

# NETWORK CULTURE

**Politics for the Information Age**

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### 3

## Free Labour<sup>1</sup>

The real *not-capital* is labour.  
(Karl Marx *Grundrisse*)

Working in the digital media industry was never as much fun as it was made out to be. Certainly, for the workers of the best-known and most highly valued companies, work might have been a brief experience of something that did not feel like work at all.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, even during the dot-com boom the ‘netslaves’ of the homonymous webzine had always been vociferous about the shamelessly exploitative nature of the job, its punishing work rhythms and its ruthless casualization.<sup>3</sup> They talked about ‘24/7 electronic sweatshops’, complained about the 90-hour week and the ‘moronic management of new media companies’. Antagonism in the new media industry also affected the legions of volunteers running well-known sites for the Internet giants. In early 1999, seven of the 15,000 ‘volunteers’ of America Online rocked the info-loveboat by asking the Department of Labor to investigate whether AOL owed them back wages for the years of playing chat hosts for free.<sup>4</sup> They used to work long hours and love it; but they also felt the pain of being burned by digital media.

These events pointed to an inevitable backlash against the glamorization of digital labour, which highlighted its continuities with the modern sweatshop and the increasing degradation of knowledge work. Yet the question of labour in a ‘digital economy’ as an innovative development of the familiar logic of capitalist exploitation is not so easily dismissed. The netslaves are not simply a typical form of labour on the Internet; they also embody a complex relation to labour, which is widespread in late capitalist societies.

In this chapter, we call this excessive activity that makes the Internet a thriving and hyperactive medium ‘free labour’ – a feature of the cultural economy at large, and an important, yet unacknowledged, source of value in advanced capitalist societies. By looking at the Internet as a specific instance of the fundamental role played by free labour, we will also highlight the connections between the ‘digital

economy' and what the Italian autonomists have called the 'social factory' (or 'society-factory').<sup>5</sup> The 'society-factory' describes a process whereby 'work processes have shifted from the factory to society, thereby setting in motion a truly complex machine'.<sup>6</sup> Simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited, free labour on the Net includes the activity of building web sites, modifying software packages, reading and participating in mailing lists and building virtual spaces. Far from being an 'unreal', empty space, the Internet is animated by cultural and technical labour through and through, a continuous production of value which is completely immanent in the flows of the network society at large.

Support for this argument, however, is immediately complicated by the recent history of Anglo-American cultural theory. How should we speak of labour, especially cultural and technical labour, after the demolition job carried out by 30 years of postmodernism? The postmodern socialist feminism of Donna Haraway's 'Cyborg Manifesto' spelled out some of the reasons behind the antipathy of 1980s critical theory for Marxist analyses of labour. Haraway explicitly rejected the humanistic tendencies of theorists who see the latter as the 'pre-eminently privileged category enabling the Marxist to overcome illusion and find that point of view which is necessary for changing the world'.<sup>7</sup> Paul Gilroy similarly expressed his discontent at the inadequacy of the Marxist analysis of labour to the descendants of slaves, who value artistic expression as 'the means towards both individual self-fashioning and communal liberation'.<sup>8</sup> If labour is 'the humanizing activity that makes [white] man', then, surely, this 'humanising' labour does not really belong in the age of networked, posthuman intelligence.

However, the 'informatics of domination' which Haraway describes in the 'Manifesto' is certainly preoccupied with the relation between technology, labour and capital. In the 20 years since its publication, this triangulation has become even more evident. The expansion of the Internet has given ideological and material support to contemporary trends towards increased flexibility of the workforce, continuous reskilling, freelance work, and the diffusion of practices such as 'supplementing' (bringing supplementary work home from the conventional office).<sup>9</sup> Advertising campaigns and business manuals suggest that the Internet is not only a site of disintermediation (embodying the famous death of the middle man, from bookshops to travel agencies and computer stores), but also the

means through which a flexible, collective network intelligence has come into being.

I will not offer here a judgement on the 'effects' of the Internet on society. What I will rather do is map the way in which the Internet connects to the autonomist 'social factory'. We will look, that is, at how the 'outernet' – the network of social, cultural and economic relationships which criss-crosses and exceeds the Internet – surrounds and connects the latter to larger flows of labour, culture and power. It is fundamental to move beyond the notion that cyberspace is about escaping reality in order to understand how the reality of the Internet is deeply connected to the development of late postindustrial societies as a whole. It is related to phenomena that have been defined as 'external economies' within theoretical perspectives (such as the theory of transaction costs) suggesting that 'the production of value is increasingly involving the capture of productive elements and social wealth that are *outside* the direct productive process ...'.<sup>10</sup> Cultural and technical work is central to the Internet but is also a widespread activity throughout advanced capitalist societies. Such labour is not exclusive to so-called 'knowledge workers', but is a pervasive feature of the postindustrial economy. The pervasiveness of such diffuse cultural production questions the legitimacy of a fixed distinction between production and consumption, labour and culture. It also undermines Gilroy's distinction between work as 'servitude, misery and subordination' and artistic expression as the means to self-fashioning and communal liberation. The increasingly blurred territory between production and consumption, work and cultural expression, however, does not signal the recomposition of the alienated Marxist worker. The Internet does not automatically turn every user into an active producer, and every worker into a creative subject. The process whereby production and consumption are reconfigured within the category of free labour signals the unfolding of another logic of value, whose operations need careful analysis.<sup>11</sup>

### THE DIGITAL ECONOMY

The term 'digital economy' emerged in the late 1990s as a way to summarize some of the processes described above. As a term, it seems to describe a formation which intersects on the one hand with the postmodern cultural economy (the media, the university and the arts)

and on the other hand with the information industry (the information and communication complex). Such an intersection of two different fields of production constitutes a challenge to a theoretical and practical engagement with the question of labour, a question which has become marginal for media studies as compared with questions of ownership (within political economy) and consumption (within cultural studies).

