

Communism of Capital and Cannibalism of the Common: Notes on the Art of Over-Identification

Matteo Pasquinelli

Abandon Normal Devices festival
1-7 October 2010
Manchester



Communism is a hateful thing and a menace to peace and organized government; but the communism of combined wealth and capital, the outgrowth of overweening cupidity and selfishness, which insidiously undermines the justice and integrity of free institutions, is not less dangerous than the communism of oppressed poverty and toil, which, exasperated by injustice and discontent, attacks with wild disorder the citadel of rule. — United States President Grover Cleveland, State of the Union 1888.

Socialism and capitalism, however, even though they have at times been mingled together and at others occasioned bitter conflicts, are both regimes of property that exclude the common. — Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth*.

A paradox that conceals its paradoxical nature becomes a commodity. — Boris Groys, *The Communist Postscript*.

1. There is no longer an outside

“There is no longer an outside” repeats a topological and existential motto since 1989, that is since the Berlin wall fell and a world system appeared to close upon itself (at least for Eurocentric eyes) — there is no longer an outside to capitalism, globalization and the Empire, it is remarked. This new spatial condition has not affected just politics but more generally the whole collective imaginary — including spy novels, for instance, as the Iron Curtain was providing at least reassuring roles and linear plots.

Indeed, how to be a double agent in the age of one-dimensional thought? This question is addressing directly any activist or artist. The ‘clash of civilization’ with the Islam world designed by Huntington attempted to resolve such a political disorientation, before being reabsorbed by China and its new ‘socialist market economy’ around the stable vortex of a gigantic accumulation of capitals. Still, keeping on imploding, this feeling of political claustrophobia is pushing the creation of new *intensive* and *post-utopian* paradigms abreast of the topology of the Empire.

One of the most elegant solutions suggested in order to escape this postmodern impasse is the so-called *over-identification*, that is an aesthetic strategy initiated first by the band Laibach and art collective Neue Slowenische Kunst in the Ljubljana of the late '80s within the peculiar ideological curtain of socialist Yugoslavia. Basically, Laibach were imitating totalitarian aesthetics in such a punctual and orthodox way to reverse it into kitsch. To the usual question whether they were really fascist or not, they were used to reply in a sibylline way: "We are fascists as much as Hitler was a painter". This strategy was already defended by Slavoj Žižek in 1994 as the ability to show the "obscene fantasmatic kernel of an ideological edifice" against the dominant *cynical reason*.

What if, on the contrary, the dominant attitude of the contemporary "postideological" universe is precisely the cynical distance toward public values? What if this distance, far from posing any threat to the system, designates the supreme form of conformism, since the normal function of the system requires cynical distance? In this sense the strategy of Laibach appears in a new light: it "frustrates" the system (the ruling ideology) precisely insofar as it is not its ironic imitation, but over-identification with it— by bringing to light the obscene superego underside of the system, over-identification suspends its efficiency.

Laibach were just pointing to "the obscene *nightly* law that necessarily redoubles and accompanies, as its shadow, the *public* Law", Žižek wrote. As a matter of fact, Laibach's *retro-avantgarde* was dictated also by the restrictions of the socialist regime to free expression. As the typical punk *transgression* of the Code was not possible, their strategy turned into the identification with the Code itself in a way that was of course too-paranoid-to-be-true. Laibach initiated the genre of *state punk*.

Yet when this over-identification strategy, which was born under a state ideology, is applied to neoliberal market ideology, it performs differently. This text will try to show how the strategies of over-identification too often simply deal with the very surface of ideology and, contrary to the Lacanian credo, never touch its obscene subtext — that is the economic infrastructure and the very *obscenity of labour*. On the contrary, it is capital itself that has been always playing an elegant art of over-identification with the heart of labour and production. By the 'communism of capital' it will be defined the continuous and subterranean cannibalism of the common operated by capitalism — a very material process running *underneath* any ideological spectacle and any Symbolic Code dear to the Lacanian Youth.

