information to produce a car *and* channeling information to control the circulation and accessibility of information itself. Rather, I argue that the informatization of the mode of production, including its purely vectoral domain – the administration of information to control the circulation and accessibility of information itself – does not constitute a mode of production that is "*qualitatively* different" from that of capitalism. First of all, capitalism is defined not by any specific mode of production but by capital, that is, by an economy in which "money is worth more money, value which is greater than itself" (Marx 1990, 257). Marx makes it amply clear that whether money comes from rent, from selling stuff, from interest-bearing capital, or, as we shall see, in fact, from information, is not capital unless it "increases its magnitude, adds to itself a surplus-value, or is valorized (*verwertet sich*)" – only "this movement converts it [money] into capital" (1990, 252). This is why "the general formula for capital" is "M – C – M′," or in its "concise style […] M – M′," where "M′ = M + Δ M, i.e., the original sum advanced plus an increment"; it is "this increment or excess over the original value" that Marx calls "surplus-value" (1990, 247, 257, and 251). What really defines capital is valorization, the accrual of excess or, to spell out Marx's exact formula, Δ, the accrual of *Διαφορά*, difference. As long as there is difference, the extraction of surplus-value, we are in capitalism. As Kojin Karatani puts it, "value productivity is not determined by what it produces, but by whether or not it produces difference"; "capital […] lives on by the difference," that is, "surplus value," regardless of "whether it gets [it] from solid objects or fluid information" (2003, 267). This is something of which Marx is acutely aware to the point of using even the term "industrial" in a much broader sense than the one assumed by Wark, as the following passage makes clear: "Industrial [is used] here in the sense that it encompasses every branch of production that is pursued in a capitalist basis" (Marx 1976, 133) – that is, as long as it produces difference. So, the industrial mode of production includes, according to Marx, also

> particular branches of industry in which the product of the production process is not a new objective product […] [, such as] the communication industry, both the transport industry proper for moving commodities and people, and the transmission of mere information – letters, telegrams, etc. (1976, 135)

I do not see any reason why Marx would object to including in this "etc." digital information. "So […] the nature of capital is consistent even before

and after its dominant production branch shifted from heavy industry to the information industry" (Karatani 2003, 267) since by industry, Marx means both. And this is a major reason why Marx's account of capital remains pertinent today – if it does not, in fact, become more pertinent than ever before.

For, "as the father of cybernetics, Norbert Wiener, suggested, information is originally nothing but *difference*" (Karatani 2003, 267). Even as capital is indifferent to the mode of production that produces the difference, its vocation is ultimately to produce this difference out of difference itself, that is, out of information. As Marx tells us, capital is a "tautological" process (1990, 250–251), which is why M – C – M′ tends toward M – M′, and what better commodity – C – can facilitate the *historical actualization* of the outmost tautology than a commodity that is itself difference, namely, digital information? Rather than inferring that the shift to the informatized mode of production means that "[c]apital was subsumed under a more abstract form of technical power [information]" (Wark 2019, 115), we should understand that informatized capital constitutes the *historical actualization of capital at its most abstract* – exactly as conceived by Marx in his method of historical materialism, to which we shall shortly turn. It is this actualization of the abstract that makes today's capitalism worse than its past manifestations.

Wark's underestimation of Marx may relate to a false interpretation of her otherwise accurate remark that "what we now think of as technology was for Marx a question of the machine. His was an era of steam" (62). As a historical materialist, I welcome Wark's gesture of correlating a thinker's thought with the products and technology that the forces of production of their time could produce. But the "era of steam" means for Wark that "Marx took a thermodynamic concept of labor as an expenditure of energy and an image of capitalism as a gigantic steam engine that would either break down or run down" (64; referencing Wendling 2011). What Wark has in mind is the first law of thermodynamics regarding the conservation of energy in any given system – i.e., the homeostatic principle. The steam engine is indeed intertwined with thermodynamics, but the second law of the thermodynamic theory, formulated by Rudolf Clausius in the 1850s – i.e., during the time Marx was working on *Grundrisse* and *Capital* – states that in any irreversible process, a small amount of heat energy – symbolized as ΔQ – is incrementally dissipated across the system boundary. This disequilibrium of energy in the system eventually led Clausius to the concept of *entropy*. It is precisely disequilibrium that Marx discovers at the heart of capitalism. For, while capital is supposed to occupy the exclusive position of the equivalent value – i.e., to play the role of money – and thus be the exception to the set of commodities, Marx realizes that capital is at the same time itself a member of the set of commodities since "capital […] is bought and sold as stock" (Karatani 1995, 70) like any other commodity. This is why the set of commodities has no center – which is not to say, in customary postmodern fashion, that it is "devoid of center," but, rather that it is "a relational system in which innumerable centers coexist, none of which can be considered primary" (Karatani 1995, 69).

