

Appropriation of Digital Machines and Appropriation of Fixed Capital as the Real Appropriation of Social Being: A Comment on Toni Negri's Article "The Appropriation of Fixed Capital: A Metaphor?"

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Abstract: This article is a reflection and comment on Toni Negri's essay "The Appropriation of Fixed Capital: A Metaphor?". The comment first points out aspects of Negri's reception of Marx. It stresses the continuities of the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. In both, we can find a dialectical concept of technology. Second, this paper points out that Negri's notion of the appropriation of technology/fixed capital should best be read as a critique of techno-optimism à la Marshall McLuhan and of techno-pessimism à la Martin Heidegger. Negri advances a dialectical concept of appropriation that is focused on the appropriation, and therefore transformation, of technology and society. Third, this reflection asks: What does it mean to appropriate digital machines? Concrete strategies of digital appropriation are outlined. The author argues that commons-public partnerships can be powerful political means of struggle against digital capitalism.

Keywords: Toni Negri, fixed capital, appropriation, digital capitalism, digital machines, Karl Marx

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Preface

On December 16, 2023, Toni Negri passed away at the age of 90. In its current issue, *tripleC* remembers Toni Negri's intellectual contributions to and influence in the fields of critical theory and the critical study of labour, communication, the media, and digital technologies. We do so a) in the form of a comment by Ngai Pun on Negri's works, to which he responded, b) the republication of a paper by Toni Negri where he reflects on Marx's notion of fixed capital and its appropriation in the context of digital technologies, and c) the republication of my comment on Negri's article. *tripleC* invites the submission of further reflections on the relevance of Toni Negri's thoughts for the analysis of communication and capitalism.

Antonio Negri's work has made important contributions to the study of capitalism and communication in several respects.

First, he shows that Marx is not just a theorist of capital but also a theorist of labour. He points out that there is a complex dialectic of capital and labour where class struggles are the decisive factor. He worked out a subject-, labour-, and praxis-oriented reading of Marx. Such a focus helps grounding praxis-oriented theories of capitalism, communication, and society.

Second, Negri shows that there is a Marx beyond *Capital*. He points out the importance of the *Grundrisse* and its “Fragment on Machines” where Marx introduced the notion of the general intellect and anticipated the emergence of a knowledge-based capitalism and its antagonism between the socialisation of labour and the capitalist class relations.

Third, based on Marx’s notion of the collective worker (*Gesamtarbeiter*), Negri developed the notion of the social worker that stresses capital’s exploitation of unpaid labour and that such labour is productive labour. This assumption is theoretically and politically significant as it acknowledges the class character of housework, audience labour, user labour, care labour, and other forms of unpaid and precarious labour in capitalism.

Fourth, Toni Negri has together with Michael Hardt in their tetralogy of books consisting of *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2004), *Commonwealth* (2009), and *Assembly* (2017) that was preceded by their 1994 book *Labor of Dionysus* and accompanied by the 2012 pamphlet *Declaration* made important discussion contributions to information society theory. In contrast to theories of postindustrial society and the network society, Hardt and Negri do not see digitalisation as being part of the transition to a completely new society. They stress the continuity of capitalist society. In contrast to orthodox approaches that say that nothing has changed in capitalism, they stress that capitalism has been undergoing transformations. Their analysis of capitalism is based on the onto-epistemological assumption of a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity.

Hardt and Negri’s notion of immaterial labour, for which a better term in my view is knowledge labour or informational labour, stresses the importance of cognitive, communicative, affective, social, co-operative, and digital aspects of labour in capitalism. While many other contemporary Marxian theory approaches have ignored and continue to ignore the analysis of the media, communication, and the digital, Hardt and Negri have stimulated the debate on the information society as well as media and communication theory from a Marxian perspective.