We will distinguish here between the New Economy, 'a historical period marker [that] acknowledges its conventional association with Internet companies',<sup>12</sup> and the digital economy – a less transient phenomenon based on key features of digitized information (its ease of copying and low or zero cost of sharing). In Richard Barbrook's definition, the digital economy is characterized by the emergence of new technologies (computer networks) and new types of worker (such as digital artisans).<sup>13</sup> According to Barbrook, the digital economy is a mixed economy: it includes a public element (the state's funding of the original research that produced ARPANET, the financial support to academic activities which had a substantial role in shaping the culture of the Internet); a market-driven element (a latecomer that tries to appropriate the digital economy by reintroducing commodification); and a gift economy (the true expression of the cutting edge of capitalist production which prepares its eventual overcoming into a future 'anarcho-communism').

What Barbrook proposed was that the vision of politicians and corporate leaders who linked the future of capitalism to the informational commodity involved a basic misunderstanding. Pointing to the world of discussion groups, mailing lists and the distributed learning of programmers, he suggested that the Internet was far from simply being a new way to sell commodities. The predominance of relationships of collaboration across distance and exchange without money suggested that this was a practised relationship with a viable and alternative political and economic model.

Unrestricted by physical distance, they collaborate with each other without the direct mediation of money and politics. Unconcerned about copyright, they give and receive information without thought of payment. In the absence of states or markets to mediate social bonds, network communities are instead formed through the mutual obligations created by gifts of time and ideas.<sup>14</sup>

Barbrook's vision of the informational commons was only reinforced by the subsequent explosion of peer-to-peer, file-sharing networks – a huge network phenomenon that had the music and film industry up in arms.

From a Marxist–Hegelian angle, Barbrook saw the high-tech gift economy as a process of overcoming capitalism from the inside. The high-tech gift economy is a pioneering moment which transcends both the purism of the New Left do-it-yourself culture and the neoliberalism of the free-market ideologues: 'money–commodity and gift relations are not just in conflict with each other, but also co-exist in symbiosis.'<sup>15</sup> Participants in the gift economy are not reluctant to use market resources and government funding to pursue a potlatch economy of free exchange. However, the potlatch and the economy ultimately remain irreconcilable, and the market economy is always threatening to reprivatize the common enclaves of the gift economy. Commodification, the reimposition of a regime of property, is, in Barbrook's opinion, the main strategy through which capitalism tries to bring back the anarcho-communism of the Net into its fold.

This early attempt to offer a polemical platform from which to think about the digital economy overemphasized the autonomy of the high-tech gift economy from capitalism. The processes of exchange which characterize the Internet are not simply the re-emergence of communism within the cutting edge of the economy, a repressed other which resurfaces just at the moment when communism seems defeated. It is important to remember that the gift economy, as part of a larger informational economy, is itself an important force within the reproduction of the labour force in late capitalism as a whole. The provision of 'free labour', as we shall see later, is a fundamental moment in the creation of value in the economy at large – beyond the digital economy of the Internet. As will be made clear, the conditions that make free labour an important element of the digital economy are based on a difficult, experimental compromise between the historically rooted cultural and affective desire for creative production (of the kind more commonly associated with Gilroy's emphasis on 'individual self-fashioning and communal liberation') and the current capitalist emphasis on knowledge as the main source of added value.

The volunteers for America On Line, the netslaves and the amateur web designers did not work only because capital wanted them to, but they were acting out a desire for affective and cultural production which was none the less real just because it was socially shaped.



The cultural, technical and creative work which supported the New Economy had been made possible by the development of capital beyond the early industrial and Fordist modes of production and therefore is particularly abundant in those areas where post-Fordism has been at work for several decades. In the overdeveloped countries, the end of the factory has spelled out the marginalisation of the old working class, but it has also produced generations of workers who have been repeatedly addressed as active consumers of meaningful commodities. Free labour is the moment where this knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into excess productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited.

Management theory has also been increasingly concerned with the question of knowledge work, that indefinable quality which is essential to the processes of stimulating innovation and achieving the goals of competitiveness. For example, Don Tapscott, in a classic example of New Economy managerial literature, *The Digital Economy*, wrote about a 'new economy based on the networking of human intelligence'.<sup>16</sup> Human intelligence provides the much needed added value, which is essential to the economic health of the organization. Human intelligence, however, also poses a problem: it cannot be managed in quite the same way as more traditional types of labour. Knowledge workers need open organizational structures in order to produce, because the production of knowledge is rooted in collaboration; this is what Barbrook had defined as the 'gift economy'.

... the concept of supervision and management is changing to team-based structures. Anyone responsible for managing knowledge workers know they cannot be 'managed' in the traditional sense. Often they have specialized knowledge and skills that cannot be matched or even understood by management. A new challenge to management is first to attract and retain these assets by marketing the organization to them, and second to *provide the creative and open communications environment where such workers can effectively apply and enhance their knowledge.*<sup>17</sup>

For Tapscott, therefore, the digital economy magically resolves the contradictions of industrial societies, such as class struggle: whereas in the industrial economy the 'worker tried to achieve fulfillment through leisure [and]... was alienated from the means of production which were owned and controlled by someone else', in the digital

economy the worker achieves fulfillment through work and finds in her brain her own, unalienated means of production.<sup>18</sup> Such means of production need to be cultivated by encouraging the worker to participate in a culture of exchange, whose flows are mainly kept within the company but also need to involve an 'outside', a contact with the fast-moving world of knowledge in general. The convention, the exhibition and the conference – the traditional ways of supporting this general exchange – are supplemented by network technologies both inside and outside the company. Although the traffic of these flows of knowledge needs to be monitored (hence the corporate concerns about the use of intranets), the Internet effectively functions as a channel through which 'human intelligence' renews its capacity to produce.