It is because of capitalism's disequilibrium and innumerable centers that Gerald Raunig can speak of "dividuals" that can constitute an individual like any of us, each of our dividuals pertaining to different classes so that one's class location can include contradictory classes (see Raunig 2016). This conception of class explains, as Wark notes, "the tension people feel about parts of their existence, as worker and hacker, or hacker and aspirational vectoralist (and so on)," as well as the fact "that the way people think about their experience of class is often conflicted" (98). Therefore, as Wark states, we need "a language about power that can address these experiences" and this language may have to "negotiate perspectives from critical race theory and feminism" to all other sorts of extant and emerging perspectives, but, as Wark argues in her Marxist vein, "class means class *antagonism*," which is why it is counterproductive that the attempt to negotiate these perspectives "often stops short of a language of class" (98–99). To this purpose, I think it would be much more productive to focus on the continuity between Marx's conception of capital and contemporary experiences of class rather than advocating the position, as Wark does, that: "The language of class analysis (in the Marxist sense) appears outdated because it is" (99). I think that what we need is to figure out how to read Marx *from the perspective*, and *for* the era, of informatized capitalism, rather than trying to spread the misleading assumption that the stage of informatized capitalism renders Marx's analysis obsolete. It is Marx's analysis of capital – not to mention his own class experience, as a poor resident of Soho who never associated himself with his proletarian neighbors – that invites us to do exactly what Wark also wants us to do, namely, to "think synchronically about a matrix of antagonistic classes that includes emerging ones" (99). This is how "capitalism can be returned to *historical* thought from its holiday in eternity" (99) – history and eternity being a relation to which we shall return below.

I would also like to mention in passing that in his second seminar, Jacques Lacan foregrounds the epistemological importance of the machine, represented by the steam engine, in his historical materialist comparison between Hegel and Freud. "Between Hegel and Freud, there is the world of the machine" insofar as both Hegel and Napoleon "completely failed to apprehend [*méconnu*] the importance of this phenomenon which was beginning to come into view in their time – the steam engine" (Lacan 1991, 74). If Descartes' conception of "man is the clock" (74), Freud's conception of man is "homeostats," since he is thinking of human beings in terms of energy, and "energy […] is a notion which can only emerge once there are machines" (75). And replicating the temporal distance between the first and the second thermodynamic laws in 1900, that is, in *The interpretation of Dreams*,

> Freud started with a conception of the nervous system according to which it always tends to return to a point of equilibrium […] It took him another twenty years [i.e., until *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920)] […]

> to be able to look back to his premises and to try to recover what it means in terms of energy. That is what required him to produce the new elaboration of the beyond of the pleasure principle and the death drive.
>
> (Lacan 1991, 76; translation modified)

– that is, to introduce the entropy that deranges the equilibrium of the homeostasis of the pleasure principle. Evidently, in this regard, Marx was faster than Freud, perhaps precisely out of his desire to overturn Hegel.

At any rate, we definitely cannot think ahead of what is allowed by the products of our forces of production. If, in capitalism, we have an increasing tendency to imagine that we do so, it is because the craving for novelty – including for seeing our present as a new historical era beyond capitalism – is itself an effect of capital and part and parcel of its logic. To quote for the last time, Karatani:

> novelty is little more than a synonym for information qua difference. From the vantage point that surplus value is attained by the production of difference, the drive for novelty does not offer any "new" recognition. To tackle capital, hence, one always has to think from the formula of merchant capital: M – C – M′. This approach would reveal that the so-called development of industrial capitalism in stages [– and, later, the development of informatized capitalism –] is nothing but the "return of the repressed" of the *archi-form* of capitalism.
>
> (2003, 268)

This conception of all "stages" of capitalism as varying manifestations of the same fundamental and defining structure of capital entails a specific conceptualization of the relation between the abstract and the concrete, as well as the corollary relation of eternity and historical time – which, conceptualization, as we shall see in the next section, is offered by historical materialism. It is this historical materialist conceptualization of the relation between the abstract and the concrete that enables us to see in informatized capitalism the historical actualization of capital at its most abstract.

Historical Materialism: Concrete and Abstract, Time and Eternity

In the introductory pages of *Grundrisse*, Marx encapsulates the core of the historically materialist epistemology as follows:

> even the most abstract categories, despite their validity – precisely because of their abstractness – for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and within these relations.
>
> (1993, 105)

Transhistorical and universal validity can apply only to an abstract concept, whereas full validity applies to something that is both an abstract concept and a concrete reality. According to this historical materialist epistemological principle, a historical materialist *ontology* would conceive of being or substance as an abstract, universal, and transhistorical concept, which as a category of thought has validity for any historical relations, yet, is actualized in reality as such only within the historical relations under which this ontology is produced. This means that, for historical materialism, the immutable and change or becoming, or, in temporal terms, eternity and time, or, in epistemological terms, abstract concept and concrete reality, are intertwined like two sides of a coin. Any possible Platonic associations here are immediately dissipated by the fact that the eternal is itself, to repeat Marx's words, "a product of historical relations," a product of concrete reality in time.