“There is no longer an outside” is an ambivalent statement: indeed it points to a claustrophobic *ideological* condition, but it suggests nevertheless very *material* lines of conflict. If there is no more a utopian space outside capitalism, exodus must be established in an intensive and paradoxical way. Resistance must set itself *inside* and *against* the structure of capitalism, as Mario Tronti was suggesting already in the ‘60s (and not just *inside* and *against* its ideological code, as a Lacanian new-wave is back to suggest today). Post-utopianism is to be replaced by *endo-utopianism*. Where to find an intensive yet practical line of flight behind the ideological spectacle of capitalism? Far from psychoanalysis, looking to the mundane chronicles close to us, it is in the very financial crisis of 2009 that we can find an example of an intrinsic breach affecting the system. The political diagram of *endo-utopianism* should be found along that ‘systemic risk’ of capitalism that has been only recently acknowledged by financial institutions.

Today a weird process of over-identification is occurring between the archetypes of capitalism and communism at different scales, expanding the feeling of political impasse but at the same time suggesting new spaces of conflict. First, for the irony of fate, a communist state formally ruled by a communist party — China — has become the leading capitalist superpower. Thanks to an enormous accumulation of capitals China managed to buy and control more than 25% of United States public debt (quota in 2010). Second, exactly 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a global credit crunch have forced western governments to nationalize *de facto* many private banks openly infringing one of the basic commandments of neoliberal monotheism. Eventually mainstream economists were forced to acknowledge a ‘systemic risk’ that, as David Harvey noticed, was already defined and named by Marx a long ago as the *internal contradiction of capitalist accumulation*. Third, the new libertarian business models that are born out of digital networks celebrate and locate the common at the center of their mode of production. The new “wealth of networks” is to be based on the “creative commons” and “peer production” of online multitudes, Yoachai Benkler is suggesting to ICT giants like IBM, whereas Wired editor Kevin Kelly confirms that a “new socialism” and a “global collectivist society” [!] is materializing thanks to the internet.

These three examples, however, refers just to the surface of economic chronicles: the ‘communism of capital’ has its roots in a more general process of *financialization of the whole life* that has to be unpacked properly. This text suggests to look at the deep processes of financialization in order to understand the new diagrams of conflict and the art of over-identification itself.

2. The 'financial soviets' of the New York Stock Exchange

As Christian Marazzi reminds, it was first Peter Drucker to identify the rise of a peculiar 'socialism of capital' in the very financial heart of United States. In his book *The Unseen Revolution* Drucker described the process of financialization of pension funds that started in the state of New York in the '70s. The 'unseen revolution' was referring to the accumulation of 35% of United States corporate stocks by workers' pension funds. Drucker predicted that this ownership interest would increase to 70% by 1985, allowing employees, through their pension funds, to become hypothetically "the true owners of the country's means of production". For the first time in history, workers' pensions became a crucial variable of stock markets. It was a revolutionary event also because wage and capital established so a very promiscuous relation, blurring then the essential antagonism between workers and capitalists. The troubles of the current credit system are rooted in that process of 'socialization of capital' that started to fuel volatile and unstable financial games.

More recently, this financial regime happened to be in need of a strong intervention and protection by the state, reinforcing even more the intuition of a 'communism of capital'. In fact, in order to resolve the financial crisis of 2007, the gigantic debt of the private sector has been moved to the public sector. In October 2008 the British government announced a rescue package of £500 billion to stabilize banks affected by the credit crunch. In the same year Northern Rock was nationalized, first of a long series of bailouts and partial nationalization in the western world, most notably the acquisition of Merrill Lynch by Bank of America. In this awkward 'communism of capital' the state fulfills the needs of the 'financial soviets' of banks, insurance companies and investments funds by using to the money of all the taxpayers — and *de facto* imposing the dictatorship of financial market over society, Marazzi argues. At the end of its parable the supposed 'socialization of means of production' *via* the stock exchange has been reversed into a less democratic 'socialization of private debt' *via* the state.