Is it possible to look beyond the totalizing hype of the managerial literature, but also beyond some of the conceptual limits of Barbrook's gift economy model? We will look at some possible explanations for the coexistence, within the debate about the digital economy, of discourses which see it as an oppositional movement and others which see it as a functional development to new mechanisms of extraction of value. Is the end of Marxist alienation wished for by the management guru the same thing as the gift economy heralded by leftist discourse?

We can start undoing this deadlock by subtracting the label 'digital economy' from its exclusive anchorage within advanced forms of labour (we can start, then, by de-pioneering it). This chapter describes the 'digital economy' as a specific mechanism of internal 'capture' of larger pools of social and cultural knowledge. The digital economy is an important area of experimentation with value and free cultural/affective labour. It is about specific forms of production (web design, multimedia production, digital services and so on), but it is also about forms of labour we do not immediately recognize as such: chat, real-life stories, mailing lists, amateur newsletters and so on. These types of cultural and technical labour are not produced by capitalism in any direct, cause-and-effect fashion, that is they have not developed simply as an answer to the economic needs of capital. However, they have developed in relation to the expansion of the cultural industries and they are part of a process of economic experimentation with the creation of monetary value out of knowledge/culture/affect.

This process is different from that described by popular, left-wing wisdom about the incorporation of authentic cultural moments: it is not, then, about the bad boys of capital moving in on underground

subcultures or subordinate cultures and ‘incorporating’ the fruits of their production (styles, languages, music) into the media food chain. This process is usually considered the end of a particular cultural formation, or at least the end of its ‘authentic’ phase. After incorporation, local cultures are picked up and distributed globally, thus contributing to cultural hybridization or cultural imperialism (depending on whom you listen to). Rather than capital ‘incorporating’ from the outside the authentic fruits of the collective imagination, it seems more reasonable to think of cultural flows as originating within a field which is always and already capitalism. Incorporation is not about capital descending on authentic culture, but a more immanent process of channelling of collective labour (even as cultural labour) into monetary flows and its structuration within capitalist business practices.

Subcultural movements have stuffed the pockets of multinational capitalism for decades. Nurtured by the consumption of earlier cultural moments, subcultures have provided the look, style and sounds that sell clothes, CDs, video games, films and advertising slots on television. This has often happened through the active participation of subcultural members in the production of cultural goods (independent labels in music; small designer shops in fashion).<sup>19</sup> This participation is, as the word suggests, a voluntary phenomenon, although it is regularly accompanied by cries of ‘Sell-out!’ The fruits of collective cultural labour have been not simply appropriated, but voluntarily *channelled* and controversially *structured* within capitalist business practices. The relation between culture, the cultural industry and labour in these movements is much more complex than the notion of incorporation suggests. In this sense, the digital economy is not a new phenomenon, but simply a new phase of this longer history of experimentation.

#### KNOWLEDGE CLASS AND IMMATERIAL LABOUR

In spite of the numerous, more or less disingenuous endorsements of the democratic potential of the Internet, its links with capitalism have always been a bit too tight for comfort to concerned political minds. It has been very tempting to counteract the naive technological utopianism by pointing out how computer networks are the material and ideological heart of informed capital. The Internet advertised on television and portrayed by the print media seems not just the latest incarnation of capital’s inexhaustible search for new markets,

but also a full consensus-creating machine, which socializes the mass of proletarianized knowledge workers into the economy of continuous innovation.<sup>20</sup> After all, if we do not get online soon, the hype suggests, we will become obsolete, unnecessary, disposable. If we do, we are promised, we will become part of the 'hive mind', the immaterial economy of networked, intelligent subjects in charge of speeding up the rhythms of capital's 'incessant waves of branching innovations'.<sup>21</sup> Multimedia artists, writers, journalists, software programmers, graphic designers and activists, together with small and large companies, are at the core of this project. For some they are the cultural elite, for others a new form of proletarianized labour.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, digital workers are described as resisting or supporting the project of capital, often in direct relation to their positions in the networked, horizontal and yet hierarchical world of knowledge work.

Any judgement on the political potential of the Internet, then, is tied not only to its much vaunted capacity to allow decentralized access to information, but also to the question of who uses the Internet and how. If the decentralized structure of the Net is to count for anything at all, the argument goes, then we need to know about its constituent population (hence the endless statistics about income, nationality, gender and race of Internet users, the most polled, probed and yet opaque survey material in the world). If this population is still largely made up of 'knowledge workers', a global elite with no ties to a disenfranchised majority, then it matters whether these are seen as the owners of elitist cultural and economic power or the avant-garde of new configurations of labour which do not automatically guarantee elite status.

The question of who uses the Internet is both necessary and yet misleading. It is necessary because we have to ask who is participating in the digital economy before we can pass a judgement on the latter. It is misleading because it implies that all we need to know is how to locate the knowledge workers within a 'class', and knowing which class it is will give us an answer to the political potential of the Net as a whole. If we can prove that knowledge workers are the avant-garde of labour, then the Net becomes a site of resistance;<sup>23</sup> if we can prove that knowledge workers wield the power in informed societies, then the Net is an extended gated community for the middle classes.<sup>24</sup> Even admitting that knowledge workers are indeed fragmented in terms of hierarchy and status won't help us that much; it will still lead to a simple system of categorization, in which the

Net becomes a field of struggle between the diverse constituents of the knowledge class.

The question is further complicated by the stubborn resistance of 'knowledge' to quantification: knowledge cannot be exclusively pinned down to specific social segments. Although the shift from factory to office work, from production to services, is widely acknowledged, it just isn't clear why some people qualify and some others do not.<sup>25</sup> The 'knowledge worker' is a very contested sociological category.