Being a product of historical relations, the eternal abstract concept cannot be an external or transcendent principle. Marx "invalidates [precisely] the procedure that would consist of evaluating experience in the name of external principles, for such principles would disqualify phenomena by bringing them back to the status of simple appearance" (Macherey 1998, 141) – this is Pierre Macherey speaking of Spinoza, but it applies equally to Marx's turning Hegel "right side up" (Marx, Afterword to the second German edition of *Capital*). "The principles of an adequate knowledge must […] be inherent in experience," yet, although "experience generates all the effects of which the […] nature of human beings is capable, it does not directly show the causes of these effects; […] experience is in fact organized so as to conceal its causes, or to postpone their manifestation" (Macherey, 141). Whence the necessity of a symptomatic reading that searches for the abstract concept behind its concealment – a concealment that often owes not just to the omissions of other thinkers but to the objective mirages through which experience distorts the manifestation of its causes.

Let us explain this relation between history and essence based on a concrete case. As Louis Althusser has argued, Marx's *real discovery* in his own "symptomatic" reading lies in "re-establishing the missing word in their [Smith's and Ricardo's] text: surplus-value" and, by extension, "value" in general (Althusser and Balibar 2009, 161). But "to find out what value was" Marx had "to ascertain *what* labour it was that produced value, and *why* and *how* it did so" (166–167; citing Engels, Preface to *Capital, Volume 2,* 14–15). Starting with surplus-value – "the transformation of money into capital" – Marx "demonstrated that this transformation is based on the purchase and sale of labour-power" (167; citing Engels ibid.). Simply put, no *wage* labor-power, no surplus-value. Once bought and sold, "labour-power [is] the value-producing property," and "value [is] nothing but congealed labour of *this* kind" (167; citing Engels ibid.), that is, congealed wage labor-power. "As exchange-values, commodities are merely definite quantities of *congealed labour-time*," and, therefore, "the *substance* of value […] is *labour-time*" (Marx 1990, 131). By

becoming wage labor, labor becomes value because it can be entirely quantified in terms of labor-time. But this quantification presupposes the absolute abstraction of labor from any of its specific qualities.

It is because this abstraction of labor is already happening in his historical reality of capitalism that Adam Smith can conceive of abstract labor as the essence of wealth not only in capitalism but also transhistorically. Because in capitalism, "labour *in reality* has […] become the means of creating wealth in general, and has ceased to be organically linked with particular individuals in any specific form," Smith was able to conceive of "abstract labor" and, thereby, "to discover the abstract expression for the simplest and most ancient relation [of] human beings – in whatever form of society – […] [as] producers" (Marx 1993, 104). For, with "labour in general […] [as] the abstract universality of wealth-creating activity we now have the universality of the object defined as wealth, the product as such or again labour as such, but labour as past, objectified labour" (1993, 104). Only a thought produced within capitalism – where labor is abstract in reality – can conceive of the abstract transhistorical concepts of wealth as objectified labor, and of active labor as an abstract wealth-creating activity.

And the same applies to conceiving of capitalism as information: only a thought produced within *informatized* capitalism – where information has become the "dominant force of production" (Wark 2019, 46), and the dominant mode of labor is information labor in actual reality – can conceive of the abstract concept of capital, throughout its entire history, as information.

These two examples – the concept of labor as abstract wealth-creating activity and the concept of capital as information – are indicative of the two senses of the terms "transhistorical" and "eternal" in Marx (which, although philosophically not synonyms, in this context can be treated as such). Sometimes, as in the case of labor, a concrete phenomenon within historical reality (abstract labor within capitalism) can yield an abstract concept (labor *qua* abstract wealth-creating activity) that is valid transhistorically or eternally in the strong sense of the word, that is, throughout all history. At other times, as is the case with capital *qua* information or Marx's own "eternal laws of commodity-exchange" (Marx 1990, 301), transhistorical or eternal is meant in the relative or historical sense of the word, that is, as valid only throughout the historical era of capital and commodity exchange. It would be preposterous to speak of "eternal laws" in the absolute sense when talking about something pertaining only to the specific historical era of capitalism, such as capital itself or commodity exchange – unlike labor, which is an activity that has existed in all forms of society. As I have put it elsewhere, where I spoke of historical "blocks" rather than eras: "Historical eternity coincides with the duration of the block to which it pertains" (2013, 53). For instance, Marx's eternal laws of commodity exchange are historically eternal; that is, they pertain only to the entirety of the historical block of capitalism.

While contemplating whether our reality is "Capitalism – or Worse?" (39), Wark writes: "One could make the case here that information was always

central to capitalism and that this is just capitalism. To some extent, that may be the case" (46). But then she proceeds to object:

> However, to even think that capitalism is about information is a fairly recent perspective. It ends up being a way of retroactively seeing the whole course of capitalism in terms of something that only emerged as a concept and an instrumental reality as one of its late products.
>
> (46)

While dismissing it, Wark offers an entirely accurate description of the historical materialist conceptualization of the relation between the concrete and the abstract, history and eternity. Far from hovering in some Platonic or other transcendent realm of Ideas, the eternal abstract concept is nothing other the concept naming the actual instrumental reality that a historical epoch produces as one of its late products. To repeat more concretely: the eternal abstract concept (capital = information) is nothing other than the concept (information) naming the actual instrumental reality (information) that a historical epoch (capitalism) produces as one of its late products.