In technical terms, the expression 'communism of capital' refers to a process of colonization of any aspect of human life that can be transformed into a credit line. The financialization of the *bios* has been cannibalizing everything: from health insurance to house mortgage, from credit cards to student debt. Also the precarization of the labour market into the figures of temp worker and freelancer and the virtualization of companies into networks of outsourcing point to a deep financialization of economy. According to Marazzi, this wild financialization of the whole human life is

specular to the crisis of the traditional forms of political representation, i.e. specular to the resurfacing of the political subject of the *multitude*.

Financial capital, as social capital listed on the stock exchange, appears as a 'collective representative' of the multitude of subjects that populate civil society. [...] Financialization defines the public sphere of capital. [...] It is specular to the missing attempt to constitute a separated public sphere autonomous from capital. Under this aspect, the financialization of capital is the sign of the political crisis of the form of representation of the multitude.

Here the political question at stake is how to overturn the hegemony of financialization and how to conceive a new political subject at the very center of the 'communism of capital'.

This attempt has been discussed more deeply by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their recent book *Commonwealth*, where they put the production of 'the common' — and its expropriation — at the core of contemporary capitalism. Capitalism is not just about exploiting labour time like in the classic Marxist theory, but about a much larger expropriation of the whole life of the metropolis, Hardt and Negri argue. The common of the *bios* is made of material production and material resources, but also of languages and lifestyles, social relations and collective knowledge.

By "the common" we mean, first of all, the common wealth of the material world—the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, and all nature's bounty—which in classic European political texts is often claimed to be the inheritance of humanity as a whole, to be shared together. We consider the common also and more significantly those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production, such as knowledges, languages, codes, information, affects, and so forth. This notion of the common does not position humanity separate from nature, as either its exploiter or its custodian, but focuses rather on the practices of interaction, care, and cohabitation in a common world, promoting the beneficial and limiting the detrimental forms of the common.

Within the forms of expropriation of the common we should include also the new forms of business running on digital networks, whose 'strategy of over-identification' is precisely to use the rhetoric of *digital collectivism* (network cooperation, peer production, free culture, creative commons, etc.) to hide the accumulation of value. Here there is no better example of sneaky socialism than Kevin Kelly's article titled *The New Socialism: Global Collectivist Society Is Coming Online* published in *Wired* magazine in 2009.

The 'project of the common' by Hardt and Negri helps to move beyond the 20th century propaganda and the opposition between public and

private specific to modernity. Hardt and Negri provide also a good ground to archive definitely the opposition between capitalism and state socialism, as they both represent “regimes of property that exclude the common”.

The seemingly exclusive alternative between the private and the public corresponds to an equally pernicious political alternative between capitalism and socialism. It is often assumed that the only cure for the ills of capitalist society is public regulation and Keynesian and/or socialist economic management; and, conversely, socialist maladies are presumed to be treatable only by private property and capitalist control. Socialism and capitalism, however, even though they have at times been mingled together and at others occasioned bitter conflicts, are both regimes of property that exclude the common.

3. Language as production vs. language as ideology

The promiscuity between the archetypes of capitalism and communism is also connected to a molecular implosion of the categories of art, education, politics and labour. We are familiar with Walter Benjamin’s famous essay about the *work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction* and with the ‘creativity-for-all’ manifestoes of the last century. What was just an intuition of the art avantgardes — mass intellectuality — has become a central pillar of post-Fordism up to the so-called Creative Industries and ‘creative cities’. One of the crucial intuitions advanced by Paolo Virno in *A Grammar of the Multitude* is about the over-lapping and indeed ‘over-identification’ of intellectual and artistic production with labour and politics.

The boundaries between pure intellectual activity, political action, and labor have dissolved. I will maintain, in particular, that the world of so called post-Fordist labor has absorbed into itself many of the typical characteristics of political action; and that this fusion between Politics and Labor constitutes a decisive physiognomic trait of the contemporary multitude.