A more interesting move is possible, however, by not looking for the knowledge class within quantifiable parameters but by concentrating instead on 'labour'. Although the notion of class retains a material value which is indispensable to make sense of the experience of concrete historical subjects, it also has its limits: for example it 'freezes' the subject, just like a substance within the chemical periodical table – one is born as a certain element (working class metal) but then might become something else (middle class silicon) if submitted to the proper alchemical processes (education and income). Such an understanding of class also freezes out the flows of culture and money which mobilize the labour force as a whole. In terms of Internet use, it gives rise to the generalized endorsements and condemnations which I have described above and does not explain or make sense of the heterogeneity and yet commonalities of Internet users. It seems therefore more useful to think in terms of what the Italian autonomists, and especially Maurizio Lazzarato, have described as *immaterial labour*. For Lazzarato, the concept of immaterial labour refers to *two different aspects* of labour:

On the one hand, as regards the 'informational content' of the commodity, it refers directly to the changes taking place in workers' labor processes ... where the skills involved in direct labor are increasingly skills involving cybernetics and computer control (and horizontal and vertical communication). On the other hand, as regards the activity that produces the 'cultural content' of the commodity, immaterial labor involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as 'work' – in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion.<sup>26</sup>

Immaterial labour, unlike the knowledge worker, is not completely confined to a specific class formation. Lazzarato insists that this form of labour power is not limited to highly skilled workers, but is a form of activity of every productive subject within postindustrial societies. In the highly skilled worker, these capacities are already there. In the young worker, however, the 'precarious worker', and the unemployed youth, these capacities are 'virtual', that is they are there but are still undetermined. This means that immaterial labour is a virtuality (an undetermined capacity) which belongs to the postindustrial productive subjectivity as a whole. For example, the obsessive emphasis on education of 1990s governments can be read as an attempt to stop this virtuality from disappearing or from being channelled into places which would not be as acceptable to the current power structures. In spite of all the contradictions of advanced capital and its relation to structural unemployment, postmodern governments do not like the completely unemployable. The potentialities of work must be kept alive, the unemployed must undergo continuous training in order to be both monitored and kept alive as some kind of postindustrial reserve force. Nor can they be allowed to channel their energy into the experimental, nomadic, and antiproduktive lifestyles which in Britain have been so savagely attacked by the Criminal Justice Act since the mid 1990s.<sup>27</sup>

However, unlike the post-Fordists, and in accordance with his autonomist origins, Lazzarato does not conceive of immaterial labour as purely functional to a new historical phase of capitalism:

The virtuality of this capacity is neither empty nor ahistoric; it is rather an opening and a potentiality, that have as their historical origins and antecedents the 'struggle against work' of the Fordist worker and, in more recent times, the processes of socialization, educational formation, and cultural self-valorization.<sup>28</sup>

This dispersal of immaterial labour (as a virtuality and an actuality) problematizes the idea of the 'knowledge worker' as a class in the 'industrial' sense of the word. As a collective quality of the labour force, immaterial labour can be understood to pervade the social body with different degrees of intensity. This intensity is produced by the processes of 'channelling' of the capitalist formation which distributes value according to its logic of profit.<sup>29</sup> If knowledge is inherently collective, this is even more the case in the postmodern cultural economy: music, fashion, and information are all produced

collectively but are selectively compensated. Only some companies are picked up by corporate distribution chains in the case of fashion and music; only a few sites are invested in by venture capital. However it is a form of collective cultural labour which makes these products possible even though the profit is disproportionately appropriated by established corporations.

From this point of view, the well-known notion that the Internet materializes a 'collective intelligence' is not completely off the mark. The Internet highlights the existence of networks of immaterial labour and speeds up their accretion into a collective entity. The productive capacities of immaterial labour on the Internet encompass the work of writing/reading/managing and participating in mailing lists/websites/chat lines. These activities fall outside the concept of 'abstract labour', which Marx defined as the provision of time for the production of value regardless of the useful qualities of the product.<sup>30</sup> They witness an investment of desire into production of the kind cultural theorists have mainly theorized in relation to consumption.

This explosion of productive activities was undermined for various commentators by the globally privileged character of the Internet population. However, we might also argue that to recognize the existence of immaterial labour as a diffuse, collective quality of postindustrial labour in its entirety does not deny the existence of hierarchies of knowledge (both technical and cultural) which pre-structure (but do not determine) the nature of such activities. These hierarchies shape the degrees to which such virtualities become actualities, that is they go from being potential to being realized as processual, constituting moments of cultural, affective, and technical production. Neither capital nor living labour want a labour force which is permanently excluded from the possibilities of immaterial labour. But this is where their desires cease to coincide. Capital wants to retain control over the unfolding of these virtualities and the processes of valorization. The relative abundance of cultural/technical/affective production on the Net, then, does not exist as a free-floating postindustrial utopia but in full, mutually constituting interaction with late capitalism.

#### COLLECTIVE MINDS

The collective nature of networked, immaterial labour was exalted by the utopian statements of the 1990s cyberlibertarians. Kevin Kelly's

popular thesis in *Out of Control*, for example, suggested that the Internet is a collective 'hive mind'. According to Kelly, the Internet is another manifestation of a principle of self-organization that is widespread throughout technical, natural and social systems. The Internet is the material evidence of the existence of the self-organizing, infinitely productive activities of connected human minds.<sup>31</sup> From a different perspective, Pierre Levy drew on cognitive anthropology and poststructuralist philosophy to argue that computers and computer networks enable the emergence of a 'collective intelligence'. Levy, who is inspired by early computer pioneers such as Douglas Engelbart, argues for a new humanism 'that incorporates and enlarges the scope of self-knowledge and collective thought'.<sup>32</sup> According to Levy, we are passing from a Cartesian model of thought based upon the singular idea of *cogito* (I think) to a collective or plural *cogitamus* (we think):