Fifth, Toni Negri was driven by a constant intellectual curiosity. His mind never stood still. He continuously reflected on the dynamics of social movements, capitalism, and class struggles, which resulted in novel theory concepts. As a consequence, he was interested in, reflected on, and contributed to novel developments in critical theory. Aged 84, he in 2017 joined the 6th ICTs & Society Conference “Digital Objects, Digital Subjects: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on Activism, Research & Critique in the Age of Big Data Capitalism” that I organised together with political theorist David Chandler at the University of Westminster. In his talk, Toni Negri talked about Google, algorithms, the Internet, and digital machines, a focus that is missing in the approaches of many established leading critical theorists of society.

Sixth, Toni Negri was an intransigent optimist of the will who stressed that the world is never hopeless and that struggles for the strengthening of the commons and commons-based society are possible and needed. He contributed to the development of theories of the commons that are relevant today in the context of debates on the common good, commoning, the digital commons, commons-based peer production, Creative Commons, etc. Toni Negri’s friend Sandro Mezzadro (2023) says in this context:

“Curiosity, the desire to know, the wish to learn the new accompanied him until the last days of his life. And if anything, he highlighted the limitations of his own work, spurring friends and comrades not to stop, to go beyond established assumptions and paradigms. Whether talking about digital platforms, mass

migration, or global disorder Toni was never satisfied with what he was told (or what he read), he always wanted to understand better and more. [...] Seeing Toni, long past his eighties, sit in cold rooms in social centers and discuss for hours the new forms taken by the class struggle is an experience that I certainly did not have alone. It was normal for him: it does not seem to me to be normal for many intellectuals of his stature. [...] What I called curiosity was nothing more than a tension to understand the world in order to transform it, starting with the identification of the tendencies that run through it, the antagonisms that mark it, and the subjectivities that are formed in and against regimes of exploitation” (Mezzadra 2023).

More points could be added why Negri’s work has been and will continue to be influential and important. But I will stop here. Of course, there have been numerous criticisms of Negri’s works. I have seen the role of Negri’s and Hardt’s works as the provision of food for thought and debate and intellectual provocations for critical academia, social movements, and the public sphere. Toni Negri will be missed as critical public intellectual. What remains and should inspire us is his model of critical, curious intellectuality and his optimism of the will (accompanied by pessimism of the heart). This outlook on the world shaped his views even in the context of death:

“Power [*potenza*] is the time of this passage, of the ontological transformations that are given along this path. This being together of life and death, of power and act, is a production of community, an extraordinary accumulation of possibility. [...] Power [*potenza*] and pain are the complementary dimensions of life. For this reason they open onto community and redemption. [...] The universal and constitutive function of suffering [*patire*] can be found where passion becomes compassion, and sadness turns into the joy of communion with the other. The ontology of the community is uncovered through suffering together – a suffering that is, therefore, torn from passivity and becomes constructive. It becomes ethical” (Negri 2009, 90-91, 93-94).

1. Marx

In his essay “The Appropriation of Fixed Capital”, Toni Negri makes an argument for thinking about the role of technology in social struggles and in relation to alternatives to capitalism. He rejects technological determinism and technological pessimism. He engages with Marx’s concept of technology in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* and applies a similar view to digital technologies.

Autonomism has traditionally preferred readings of the *Grundrisse* over *Capital* because of the heavy focus on the latter in Stalinist readings of Marx. In this context, Negri stresses that the “objectification of categories in *Capital* blocks action by revolutionary subjectivity” (Negri 1991, 8). “I am not launching an abstract polemic against *Capital* – in fact all of us have been formed intellectually and brought to theoretical understanding by the class hatred that reading *Capital* nourished within us. But *Capital* is also the text which has been used in order to reduce criticism to economic theory, to the elimination of subjectivity into objectivity, and to the subjugation of the subversive proletariat by the repressive recomposing of knowledge in the form of a science of domination” (Negri 1988, 175). Negri argues that the *Grundrisse* is “a political text that conjugates an appreciation of the revolutionary possibilities created by the ‘imminent crisis’” (Negri 1991, 8). Negri has pointed out the importance of technology in capitalism and beyond capitalism. He has in this context

stressed the role of the *Grundrisse's Fragment on Machines* (Marx 1857/1858/1973, 690-714; see Fuchs 2016, 360-375).