Paraphrasing Virno, we might say that new forms of production based on knowledge and communication (variously termed knowledge economy, cognitive capitalism, media culture, network society, etc.) have hybridized and integrated Labour, Politics and Art into a single unified gesture of production.

Here labour and politics did not eventually as a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, but on the contrary into the figure of the manager as opposed to the apparatchik of parliamentary democracy. Managers have become today

the models of political leadership. Similarly the society of the spectacle has collapsed onto politics, as exemplified by the institutional roles acquired by Ronald Regan and Arnold Schwarzenegger after their cinema careers. In order to be a leader, you have to be a good performer too. These are basic examples of phenomena of reversed over-identification occurring within the realm of capitalism itself — which make any attempt of counter-over-identification more difficult to accomplish.

This implosion of roles and categories is responsible of the same aforementioned feeling of claustrophobia affecting contemporary passions. Virno notices how the feeling of living in an age of radical depoliticization is related to the absorption of the political skills (that were specific to the generation of '68) into the very production of value.

In fact, political action now seems, in a disastrous way, like some superfluous duplication of the experience of labor, since the latter experience, even if in a deformed and despotic manner, has subsumed into itself certain structural characteristics of political action. [...] The inclusion of certain structural features of political praxis in contemporary production helps us to understand why the post-Ford multitude might be seen, today, as a de-politicized multitude. There is already too much politics in the world of wage labor (in as much as it is wage labor) in order for politics as such to continue to enjoy an autonomous dignity.

There is less passion in politics as political skills have been absorbed by creative industries, marketing campaign and the art system itself. Looking at the implosion of the political categories and their absorption within the realm of economy along the evolution of Fordism into post-Fordism, Virno can say in the final line of the final thesis of *A Grammar of the Multitude* that post-Fordism but incarnates the 'communism of capital'.

The metamorphosis of social systems in the West, during the 1980's and 1990's, can be synthesized in a more pertinent manner with the expression: communism of capital. [...] If we can say that Fordism incorporated, and rewrote in its own way, some aspects of the socialist experience, then post-Fordism has fundamentally dismissed both Keynesianism and socialism. Post-Fordism, hinging as it does upon the general intellect and the multitude, puts forth, in its own way, typical demands of communism (abolition of work, dissolution of the State, etc.). Post-Fordism is the communism of capital.

Compared to other authors of Marxist lineage, Virno has always put a big emphasis on the political role of language. Since his work on the Marxian general intellect, Virno has been emphasizing how post-Fordism "has placed

language into the workplace". If once the sign "Silence, men at work" was hanging in many factories, today in certain workshops one could put a new one declaring "Men at work, talk!", he suggests. In addition, in more recent works, Virno has underlined the very ambivalent nature of language — at the same time, basis of political institutions and source of social conflicts and wars. Language is an ambivalent and dangerous political force by nature, Virno says.

The ground of language allows comparing the plane of the 'communism of capital' with other schools of thought and the strategy of over-identification itself. It is interesting, for instance, to notice a similarity between Virno's notion of *language as production* and the understanding of *language as institution* by Boris Groys. Interestingly, in his book *The Communist Postscript*, Groys defines communism as the *linguistification of society*, while post-Fordism is intended as the total commodification of language.

I will understand communism to be the project of subordinating the economy to politics in order to allow politics to act freely and sovereignly. The economy functions in the medium of money. It operates with numbers. Politics functions in the medium of language. It operates with words — with arguments, programmes and petitions, but also with commands, prohibitions, resolutions and decrees. The communist revolution is the transcription of society from the medium of money to the medium of language.

Opposite to Virno and Groys' understanding of language as a political institution and productive force, we find Žižek and his static idea of *language as ideology* that is at the basis of many interpretation of the strategy of over-identification. For Lacan and Žižek, language — and not material forces — represents the very nature and structure of ideology. If ideology is structured as an unconscious 'grammar' and it is not a product of material forces, any form of political resistance that does not question that very grammar is caught in a trap — Žižek remarks in a very self-castrating logic. Žižek always repeats that ideology does not teach *what* to desire but *how* to desire. In books such as *The Plague of Phantasy*, imagination is never an expression of desire and production, but it is mostly considered a *perverted phantasma*.