What is collective intelligence? It is a form of *universally distributed intelligence*, constantly enhanced, coordinated in real time, and resulting in the effective mobilization of skills ... The basis and goal of collective intelligence is the mutual recognition and enrichment of individuals rather than the cult of fetishized or hypostatized communities.<sup>33</sup>

Like Kelly, Levy frames his argument within the common rhetoric of competition and flexibility which dominates the hegemonic discourse around digitalization: 'The more we are able to form intelligent communities, as open-minded, cognitive subjects capable of initiative, imagination, and rapid response, the more we will be able to ensure our success in a highly competitive environment.'<sup>34</sup> In Levy's view, the digital economy highlights the impossibility of absorbing intelligence within the process of automation: unlike the first wave of cybernetics, which displaced workers from the factory, computer networks highlight the unique value of human intelligence as the true creator of value in a knowledge economy. In his opinion, since the economy is increasingly reliant on the production of creative subjectivities, this production is highly likely to engender a new humanism, a new centrality of man's [sic] creative potentials.

Especially in Kelly's case, it has been easy to dismiss the notion of a 'hive mind' and the self-organizing Internet-as-free market as 'Internet gold rush' rhetoric, promptly demolished by more or less unexpected events of 2001 (dot-com crash, resurgence of international terrorism and imperialism). It was difficult to avoid a feeling of irritation at



such willing oblivion of the realities of working in the high-tech industries, from the poisoning world of the silicon chips factories to the electronic sweatshops of America Online, where technical work is downgraded and workers' obsolescence is high.<sup>35</sup> How can we hold on to the notion that cultural production and immaterial labor are collective on the Net (both inner and outer) after the belated Y2K explosion in 2001 and without subscribing to the idealistic and teleological spirit of the wired revolution?

We could start with a simple observation: the self-organizing, collective intelligence of cybercultural thought captured the existence of networked immaterial labour, but was weak in its analysis of the operations of capital overall (including the coexistence of different capitalist lobbies and their relation to insitutional governance). Capital, after all, is the unnatural environment within which the collective intelligence materializes. The collective dimension of networked intelligence needs to be understood historically, as part of a specific momentum of capitalist development. The Italian writers who are identified with the post-Gramscian Marxism of *Autonomia Operaia* have consistently engaged with this relationship by focusing on the mutation undergone by labour in the aftermath of the factory. The notion of a self-organizing 'collective intelligence' looks uncannily like one of their central concepts, the 'general intellect', a notion that the autonomists 'extracted' out of the spirit, if not the actually wording, of Marx's *Grundrisse*. The 'collective intelligence' or 'hive mind' captures some of the spirit of the 'general intellect', but removes the autonomists' critical theorization of its relation to capital.

In the autonomists' favorite text, the *Grundrisse*, and especially in the 'Fragment on Machines', Marx argues (as summarized by Paolo Virno) that

knowledge – scientific knowledge in the first place, but not exclusively – tends to become precisely by virtue of its autonomy from production, nothing less than the principal productive force, thus relegating repetitive and compartmentalized labor to a residual position. Here one is dealing with knowledge ... which has become incarnate ... in the automatic system of machines.<sup>36</sup>

In the vivid pages of the 'Fragment', the 'other' Marx of the *Grundrisse* (adopted by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s against the more orthodox endorsement of *Capital*) describes the system of industrial machines as a horrific monster of metal and flesh:

The production process has ceased to be a labour process in the sense of a process dominated by labour as its governing unity. Labour appears, rather, merely as a conscious organ, scattered among the individual living workers at numerous points of the mechanical system; subsumed under the total process of the machinery itself, as itself only a link of the system, whose unity exists not in the living workers, but rather in the living (active) machinery, which confronts his individual, insignificant doings as a mighty organism.<sup>37</sup>

The Italian autonomists extracted from these pages the notion of the 'general intellect' as 'the ensemble of knowledge ... which constitute the epicenter of social production'.<sup>38</sup> Unlike Marx's original formulation, however, the autonomists eschewed the modernist imagery of the general intellect as a hellish machine. They claimed that Marx completely identified the general intellect (or knowledge as the principal productive force) with fixed capital (the machine) and thus neglected to account for the fact that the general intellect cannot exist independently of the concrete subjects who mediate the articulation of the machines with each other. The general intellect is an articulation of fixed capital (machines) *and* living labour (the workers). If we see the Internet, and computer networks in general, as the latest machines – the latest manifestation of fixed capital – then it won't be difficult to imagine the general intellect as being alive and well today.

However the autonomists did not stop at describing the general intellect as an assemblage of humans and machines at the heart of postindustrial production. If this were the case, the Marxian monster of metal and flesh would just be updated to that of a world-spanning network, where computers use human beings as a way to allow the system of machinery (and therefore capitalist production) to function. The visual power of the Marxian description is updated by the cyberpunk snapshots of the immobile bodies of the hackers, electrodes like umbilical cords connecting them to the matrix, appendixes to a living, all-powerful cyberspace. Beyond the special-effects bonanza, the box-office success of *The Matrix* series validates the popularity of the paranoid interpretation of this mutation.

To the humanism implicit in this description, the autonomists have opposed the notion of a 'mass intellectuality', living labour in its function as the determining articulation of the general intellect. Mass intellectuality – as an ensemble, as a social body – 'is the

repository of the indivisible knowledges of living subjects and of their linguistic cooperation ... an important part of knowledge cannot be deposited in machines, but ... it must come into being as the direct interaction of the labor force'.<sup>39</sup> As Virno emphasizes, mass intellectuality is not about the various roles of the knowledge workers, but is a '*quality* and a distinctive sign of the *whole* social labor force in the post-Fordist era'.<sup>40</sup>

The pervasiveness of the collective intelligence within both the managerial literature and Marxist theory could be seen as the result of a common intuition about the quality of labour in informed societies. Knowledge labour is inherently *collective*, it is always the result of a collective and social production of knowledge.<sup>41</sup> Capital's problem is how to extract as much value as possible (in the autonomists' jargon, to 'valorize') out of this abundant, and yet slightly untractable terrain.