In *Fragment*, Marx anticipates the emergence of an information economy due to the development of capitalism's productive forces. He foresees a stage where "general social knowledge", or what he terms the "general intellect", has become "a *direct force of production*" (Marx 1857/1858/1973, 706). Marx stresses the importance of knowledge in the development of fixed capital. His notion of the general intellect has a huge influence on Negri's work and is at the heart of the latter's concepts of the social worker, the multitude, immaterial labour, and the commons (see Hardt and Negri 1994, 10, 21; Hardt and Negri 2000, 29-30, 364-369; Negri 1991, 139-150).

The notion of the general intellect can also be found in *Capital* as the concept of general work (Marx 1867/1976, 667; Marx 1894/1981, 199). It is therefore certainly feasible to extend the analysis of knowledge in and beyond capitalism to a broad range of Marx's works, including *Capital*. In more recent works, Toni Negri has increasingly embraced *Capital*. In his latest book *Marx and Foucault*, Negri (2017) stresses for example that the analysis of relative surplus value and large-scale industry in *Capital Volume I* constitutes a "*political point of view in Marx*". Negri (2017, 55) writes that in the *Grundrisse*, "Marx had advanced theses that would only achieve their full and material consistency in Book I of *Capital*". Machines are fixed capital that labour uses as a means for creating surplus value. They are also a means of relative surplus-value production. When Negri says that large-scale industry and relative surplus value are political, he means that class struggle in capitalism is a struggle over the control of human activity and time. Given that technology is a means for organising labour and labour-time, it is embedded in social struggles.

With around 150 pages, Chapter 15 (*Machinery and Large Scale Industry*) of *Capital Volume I* is the book's longest chapter. It is also *Capital's* technology chapter (see Fuchs 2016, Chapter 15, for a detailed discussion of this chapter). Technology in capitalism is "converting the worker into a living appendage of the machine" (Marx 1867/1976, 614), but at the same time it develops potentials for the "totally developed individual" (618) and fosters the "struggle between the capitalist and the wage-labourer" (553) that extends to "the instrument of labour itself, capital's material mode of existence" (ibid, 554). Modern technology is at the heart of the capitalist contradiction between productive forces and relations of production. This antagonism does not result in an automatic collapse of capitalism, as is incorrectly assumed by breakdown theories, but simultaneously fosters repeated crises and the emergence of communist potentials. The dialectical transcendence and *Aufhebung* of capitalism is not caused by technology, but is a potential that can only be realised in and through social struggle. We can learn from Marx's Chapter 15 that technology in capitalism always has an antagonistic character; it is a means of domination just as it is a potential means of liberation, and, in a post-capitalist world, a means of commoning.

In the article "The Appropriation of Fixed Capital: A Metaphor?", Negri stresses the continuity of Marx's analysis of technology in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. Machinery is a tool both of domination and potential liberation. It opens up spaces of exploitation and potential spaces of autonomy and self-valorisation. Negri says in his article in this context: "On the one hand, past human activity and its intelligence are accumulated, crystallised as fixed capital; on the other, reversing the tide, living humans are capable of reabsorbing capital in themselves and their own social life".

2. The Appropriation of Technology

By speaking of the need for the political appropriation of technology, Toni Negri rejects both the optimistic and the pessimistic versions of technological determinism. Techno-optimism assumes that technology is itself a form of human appropriation and automatically has positive effects on society. In the realm of the study of communication technologies, we can look to Marshall McLuhan's example that electronic media create a global village: "The new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village" (McLuhan 1995, 121). "The overhauling of our traditional political system is only one manifestation of the retribalizing process wrought by the electric media, which is turning the planet into a global village" (238).