4. The belated strategy of over-identification

Language as *production*, language as *institution*, language as *ideology*. These three definitions condense the positions of three contemporary authors such as Virno, Groys, and Žižek, and provide a common ground to critique the artistic and political strategy of over-identification. Indeed the notion of ‘communism of capital’ has been introduced along this essay in order to show (1) that the actual engine of capitalism is running detached from any *ideological spectacle* and (2) that capitalism is playing the over-identification game with the *obscenity of labour and value production* since ever. As the strategy of over-identification is often transplanted from the context of state ideology of socialist Yugoslavia to the liquid spaces of post-Fordism, it is important to follow this migration in detail.

A good example of this cultural translation is given by the book *Cultural Activism Today* by the Dutch research collective BAVO. Questioning “artistic resistance after the end of history”, BAVO tries to contextualize and extend the strategy of over-identification outside the peculiar ideological context of the former East Bloc. The problem from which they move is the usual problem of the relation between art and politics and the subversive value of art in a society of spectacle capable to *recuperate* any radical gesture. Essentially, following a typical postmodern logic, they claim that politically engaged art is the victim of a double bind: it is asked to be critical without directly questioning the dominant system, but as soon as *critical art* becomes engaged, it is accused of not being critical at all.

On one side, BAVO measures the boundaries of contemporary engaged art and frame it in the effective definition of ‘NGO art’, that is a form of art that aestheticizes social injustice and sanitizes any real political conflict in a fetish for victimization. “No politics please, victims only” says NGO art: “These art practices share the idea that, considering the many urgent needs at hand, there is no call for high art statements, big political manifestoes or sublime expressions of moral indignation. Instead what are needed are direct, concrete, artistic interventions that help disadvantaged population and communities to deal with the problems they are facing”.

On the other side, celebrated figures such as Santiago Sierra are, according to BAVO, the personification of the cynical artist, whose provocations are just instrumental to the neoliberal consensus. Santiago Sierra is known for his provocative performances, which have included: paying refugees from Chechnya to remain inside cardboard boxes, giving money to young Cubans for the privilege of tattooing their backs, dying the hair of Africans blonde to make them look European, and spraying ten Iraqis immigrant workers with insulating foam. In the art catalogues Sierra

is celebrated for highlighting socio-economic inequality through performances and installations, but “like a true capitalist, Sierra simply sat down, did nothing, took some photographs and consumed the surplus value that was generated at the expense of the day labourers”, BAVO notes.

Between the twin poles of politically-correct NGO art and the politically-incorrect art of provocation, BAVO advances the strategy of over-identification as the ultimate escape, assuming then that the *neoliberal ideology* functions exactly like the *state ideology* that was providing a stage for NSK and Laibach. The main example of over-identification practices abreast of the age of globalization is the work of The Yes Men, a culture jamming duo that is famous for infiltrating business conferences and re-enacting perfectly the whole anthropology and imaginary of global corporations. For instance, on 3 December 2004, the twentieth anniversary of the Bhopal disaster, BBC news reported an interview with a (fake) Dow Chemical spokesperson (staged by one member of The Yes Men) who was promising an investment of 12 billion dollars in medical care for the region. In just a few hours Dow Chemical reported stock losses of \$2 billion on the Frankfurt stock exchange.

Despite rare successful examples, the attempt to upgrade the over-identification strategy to the neoliberal ideology appears to re-enter a *cul de sac* and to be stuck in a vicious circle. The diagram offered by BAVO may paradoxically reinforce the dominant language and feature no real exploit at all. The overarching suspicion here is that Lacan and Žižek make the disease worst, trapping frustration in an even more claustrophobic space. If the ‘obscene subtext’ of ideology is understood according to the matrix of language, any gesture that is expressed according to that language just reinforces its hegemony. The feeling is that over-identification is often missing the target, as it incarnates the ideological *grammar* without ever touching the ground of material *production*.