Collective knowledge work, then, is not about those who work in the knowledge industry. But it is also not about employment. The mass layoffs in the dot-com sector have not stopped Internet content from growing or its technologies from mutating. The acknowledgement of the collective aspect of labour implies a rejection of the equivalence between labour and employment, which was already stated by Marx and further emphasized by feminism and the post-Gramscian autonomy.<sup>42</sup> Labour is not equivalent to waged labour. Such an understanding might help us to reject some of the hideous rhetoric of unemployment which turns the unemployed person into the object of much patronizing, pushing and nudging from national governments in industrialized countries (accept any available work or else ...) Often the unemployed are such only in name, in reality being the life-blood of the difficult economy of 'under the table', badly paid work, some of which also goes into the new media industry.<sup>43</sup> To emphasize how labour is not equivalent to employment also means to acknowledge how important free affective and cultural labour is to the media industry, old and new.

#### EPHEMERAL COMMODITIES AND FREE LABOUR

There is a continuity, and a break, between older media and new media in terms of their relationship to cultural and affective labour. The continuity seems to lie in their common reliance on their public/users as productive subjects. The difference lies both in the mode of production and in the ways in which power/knowledge works in

the two types. In spite of different national histories (some of which stress public service more than others), the television industry, for example, is relatively conservative: writers, producers, performers, managers, and technicians have definite roles within an industry still run by a few established players. The historical legacy of television as a technology for the construction of national identities also means that television is somehow always held more publicly accountable than the news media.

This does not mean that the old media do not draw on free labour; on the contrary. Television and the print media, for example, make abundant use of the free labour of their audiences/readers, but they also tend to structure the latter's contribution much more strictly, in terms of both economic organization and moralistic judgement. The price to pay for all those real-life TV experiences is usually a heavy dose of moralistic scaremongering: criminals are running amok on the streets and must be stopped by tough police action; wild teenagers lack self-esteem and need tough love; and selfish and two-faced reality TV contestants will eventually get their come-uppance. If this does not happen on the Internet, why is it then that the Internet is not the happy island of decentred, dispersed and pleasurable cultural production that its apologists claimed it to be?

The most obvious answer to such questions came spontaneously to the early Internet users, who blamed it on the commercialization of the Internet. E-commerce and progressive privatization were blamed for disrupting the free economy of the Internet, an economy of exchange which Richard Barbrook described as 'gift economy'.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the Internet might have been a different place from what it is now. However it is almost unthinkable that capitalism could have stayed forever outside of the network, a mode of communication which is fundamental to its own organizational structure.

The outcome of the explicit interface between capital and the Internet is a digital economy which manifests all the signs of an acceleration of the capitalist logic of production. During its dot-com days, the digital economy was the fastest and most visible zone of production within late capitalist societies. New products, new trends and new cultures succeeded each other at anxiety-inducing pace. It was a business where you needed to replace your equipment/knowledge, and possibly staff, every year or so.

At some point, the speed of the digital economy, its accelerated rhythms of obsolescence and its reliance on (mostly) 'immaterial' products seemed to fit in with the postmodern intuition about the

changed status of the commodities whose essence was said to be meaning (or lack of it) rather than labour (as if the two could be separable).<sup>45</sup> The recurrent complaint that the Internet contributes to the disappearance of reality is then based *both* in humanistic concerns about 'real life' *and* in the postmodern nihilism of the recombinant commodity.<sup>46</sup> Hyperreality confirms the humanist nightmare of a society without humanity, the culmination of a progressive taking over of the realm of representation. Commodities on the Net are not material and are excessive (there is too much information, too many web sites, too much spam, too many mailing lists, too much clutter and noise) with relation to the limits of 'real' social needs.

It is possible, however, that the disappearance of the commodity is not a material disappearance, but its visible subordination to the quality of labour behind it. In this sense the commodity does not disappear as such; it rather becomes increasingly ephemeral, its duration becomes compressed, it becomes more of a process than a finished product. The role of continuous, creative, innovative labour as the ground of market value is crucial to the digital economy. The process of valorization (the production of monetary value) happens by foregrounding the quality of the labour which literally animates the commodity.

The digital economy, then, challenged the postmodern assumption that labour disappears while the commodity takes on and dissolves all meaning. In particular, the Internet foregrounds the extraction of value out of continuous, updateable work and is extremely labour-intensive. It is not enough to produce a good web site; you need to update it continuously to maintain interest in it and fight off obsolescence. Furthermore, you need updateable equipment (the general intellect is always an assemblage of humans and their machines), which in its turn is propelled by the intense collective labour of programmers, designers and workers. It is as if the acceleration of production has increased to the point where commodities, literally, turn into translucent objects. Commodities do not so much disappear as become more transparent, showing throughout their reliance on the labour which produces and sustains them. It is the labour of the designers and programmers that shows through a successful web site and it is the spectacle of that labour changing its product that keeps the users coming back. The commodity, then, is only as good as the labour that goes into it.

As a consequence, the sustainability of the Internet as a medium depends on massive amounts of labour (which is not equivalent

to employment, as we have said), only some of which was hyper-compensated by the capricious logic of venture capitalism. Of the incredible amount of labour which sustains the Internet as a whole (from mailing list traffic to web sites to infrastructural questions), we can guess that a substantial amount of it is still 'free labour'.