And, as Wark's *Capital Is Dead* indicates, an historical epoch reaches that point at which it can produce one of its latest and most abstract products when it can also be mistaken for already dead. At that point of advanced development, the epoch evidently possesses (or appears to possess) incommensurable powers compared to its past phases – powers that only the dead could have, according to Freud's logic of "deferred obedience," whose famous motto is: "*The dead father became stronger than the living one had been*" (Freud 1913). Indeed, as we shall see in the last section, capitalism has never been as powerful as it is today – but this should not mislead us to imagine it is dead, unless we mean it in Freud's sense.

Wark rightly remarks that a mode of thought that is based on the fact that "Communism […] has not prevailed" infers that "then this by definition must still be the reign of Capital" – that is, a mode of thought that defines "the present […] mostly in terms of a hoped-for negation of it" – amounts to "Some theology!" (52). But whether one proclaims the advent of the hoped-for negation of the present – like Hardt and Negri did in their *Empire* – or the advent of an even worse negation of the present – like Wark does – whether we arrive in paradise or in hell, in both cases, we remain within the theological parameters of the negation of the present and continue to cater to the messianic expectation of the end of our time and the beginning of the new. And, as we have seen, the new is the craving for not only messianism but also capitalism. For the sake of novelty, capitalism would gladly enjoin us to "abandon[] the duality of […] essence and appearance" (53), in Wark's sense, that is, on the one hand, to discard essence as an outdated, transcendentalist, and ultimately theological notion, and, concomitantly, on the other hand, to embrace every appearance as the new, the hip moment bursting with historicity. This is the perfect capitalist inversion of the theological/Christian

dualism of relinquishing earthly appearance for the sake of celestial essence. If we really want to extricate ourselves from theology, Christian and capitalist alike, the first thing to do is to conceptualize the relation of essence and appearance in non-dualist terms – and, as I hope to have shown, historical materialism has already paved this path.

A Note on Materialism and Communism

This context enables us to grasp what Marx means by "*Realabstraktion*" (real abstraction), namely, that the abstraction – of labor, not unlike the abstraction of commodities as values – is not a subjective illusion (as if it were the effect of ideological manipulation) but is part of objectivity. In capitalism, labor undergoes abstraction in reality (as do the commodities *qua* values). A central tenet of materialism consists precisely in grasping the reality of abstraction (unlike the traditional vulgar materialism that simply dismisses it). This is why commodity fetishism – the fact that human relations appear as relations among things/commodities – is also not an ideological effect but part of reality. This specific capitalist reality actualizes the abstractions of labor and everything *qua* value. Finally, as Marx's (Feuerbachian) reading of religion indicates, all societies throughout history produce their own abstractions (which then people project to a realm that obtains autonomy – be it the supernatural sphere of religion or the market). It is, therefore, possible that abstraction is an integral constituent of any society. If so, then the question of communism – or any form of social organization one may envision as one that eliminates or even just diminishes exploitation and allows people to unfold their potentials – should not be based on the assumption that realizing this society involves the elimination of abstraction. Perhaps we should instead be asking: what kind of abstractions do we want to have in such a society?

Affective Labor or Transindividual Affective Power

Crucially, the present conception of labor as affect differs fundamentally from current references to affective labor in the narrow sense of so-called immaterial or invisible labor within the branches of advertisement, domestic work, and care and service industries (usually drawing on the work of Negri and Hardt). This is far from what I mean by "affective labor." Instead, following a Spinozian-Marxian line of thought, I maintain that *all* labor-power has *always* been the affective potential of the transindividual production and constitution of individuals (human and not). This transindividual production and constitution of all individuals mean the isomorphic production and constitution of objectivity and subjectivity, and this isomorphism constitutes the core of Marx's historical materialism. While labor is transhistorically (in the strong sense) affective, its actualization and exploitation are historically determined.[1] As I will argue, the capitalist actualization and exploitation of

labor are simultaneously and inextricably economic and affective throughout all capitalism, yet its intensity can vary within different phases of capitalism, with informatized capitalism marking its culmination. This conception of exploitation as economico-affective is required to explain the unforeseen intensity of both exploitation and conformism in today's era of informatized capital.

As Marx writes, "labour-capacity [is] the aggregate of those mental and physical *capabilities* […] of a human being […] which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind" (Marx 1990, 270; emphasis mine). "[Labor-power] is *not materialized* in a product, does not exist apart from him [the laborer] at all, thus *exists not really*, but only in *potentiality*" (Marx 1993, 267; emphasis mine). Labor-power is the body's and mind's power to actualize their potentialities – i.e., whatever they can possibly do and be. And the act of laboring is the process in which labor – as a pure capability, power, or potentiality – actualizes itself. In short, labor-power is the power of self-actualization.