Techno-pessimism assumes that technology as such is an autonomous realm that inherently has negative effects on society. An example is Martin Heidegger's analysis of modern technology. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1996, 119) characterises the newspaper and means of public transport as inauthentic and "true dictatorship". For Heidegger, the left-wing blog and the socialist newspaper are, just like the right-wing extremist tabloid, a form of inauthenticity. In *The Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger (1977) introduces the notion of the *Gestell* for modern technology that he sees as inherently alienating. Heidegger detaches the analysis of technology from the analysis of capitalism and therefore leaves a dangerous void in his theory (Fuchs 2015c, 2015d). Negri (2017, 7) speaks in this context of "Heideggerian fascism".

In contrast to techno-optimism and techno-pessimism, Negri stresses that the appropriation of technology is a political struggle. Technology does not automatically have a liberating or dominative character, but its character is shaped by the process and outcomes of social struggles. To appropriate technology means attempting to turn it from a means of domination and exploitation into a means of struggle and commoning. The appropriation of technology is the *Aufhebung* of technology, that is, neither its elimination nor its new creation, but a dialectical transformation that preserves the best qualities of existing technologies, eliminates their destructive, dominative and exploitative character, and creates new qualities that support the common development of humans, society and nature. Appropriation as political struggle means the transformation of society from a class society into a commonist society. The transformation of technologies from technologies of capital into technologies of commoning is part of this appropriation process.

The commonist expropriation of the expropriators entails the transformation of capitalist technologies into common technologies of commoning, commonly owned and controlled technologies that foster the common good. Whereas exploitation is the 'capitalist mode of appropriation' (Marx 1867/1978, 929), commoning is the commonist mode of appropriation. In capitalism, "[a]ppropriation appears as *estrangement*, as *alienation*" (Marx 1844/2010, 83), whereas commonism is the "*real appropriation*" of the "*social* (i.e., human) being" (ibid, 102), and the "appropriation of *human life*" (ibid, 103). Real appropriation requires socially developed productive forces as one of its preconditions in order to transform surplus labour-time into the realm of freedom. In the age of the social worker and the digital machine, the preconditions and germs of real ap- propriation exist and develop, but are simultaneously constrained by capitalism.

3. The Appropriation of Digital Machines

In the age of algorithms, social media, Big Data and digital machines, the relationship between fixed constant capital and variable capital has become more dynamic. Traditionally, engineers created machines that were used in the production process over a longer time period until they became physically or morally depreciated and had to be replaced. Digital machines operate on binary data. Digital capitalism has datafied our lives. Our online activities are to a significant degree digital labour that creates data that is both a commodity and part of fixed capital (Fuchs 2014; 2015a, Chapter 5). Data storage is an inherent element of the digital machine. Once created, data in digital capitalism becomes fixed constant capital (Fuchs 2015a, 183-185). It is stored on servers as part of the digital machine that enables digital capital accumulation. But data is also the building block, the circulating constant capital, on which basis digital labour creates new content and data. In the realm of Big Data, “circulating constant capital and fixed constant capital tend to converge” (Fuchs 2015a, 184). Data is the objectification of digital labour, of human subjectivity that goes online. Data as constant capital is therefore an objectification of the general intellect. Datafication generalises human knowledge and fixes it in databases stored on servers.

Toni Negri in his article says that young people in particular have the potential to answer to digital exploitation and digital capital: “We wish to valorise ourselves, to govern the commons that we produce”. When human subjects become political subjects, then communist digital appropriation can become a form of resistance to digital capitalism. Negri reminds us in his paper that algorithms and digital machines are not intelligent. Only humans possess intelligence. And it is the political intelligence of humans that gives them the capacity to turn digital capital into digital commons, and the capitalist digital machine into one of commoning and social cooperation.