Free labour, however, is not necessarily exploited labour. Within the early virtual communities, we are told, labour was really free: the labour of building a community was not compensated by great financial rewards (it was therefore 'free', unpaid), but it was also willingly conceded in exchange for the pleasures of communication and exchange (it was therefore 'free', pleasurable, not-imposed). In answer to members' requests, information was quickly posted and shared with a lack of mediation which the early netizens did not fail to appreciate. Howard Rheingold's book, somehow unfairly accused of middle-class complacency, is the most well-known account of the good old times of the old Internet, before the net-tourist overcame the net-pioneer.<sup>47</sup>

The free labour which sustains the Internet is acknowledged within many different sections of the digital literature. In spite of the volatile nature of the Internet economy (which yesterday was about community and portals, today is about P2P and wireless connections, and tomorrow, who knows ... ?). the notion of users' labour maintains an ideological and material centrality which runs consistently throughout the turbulent succession of Internet fads. Commentators who would normally disagree, such as Howard Rheingold and Richard Hudson, concur on one thing; the best way to keep your site visible and thriving on the Web is to turn it into a space which is not only accessed, but somehow built by its users.<sup>48</sup> Users keep a site alive through their labour, the cumulative hours of accessing the site (thus generating advertising), writing messages, participating in conversations and sometimes making the jump to collaborators. Out of the 15,000 volunteers which keep AOL running, only a handful turned against it, the others stayed on. Such a feature seems endemic to the Internet in ways which can be worked on by commercialization, but not substantially altered. The 'open-source' movement, which relies on the free labour of Internet tinkers, is further evidence of this structural trend within the digital economy.

It is an interesting feature of the Internet debate (and evidence, somehow, of its masculine bias) that users' labour has attracted more attention in the case of the open-source movement than in that of mailing lists and websites. This betrays the persistence of

an attachment to masculine understandings of labour within the digital economy: writing an operating system is still more worthy of attention than just chatting for free for AOL. This in spite of the fact that in 1996, at the peak of the volunteer moment, over 30,000 'community leaders' were helping AOL to generate at least \$7 million a month.<sup>49</sup> Still, the open-source movement has drawn much more positive attention than the more diffuse user-labour described above. It is worth exploring because of the debates which it has provoked and its relation to the digital economy at large.

The open-source movement is a variation of the old tradition of shareware and freeware software, which substantially contributed to the technical development of the Internet. Freeware software is freely distributed and does not even request a payment from its users. Shareware software is distributed freely, but incurs a 'moral' obligation for the user to forward a small sum to the producer in order to sustain the shareware movement as an alternative economic model to the copyrighted software of giants such as Microsoft. 'Open source' 'refers to a model of software development in which the underlying code of a program – the source code a.k.a. the 'crown jewels' – is by definition made freely available to the general public for modification, alteration, and endless redistribution'.<sup>50</sup>

Far from being an idealistic, minoritarian practice, the open-source movement has attracted much media and financial attention. In 1999, Apache, an open-source web server, was the 'Web-server program of choice for more than half of all publicly accessible Web servers'<sup>51</sup> and has since then expanded to the point where Bavaria in Germany and the whole of China have recently announced a switchover to it. Open-source conventions are anxiously attended by venture capitalists, informed by the digerati that open source is a necessity 'because you must go open-source to get access to the benefits of the open-source development community – the near-instantaneous bug-fixes, the distributed intellectual resources of the Net, the increasingly large open-source code base'.<sup>52</sup> Open-source companies such as Cygnus convinced the market that you do not need to be proprietary about source code to make a profit: the code might be free, but technical support, packaging, installation software, regular upgrades, office applications and hardware are not.

In 1998, when Netscape went open source and invited the computer tinkers and hobbyists to look at the code of its new browser,

fix the bugs, improve the package and redistribute it, specialized mailing lists exchanged opinions about the implications.<sup>53</sup> Netscape's move rekindled the debate about the peculiar nature of the digital economy. Was it to be read as being in the tradition of the Internet 'gift economy'? Or was digital capital hijacking the open-source movement exactly against that tradition? Richard Barbrook saluted Netscape's move as a sign of the power intrinsic in the architecture of the medium.<sup>54</sup> Others such as John Horwarth did not share such optimism. The 'free stuff' offered around the Net, he argued,

is either a product that gets you hooked on to another one or makes you just consume more time on the net. After all, the goal of the access people and telecoms is to have users spend as much time on the net as possible, regardless of what they are doing. The objective is to have you consume bandwidth.<sup>55</sup>

Far from proving the persistence of the Internet gift economy, Horwarth claimed, Netscape's move is a direct threat to those independent producers for whom shareware and freeware have been a way of surviving exactly those 'big boys' that Netscape represents:

Freeware and shareware are the means by which small producers, many of them individuals, were able to offset somewhat the bulldozing effects of the big boys. And now the bulldozers are headed straight for this arena. As for Netscape [sic], such a move makes good business sense and spells trouble for workers in the field of software development. The company had a poor last quarter in 1997 and was already hinting at job cuts. Well, what better way to shed staff by having your product taken further by the freeware people, having code-dabbling hobbyists fix and further develop your product? The question for Netscape [sic] now is how to tame the freeware beast so that profits are secured.<sup>56</sup>

Although it is tempting to stake the evidence of crashes and layoffs against the optimism of Barbrook's gift economy, there might be more productive ways of looking at the increasingly tight relationship between an 'idealistic' movement such as open source and the venture mania for open-source companies.<sup>57</sup> Rather than representing a moment of incorporation of a previously authentic moment, the open-source question demonstrates the overreliance of the digital economy as such on free labour, free both in the sense



of 'not financially rewarded' and of 'willingly given'. This includes AOL community leaders, the open-source programmers, the amateur web designers, mailing list editors and the netslaves who for a while were willing to 'work for cappucinos' just for the excitement and the dubious promises of digital work.<sup>58</sup>