Those familiar with Spinoza can easily discern the affinity between Marx's conception of labor-power and Spinoza's substance. In Spinoza's words, "there is only one substance," so "a substance cannot be produced by anything else," and is, therefore, "the cause of itself (*causa sui*)" (1985; *Ethics*, IP14C1 and IP7D). In other words, substance is "the power of making itself actual" (Lord 2010, 21) or, in Gilles Deleuze's words, it is the "full, unvarying *power*" (Deleuze 1988, 62–63) or the potentiality of self-actualization.

Like Spinoza's God, which is Nature, this power of self-actualization is not the prerogative of some supernatural entity but is rather what Spinoza calls the "singular essence" of every individual, human or not. In Deleuze's words, "singular essence" means that any "individual is first of all […] a degree of power" of "*acting*" or affecting other individuals and "a certain capacity for being affected" by other individuals (Deleuze 1988, 27). In other words, in Spinoza's ontology, individuals or "singular essences" are degrees of the potential of affecting and being affected in a process in which individuals are being produced in the first place. Since the interplay between the affective capacities of all individuals constitutes each of these individuals, every individual is, in Étienne Balibar's words, "transindividual" (see Balibar 1997). "Transindividuality" means that "*every individual thing, i.e., anything whatever which is finite and has a determinate existence*" (Spinoza 1985, *Ethics* IP28) – i.e., everything existing, human or not – is produced through "a transindividual process of individuation" (Balibar 1997, 12), whereby equal emphasis must be placed on the prefix "trans-" and on the word "process," the former indicating that no individual is isolated from the other individuals, and the latter that no individual is ever a finished product but is rather always a becoming. Individuals are not discrete entities but are always caught up in an immanent network in which they are mutually, at once actively and passively, further individuated or produced. In other words, "'substance' (or God, or

Nature) is an infinite process of production of multiple individuals, whereas 'individuals,' being all different and all causally dependent, are the necessary existence of the substance" (Balibar 1997, 8). This is a reformulation of Spinoza's famous assertion that substance or "God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things" (*Ethics* IP18): substance does not externally cause modes or individuals to exist but, rather, substance actualizes itself as these modes or individuals of empirical existence. In short, "'substance' is nothing other than the individuals" (Balibar 1997, 8) – which constitutes the materialist core of the conception of being as the power of self-actualization. And labor-power is part of this power of self-actualization, that is, part of nature.

Indeed, this follows from Marx's conception of labor-power in general as "man's essential powers" (1959, 46). This concept relates to Marx's critique of Feuerbach's abstract materialism, for which the object is only an "object of contemplation," ignoring "*practical*, human-sensuous activity" ("Theses on Feuerbach," V; emphasis in the original). It is through these "essential powers" that all individuals – humans or not – constitute themselves and each other. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx exemplifies his concept of "essential powers" through the five senses – although, as he will tell us, he means more than the five senses. For instance, "only music awakens in man the sense of music" and even "the most beautiful music has *no* sense for the unmusical ear," therefore, it "is [no] object for it" (1959, 46). In any socio-historical context, the world consists only of objects whose essential power – in this case, musicality – is accessible to the essential powers of the human individuals of that socio-historical configuration (in this case, musical ear). "For this reason the *senses* of the social man *differ* from those of the non-social man" (46). And

> not only the five senses but also the so-called mental senses, the practical senses (will, love, etc.), in a word, *human* sense, the human nature of the senses, comes to be by virtue of *its* object, by virtue of *humanized* nature. (46)

"The objective world," Marx continues:

> becomes everywhere for man in society the world of man's essential powers – human reality, and for that reason the reality of his *own* essential powers – […] all *objects* become for him the *objectification* of himself, become objects which confirm and realize his individuality, become *his* objects: that is, *man himself* becomes the object. The *manner* in which they become *his* depends on the *nature of the object* and on the nature of the *essential power corresponding to it* […] To the *eye* an object comes to be other than it is to the *ear*, and the object of the eye *is* another object than the object of the *ear*. The specific character of each essential power is precisely its *specific essence,* and therefore also the specific mode of its

> objectification, of its *objectively actual*, living *being*. Thus man is affirmed in the objective world not only in the act of thinking, but with *all* his senses.
>
> (1959, 46)

– that is, not just what we usually have in mind under the term "five senses," but with all possible human experience of anything in the objective world. The world is constituted through the mutual affective determinations of the essential powers of human and non-human individuals.

Accordingly, when "producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their material life" (Marx 1998, 37). That is, "this mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals," as if they were pregiven.

> Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part […] What they [the individuals] are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce.
>
> (Marx 1998, 37)

Here, Marx offers us the nucleus of a historical materialist explanation of subjectivity and objectivity, that is, a thoroughly transindividual constitution of humans and objects or nature. The objects of the world are the objectification of their producers, just as the producers are the subjectification of the objective world, or, in Marx's words: "Only through the *objectively* unfolded richness of man's essential being is the richness of *subjective* human sensibility ([…] senses affirming themselves as essential powers of *man*) either cultivated or brought into being" (1959, 46; emphasis mine). Marx's intertwining of the production of objectivity and subjectivity will eventually find its most mature and elaborate formulation in his theory of commodity fetishism, according to which the products of labor are as much "objects of utility" as they are the people's "language," that is, their mode of thought and expression through all their senses (Marx 1990, 167). As Balibar puts it, "what constitutes the philosophical importance of Marx's text and explains its astonishing legacy" is its insight "that there is no theory of objectivity without a theory of subjectivity. *By rethinking the constitution of social objectivity, Marx at the same time virtually revolutionized the concept of the 'subject'*" (Balibar 2007, 64–65). Balibar's account of transindividuality can again assist in further clarifying Marx's point:

> every individual (including human individuals) is an effect of, or a moment in a more general, and more flexible, process of *individuation* […] Since they are not "given," individuals are constructed (or produced); and since they are not "perfect" in a final sense, they are active, or productive. [In this transindividual process there is] […] not only an adaptive

> reciprocity of the individual and its environment, or the "interior" and the "exterior," but rather a reciprocity of interconnected or interdependent processes of individuation […] in other words […] the processes which lead to separated singularities are not themselves separated.
>
> (Balibar 1997, 9)

As Balibar concludes, "precisely because the result is individuals which tend to indefinitely increase their degree of autonomy, the very idea of isolated processes of individuation is properly unthinkable" (1997, 9) – which is why both Spinoza and Marx are incompatible with individualism. This transindividual or the communal affective constitution of every individual being enables a conceptualization of communism or socialism as something other than a reductionist economic model.

Marx's own work offers ample evidence against economic reductionism, as it clearly indicates that the economic appropriation and exploitation of labor in terms of surplus-value are inseparable from an affective appropriation and exploitation of labor – that is, the exploitation of labor's transindividual constitution of life. As Marx writes:

> all the progress of civilization, or in other words every increase in the powers of social production […] in the productive powers of labour itself – such as results from science, inventions, division and combination of labour, improved means of communication, creation of the world market, machinery etc. – enriches not the worker but rather capital.
>
> (1993, 308)

The "productive powers of labor itself" that enrich "not the worker but rather capital" create not just surplus-value but also the "progress of civilization" – that is, science, inventions, and all the bodies of knowledge and practices that are part of the transindividual affective constitution of individuals. The underside of the quantitative capitalist exploitation is the appropriation of labor *qua* affective capacity for the production of life. Therefore, the transindividual self-actualization cannot be reduced to surplus-value, even as surplus-value owes its existence to it. Surplus-value owes its existence to these "productive powers of labor" – which transindividually produce individuals and the "progress of civilization" – only because capital appropriates them so that "the creative power of [the laborer's] labour establishes itself as the power of capital, as an *alien power* confronting him" (Marx 1993, 307). By appropriating the transindividual affective constitution of individuals, capital sustains and amplifies both the accumulation of surplus-value and the reproduction of individuals whose essential powers correspond to surplus-value. Therefore, we should never separate the economic from the affective exploitation of labor and instead we should speak of economico-affective appropriation and exploitation. While labor-power is always affective, its actualization and exploitation are historically determined, and it is in capitalism that the

economic is coupled with the affective exploitation.[2] Within capitalism, the economico-affective exploitation of labor reaches its apogee in today's informatized capitalism.

Informatized Era: Convergence of the Forces and Relations of Production = Maximization of Economico-Affective Exploitation

In the informatized era of capitalism, all branches of production – from agriculture, commerce, and industrial production to transportation, communication, and all services – *and* all relations of production – which unfold themselves in our so-called leisure, entertainment, recreation, edification, and generally culture, whose institutions have been multiply named by Marx, Althusser, and others – are mediated through information. Simply put, we educate, enculturate, play, and kill time during our so-called leisure time with the same material that we use during our so-called work time: information.

Informatized capitalism obtains unforeseen high levels of economic exploitation, as well as of political conformism, because it is the first era that has succeeded in maximizing its *affective* exploitation due to the colonization of the relations of production by the forces of production (information). This leads to an indiscernibility between labor and leisure, and this indiscernibility is a structural tendency of capital, that is, it, too, is as much something historically new as it is part of the essence of capital.

To explain we must turn to Marx's concept of surplus-labor:

> If the worker needs only half a working day in order to live a whole day, then, in order to keep alive as a worker, he needs to work only half a day. The second half of the labour day is forced labour; surplus-labour.
>
> (1993, 324)

– labor that drastically contributes to the accumulation of surplus-value because it is unpaid labor. What "appears as surplus value on capital's side appears identically on the worker's side as surplus labour […] in excess of his immediate requirements for keeping himself alive" (324–325). And, since the more the surplus-labor, the more the surplus-value, the drive of capital is to maximize surplus-labor, while minimizing (ideally eliminating) necessary (i.e., paid) labor. In Marx's words, the best way for capital to realize its "sole driving force, the drive to valorize itself, to create surplus-value" is "to make […] the means of production […] absorb the greatest possible amount of surplus labour" (1990, 342). For this reason, "the great historical bearing/direction [geschichtliche Seite] of capital is to *create* this *surplus labour*," and this "historic destiny [*Bestimmung*] is fulfilled as soon as" three conditions are met (1993, 325; 1983, 244; translation modified). First, "there has been such a development of needs that surplus labour above and beyond necessity has itself become a general need" – notice the juxtaposition between "need" and "necessity," with "need" being historico-culturally determined and