Is Big Data commonism the alternative to Big Data capitalism? On the one hand, amassing, leaking and publishing Big Data about capitalist power and state power has become a strategy of resistance. On the other hand, one must see that Big Data generation and Big Data storage serves the interests of capitalism and the state. Big Data has emerged from capitalist control (Big Data-based capital accumulation) and state control (state surveillance of citizens because of the false surveillance ideology that not socialism, but surveillance and a police state, are the best means against political and social problems). In addition, Big Data capitalism requires massive amounts of energy that are predominantly based on non-renewable sources, advancing climate change. Big Data commonism therefore aims to limit the amount of data stored to the minimum necessary, and to get rid of surplus data that today becomes surplus value and surplus power. We need small data instead of Big Data.

But how do we appropriate an algorithm? There are two main strategies, the first of which is capital taxation. Global Internet giants constantly avoid paying taxes, an evasion that is enabled by the contradiction between the global Internet and regulation at the level of the nation state. Taxing global corporations and online advertising can create state income that can be distributed to citizens via participatory budgeting. The participatory media fee would tax global corporations and give everyone a citizens' communication income that could then be donated to non-profit media projects (Fuchs 2015b). Alternative media often lack resources. Via participatory budgeting and capital taxation, the alternative media sector could be strengthened in order to weaken the corporate character of the Internet and the media in general. Paying a salary for using Facebook is in general not a feasible strategy because it does not question the dominant character of digital monopoly capital. A universal basic income for universal

labour, which includes unpaid digital labour and other unpaid reproductive labour, would be a better political strategy.

Platform co-ops and peer-to-peer production are a second strategy. These are civil society projects that organise online platforms and digital machines as user-controlled and digital worker-controlled organisations that do not operate for profit and for the interests of the few, but for the benefit of all and the common good. Resource precarity is one of the main problems alternative economy projects tend to face. Combining both strategies would generate a resource base for platform co-ops and peer-to-peer projects. If they can expand, then they can create an economic realm that poses an alternative to digital capital and is in itself a form of digital class struggle against digital capitalism.

The Left has traditionally been afraid of conquering state power. To a certain degree, the Stalinist experience justifies such scepticism. But the anarchist rejection of appropriating the state in order to transform and transcend it often leaves alternative projects powerless, marginalised and confronted with a political economy of precarity (of voluntary labour and resources) that fosters sectarianism and anarchist versions of Stalinist orthodoxy and hierarchy. In the realm of communications, we should not forget that besides citizens' media, there is the realm of public service media (PSM). Especially in Europe, there is a strong PSM tradition that, to a significant degree, operates outside the logic of capital. The problem it often faces is political clientelism. But just like there can be struggles for more autonomous realms from capital in the economy, so there can be struggles for more autonomous realms from the state in the public sphere. Today, legal frameworks keep PSM from becoming public digital services and public service Internet platform providers. Monopoly media capital sees PSM as competitors and has influenced legislation that in the end helps the economic interests of digital monopoly capital (Google, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft, Apple, etc.). I am not arguing in favour of a state-controlled Internet, as we already can find it where secret services implement a surveillance-industrial Internet complex (as revealed by Edward Snowden), but for independent, critical public service media that offer specific online services, such as Club 2.0 (see Fuchs 2017, Section 3.3) or a public service YouTube that offers all archived public service television and radio content to the public as a common good that can be appropriated and remixed (using certain Creative Commons licences).

What does the appropriation of the capitalist digital machine mean? It means the struggle for alternatives to digital capitalism, the de-commodification, de-capitalisation and de-commercialisation of the digital and the Internet. Today, we often find private-public partnerships that foster commodification. Digital appropriation promises to be an effective form of digital struggle when organised as commons-public partnerships that negate the logic of digital capital and help the digital commons to transcend and abolish digital capitalism. The broader context of such digital struggles is the renewal of the Left as a dialectic of movement and party (Dean 2016).

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