Such a reliance, almost a dependency, is part of larger mechanisms of capitalist extraction of value which are fundamental to late capitalism as a whole. That is, such processes are not created outside capital and then reappropriated by capital, but are the results of a complex history where the relation between labour and capital is mutually constitutive, entangled and crucially forged during the crisis of Fordism. Free labour is a desire of labour immanent to late capitalism, and late capitalism is the field which both sustains free labour *and* exhausts it. It exhausts it by undermining the means through which that labour can sustain itself: from the burn-out syndromes of Internet start-ups to under-compensation and exploitation in the cultural economy at large. Late capitalism does not appropriate anything: it nurtures, exploits and exhausts its labour force and its cultural and affective production. In this sense, it is technically impossible to separate neatly the digital economy of the Net from the larger network economy of late capitalism. Especially since 1994, the Internet has always and simultaneously been a gift economy *and* an advanced capitalist economy. The mistake of the neoliberalists (as exemplified by the *Wired* group), was to mistake this coexistence for a benign, unproblematic equivalence.

As we stated before, these processes are far from being confined to the most self-conscious labourers of the digital economy. They are part of a diffuse cultural economy which operates throughout the Internet and beyond. The passage from the pioneeristic days of the Internet to its 'venture' and 'recession' days does not seem to have affected these mechanisms, only intensified them. Nowhere is this more evident than on the World Wide Web.

#### THE NET AND THE SET

In the winter of 1999, in what sounded like another of its resounding, short-lived claims, *Wired* magazine announced that after just five years the old Web was dead:

The Old Web was a place where the unemployed, the dreamy, and the iconoclastic went to reinvent themselves ... The New Web isn't

about dabbling in what you don't know and failing – it's about preparing seriously for the day when television and Web content are delivered over the same digital networks.<sup>59</sup>

The new Web was made of the big players, but also of new ways to make the audience work. In the new Web, after the pioneering days, television and the web converge in the one thing they have in common: their reliance on their audiences/users as providers of the cultural labour which goes under the label of 'real life stories'. Gerry Laybourne, executive of the web-based media company *Oxygen*, thought of a hypothetical show called *What Are They Thinking?* a reality-based sketch comedy show based on stories posted on the Web, because 'funny things happen in our lives everyday'.<sup>60</sup> As Bayers also adds, '[u]ntil it's produced, the line separating that concept from more puerile fare dismissed by Gerry, like *America's Funniest*, is hard to see'.<sup>61</sup>

The difference between the puerile fare of *America's Funniest* and user-produced content does not seem to lie in the more serious nature of the new Web as compared to the vilified output of 'people shows' and 'reality television'. From an abstract point of view there is no difference between the ways in which people shows rely on the inventiveness of their audiences and the web sites rely on users' input. People shows rely on the activity (even amidst the most shocking sleaze) of their audience and willing participants to a much larger extent than any other television programmes. In a sense, they manage the impossible; they create monetary value out of the most reluctant members of the postmodern cultural economy: those who do not produce marketable style, who are not qualified enough to enter the fast world of the knowledge economy, are converted into monetary value through their capacity to *affectively* perform their misery.

When compared to the cultural and affective production on the Internet, people shows and reality TV also seem to embody a different logic of relation between capitalism (the media conglomerates which produce and distribute such shows) and its labour force – the beguiled, dysfunctional citizens of the underdeveloped North. Within people shows and reality TV, the valorization of the audience as labour and spectacle always happens somehow within a power/knowledge nexus which does not allow the *immediate* valorization of the talk show participants: you cannot just put a Jerry Springer guest on TV on her own to tell her story with no mediation (indeed

that would look too much like the discredited access slots of public service broadcasting). There is no real 24/7 access to reality TV, but increasing/decreasing levels of selective editing (according to the different modalities of a communication spectrum that goes from terrestrial to digital TV and the Internet). In the case of talk shows, various levels of knowledge intervene between the guest and the apparatus of valorization, which normalize the dysfunctional subjects through a moral or therapeutic discourse and a more traditional institutional organization of production. So after the performance, the guest must be advised, patronized, questioned and often bullied by the audience and the host, all in the name of a perfunctory, normalizing morality. In reality television, psychologists and other experts are also brought in to provide an authoritative perspective through which what is often a sheer voyeuristic experience may be seen as a 'social experiment'.

TV shows also belong to a different economy of scale: although there are more and more of them, they are still relatively few when compared to the millions of pages on the Web. It is as if the centralized organization of the traditional media does not let them turn people's productions into pure monetary value. TV shows must have morals, even if those morals are shattered by the overflowing performances of their subjects.

Within the Internet, however, this process of channelling and adjudicating (responsibilities, duties and rights) is dispersed to the point where practically anything is tolerated (sodomasochism, bestiality, fetishism and plain nerdism are not targeted, at least within the Internet, as sites which need to be disciplined or explained away). The qualitative difference between people shows and a successful web site, then, does not lie in the latter's democratic tendency as opposed to the former's exploitative nature. It lies in the operation, within people shows, of majoritarian discursive mechanisms of territorialization, the application of a morality that the 'excessive' abundance of material on the Internet renders redundant and, even more, irrelevant. The digital economy cares only tangentially about morality. What it really cares about is an abundance of production, an immediate interface with cultural and technical labour whose result is a diffuse, non-dialectical antagonism and a crisis in the capitalist modes of valorization of labour as such.

As we shall see in the next chapter, it would be a mistake to think of such trends as constituting an automatic process of liberation from the tyranny of capitalist exploitation. On the contrary, as we have

also suggested here, this open and distributed mode of production is already the field of experimentation of new strategies of organization that starts from the open potentiality of the many in order to develop new sets of constraints able to modulate appropriately the relation between value and surplus value – or, as we will refer to them, the entanglement of emergence and control.