"necessity" being fixed as the minimum requirement of survival. For example, today's development of culinary and habitational needs goes so far beyond necessity (survival) that surplus-labor above and beyond necessity (survival) has itself become a general need. The second condition for the fulfillment of the historical destiny of surplus-labor is achieved "when the severe discipline of capital" over "generations [*Geschlecter*] has developed general industriousness as the general property of the new species [*Geschlecht*]" – that is, when the species has mutated to the level of being so addicted to labor that it cannot do anything else but laboring. And the third condition is met "when the development of the productive powers of labour" has "flourished to the stage […] where […] labour in which a human being does what a thing could do has ceased" (1993, 325). If everything could be done by things (machines), then whatever human beings do would be surplus-labor in the absolute sense of the word, that is, no labor at all but a pure actualization of potential for its own sake. In Marx's words:

> Capital's ceaseless striving towards the general form of wealth drives labour beyond the limits of its natural paltriness [*Naturbedürftigkeit*], and thus creates the material elements for the development of the rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as in its consumption, and whose labour also therefore appears no longer as labour, but as the full development of activity itself.
>
> (1993, 325)

At this point of development, "natural necessity [survival] in its direct form has disappeared […] because a historically created need has taken the place of the natural one" (1993, 325). This "historically created need" is catered by the "full development of activity itself" which, as such, "appears no longer as labour." It is in this sense that Marx can see in capital the force of a revolutionary development of affective capacities that, as such, would lead to communism, as the societal organization in which all labor would be the expression of the individuals' creative affective capacity for the sake of the affective enrichment of every individual, and not for the sake of the accumulation of surplus-value.

However, in this labor that "appears no longer as labour" may lie the Hegelian ruse, namely: the conflation between appearance *and* appearance-*qua*-appearance. In his optimistic mood, Marx envisions a world in which machines maximize their potential affective powers by laboring for us, humans, while we develop our rich individualities through fully creative activities. In this utopia, our "labour […] appears no longer as labour" because *it actually is not labor*. What eludes Marx is the possibility of the inverse meaning of his own statement that becomes evident when one reads the verb "to appear" as designating illusion instead of reality. For instance, once humanity has produced the information technology required to search a vast supply of data, my activity searching and finding these data *appears* no longer

as labor but rather as the manifestation of my rich and all-sided individuality that I can actualize for my own recreation. Yet, every time that during our so-called leisure time, we search on the internet to find something, we are actually giving back to the platform feedback through which it can increase its effectivity, productivity, scalability, and ultimately profit. This is also the case with crowdsourcing or crowdworking company platforms, such as Uber, Deliveroo, Amazon, and the like. All these platform models, as Andrea Righi observes, "capitalize on the information they glean and the network affect they generate" through the unpaid labor of the contractor or the client as internet searchers and feedback-givers. The more feedback these companies receive, the "more people join the service and create traffic, the higher the value of the company," and the "more big data is assembled and crunched, the higher the scalability of the system" (Righi 2021, 139). The extraction of value in the form of surplus-labor – from crowdworking and turking[3] to our everyday hour-long internet finding-*qua*-feeding, the system constitutes the culmination of what Marx famously called "the vampire thirst for the living blood of labour," because of which "capitalist production […] drives, by its inherent nature, toward the appropriation of labour throughout the whole of the 24 hours in the day" (Marx 1990, 367). In Righi's words: "the vampire-like character of capital is better explained by the necessity of an absolute round-the-clock activity which is engrained in the very concept of the feedback" (2021, 68). Informatized capitalism fully realizes Marx's observation that "it is not the normal maintenance of labour-power which determines the limits of the working day here, but rather the greatest possible daily expenditure of labour–power, no matter how diseased, compulsory, and painful it may be" (1990, 376). Of course, Marx has nineteenth-century labor conditions in mind, but today's most common diseases, from Attention Deficit Disorder and Internet Addiction Disorder to all compulsory addictions to the screen, perfectly fit the picture. And, what is more, today's diseases themselves reinforce surplus-labor – but how many people would call the activity of the internet addicted gamer or shopper "labor"? And not just addicts but most people today tend to offer their surplus-labor enthusiastically while perceiving it as the full development of their potential for creative and affectively rewarding activity. At the same time that today's capitalism has obtained unforeseen levels of economico-affective exploitation, it also has surpassed itself in terms of its ability to hide this exploitation.