5. Cannibalism, or the ingestion of the enemy

The strategy of over-identification appears often to be described and to be trapped in categories that still belong to the previous century and specifically to the regime of Fordism. When Virno was observing that Intellect and Labour, Art and Politics are blurring into each other, he was also pointing to the implosion of any ideological discourse in the western world. However, the residual force of Fordist categories is still alive today and re-emerges precisely in those paradigms of art and politics that consider language as *ideology* and not as a material means of production. Whereas

over-identification claims to enter the obscene kernel of capitalism, in fact it just remains on its ideological surface, while beneath the 'communism of capital' keeps on cannibalizing the common undisturbed. The central difference between *over-identification* and *endo-utopianism* approaches (both claiming to be 'inside and against') lays precisely in this conception of language that is understood respectively as *ideology* or *production*.

In order to eventually escape the neuroses of western dialectics, other latitudes should be explored. Aside from the arts of *identification* with the enemy, incidentally we could also consider those strategies that contemplate the *ingestion* of the enemy himself. In the *Manifesto Antropófago* (1928) the Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade, in polemic with Freud and the whole colonial patriarchy, was suggesting the cannibalism of the (European) taboos in order to transfigure them back into totems, i.e. in material and pagan figures. Like Andrade with the Freudian idea of interiorized Super-ego, we should follow this ancestral invitation and finally ingest the neurotic angels of ideology to transform them into the demons of the living matter.

Berlin, 5 October 2010

References

- ANDRADE, Oswald de. "Manifesto Antropófago", 1928. Translated as: "The Cannibalist Manifesto", *Third Text: Third World Perspectives on Contemporary Art & Culture*, n. 46, Spring 1999. London: Kala Press.
- ARNS, Inke. *Avantgarde in the Rearview Mirror: On the Paradigm Shifts of Reception of the Avantgarde in (ex) Yugoslavia and Russia from the 80s to the Present*. Ljubljana: Maska, 2006.
- BAVO (ed.) *Cultural Activism Today. The Art of Over-identification*, Rotterdam: Episode Publishers, 2007.
- BENKLER, Yochai. *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.
- BICHLBAUM, Andy and BONANNO, Mike. *The Yes Men: the true story of the end of the World Trade Organization*. New York: Disinfo, 2004.
- DRUCKER, Peter. *The Unseen Revolution: How Pension Fund Socialism Came to America*. New York: Harper & Row, 1976.
- FUMAGALLI, Andrea and MEZZADRA, Sandro (eds) *Crisis in the Global Economy: Financial Markets, Social Struggles, and New Political Scenarios*. Postface by Antonio Negri. New York: Semiotexte, 2010.
- GROYS, Boris. *The Communist Postscript*. London: Verso, 2010.
- HARDT, Michael and NEGRI, Antonio. *Commonwealth*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2009.
- HARVEY, David. "The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis this Time", paper presented at meeting of the American Sociological Association, Atlanta, 16 August 2010.
- DJURIC, D. and M. SUVAKOVIC (eds) *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003.
- KELLY, Kevin. "The New Socialism: Global Collectivist Society Is Coming Online." *Wired*, 22 May 2009 [short URL: <http://t.co/mpRq58A>].
- MARAZZI, Christian. *Il comunismo del capitale*. Verona: Ombre Corte, 2010.
- SHUKAITIS, Stephen. "Overidentification and/or bust?", *Variant* #37, Spring/Summer 2010.
- VIRNO, Paolo. *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*. New York: Semiotexte, 2004.
- VIRNO, Paolo. *Multitude Between Innovation and Negation* (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2008).
- ZIZEK, Slavoj. "Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?", in *M'ARS*, vol. 3-4. Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija, 1993.
- ZIZEK, Slavoj. *The Plague of Fantasies*. London: Verso, 1997.