Here, we encounter an utterly ironic inversion of intention, or what Lacanian psychoanalysis designates as the return of one's own message in its inverted form. A society, in which there is no contradiction between (surplus, i.e., wage, yet unpaid) labor and the "full development of activity itself" as recreation, is the same society in which "there exists no contradiction between freedom and regulation" – that is, the society in which "surveillance and freedom are inextricably linked" (Schrape 2014, 36 and 41). As Niklas Schrape remarks in his analysis of the relation between gamification and the liberalist mode of governmentality (Foucault), this inextricable link occurs after the shift from disciplinary modes of governmentality – with their

negative feedback of punishment and the like – to the governmentality of the positive feedback of rewards. In order to get the rewards for my actions, the latter must constantly be monitored, just as they must be the kinds of actions my rewarder is willing to reward. In other words, two conditions are inextricable. On the one hand, I must be granted "the freedom of choice," while, on the other hand, the rewarder must be able to survey my options *and* design "all possible options in such a way that [I] will decide in an intended way"; in short, "subjects should feel free but their behaviour is regulated" (Schrape, 35). Far from realizing any liberatory utopia, we have arrived at the fulfillment of the "Benthamian philosophy," whose notion of the panopticon, as Foucault understood in his work on governmentality, is "not only […] a disciplinary technology but also […] one to produce freedom" (41) – in precisely the sense of libertarian paternalism described here, that is, as the sense of freedom presupposed so as to experience the intended choice as "free choice." Similarly, we must understand labor not just as a disciplinary technology – something to which I have to subject myself in order to survive – but also as one that allows me to produce my creative affective capacity as an individual. Just as for "Bentham, only omnipresent surveillance […] guarantees freedom" (41), so, too, incessant (surplus) labor guarantees my individual creative expression.

These are two inseparable sides of liberalism, because of which, as several analysts have observed, many working-class people today are willing to work in the fashion or "tech industry in the so-called start-up culture" "despite low pay, long hours, and precarious employment"; "they don't want jobs, they want to be creative. They want to be hackers, not workers. Whole industries now function on the promise of creative activity and effect a bait and switch" (Wark 2019, 96). Whether you call it neoliberal or "*vectoral culture*" or California ideology, it is a culture that "encourages everyone to imagine that they are entrepreneurs of the self, playing the stakes of their own animal spirits in the great casino of life" (98). The fulfillment of liberalism means that at the same time that today's capitalism has obtained unforeseen levels of economico-affective exploitation, it also has surpassed itself in terms of its ability to hide this exploitation. For, if surplus-labor appears increasingly today as not labor, then who would be aware of the fact that their labor is appropriated and exploited?

Because the forces of production have entirely colonized the relations of production, the control of "the information vector extends even into life itself" (Wark 2019, 57). But it is misleading to claim, invoking Marshall McLuhan's rhetoric, that "not capital but the vector enters the flesh and commands it, and not just as meat, but also as information" (57). And this is not only because "actually all corporations" – i.e., all cites of production and extraction of surplus-value – "become increasingly organized around the ownership and control of information" (57), i.e., but also because experience shows that the relation between capital and information evidently cannot be that of a dualistic "*not* capital *but* the vector." The conceptual repertory of Marx's theory also corroborates the empirical evidence that capital *or* information

extends into life and commands it. Marx's theory also shows us that to catch up with the times of informatized capitalism we must first grasp that dualism is not an adequate model for conceiving either the relation between capital and information, essence and appearance, or forces and relations of production. It is on the basis of such dualisms that Wark claims that "[t]heories of the eternal quality of Capital's essence, its unity and identity through time, tend to focus on the analysis of the *relations* of production," and she invites us to focus instead on history and on "the forces of production," once again presupposing an either-or relation between the two sides. In this context, she reminds us that "the brain-fryer is a different machine from the meat grinder" (53). She is right-on about this latter point: it would be quite a feat to colonize the relations of production with meat grinders. Information, on the other hand, does it easily.

Notes

1 Of course, everything that is said in the present work about affective labor in the sense of labor-qua-affect also applies to the specific kinds of labor often referred to as affective. I think that the consideration of the latter within the wider framework of an ontology of labor-qua-affect would contribute to a more accurate conceptualization of the particularities of such forms of labor. The same, as I have argued elsewhere, is the case with the designation of labor as "immaterial," that is, discussions of certain contemporary forms of labor as immaterial tend to forget that labor-power itself is immaterial (see, for instance, the chapter "Materialist Epistemontology: Marx and Sohn-Rethel with Spinoza and Psychoanalysis," in Kordela 2018).
2 Note that Lacan elaborates on the affective exploitation of labor in precapitalist societies – the discourse of the Master – as the expropriation of the enslaved person's knowledge in his Seminar XVII (see Lacan 2007).
3 MTurk is a

> microworking system which enables elementary tasks to be performed by a huge number of people (typically called "Turkers") online. Ideally, these tasks are meant to be solved by computers, but they still remain out of computational reach (for instance, the translation of an English sentence into Urdu).

Academic surveying is another example of a field that has been steadily growing, as social scientists have found easy and inexpensive access to quick and already measurable raw data.

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