To Anticipate and Accelerate: Italian Operaismo and Reading Marx’s Notion of the Organic Composition of Capital

Matteo Pasquinelli

This essay proposes to follow a basic philological track: to illustrate Italian operaismo’s theses on the metamorphoses of labor through the lens of Marx’s notion of the organic composition of capital (OCC). Since the 1960s, operaismo not only has been importing new labor subjectivities into canonical Marxism but also has shaped these concepts inside a very Marxian logic. Marx’s OCC has accompanied operaismo for fifty years, from Tronti’s social factory and Alquati’s prophetic account of the cybernetic factory to the more recent model of anthropogenic industries. The organic relation implied in Marx’s composition of fixed capital and variable capital is also key to understanding operaismo’s hypothesis of cognitive capitalism. Finally, operaismo’s method is identified in the acceleration of Marx’s notion of the tendency of capitalist development.

Key Words: Capitalist Development, Cognitive Capitalism, Karl Marx, Operaismo, Organic Composition of Capital

Metamorphoses of Marx’s Organic Composition of Capital

Marx’s idea of the organic composition of capital (OCC) is the most elegant attempt ever made to compact the whole gear of industrial capitalism into one short formula. Despite its imprecise formulation and the confused literature that followed (as pointed out analytically in Harvey [1982, 126, 207]), its core intuition is maintained in this essay in order to follow and fathom its further interpretations by the tradition of the Italian operaismo. Introduced in the first volume of Capital (Marx 1981, chap. 25), the OCC is based on the intuition to divide the whole capital invested in industrial production along a dual tension: that is, between constant capital and variable capital, or money invested in machines and raw materials and money invested in labor force, respectively. This dualism is also differently expressed by Marx in the division between fixed capital (machinery) and circulating capital (in this case, labor force and raw materials are included under the same form of mobile investment). This linear mathematical dualism aims to describe the very inner antagonism of capitalist society while at the same time containing this antagonism within the spheric wholeness of capital. In Marx’s own words:
The composition of capital is to be understood in a twofold sense. As value, it is determined by the proportion in which it is divided into constant capital, or the value of the means of production, and variable capital, or the value of labor-power, the sum total of wages. As material, as it functions in the process of production, all capital is divided into means of production and living labor-power. This latter composition is determined by the relation between the mass of the means of production employed on the one hand, and the mass of labor necessary for their employment on the other. I call the former the value composition, the latter the technical composition of capital ... I call the value composition of capital, in so far as it is determined by its technical composition and mirrors the changes in the latter, the organic composition of capital (Marx 1981, 762).

Two practical examples can be sketched to unpack this formula more intuitively. From the point of view of the value composition of capital, the more variable capital is absorbed by wages, the smaller the profit and the greater the social weight of the
proletariat. From the point of view of the technical composition of capital—that is, the materiality of production—the more money is incarnated into machinery (indeed, fixed capital), the more difficult it is to free and to put this value back into circulation. From these two basic examples it is clear how this formula already condenses complex and dynamic political narratives: “organic” means that each part in fact influences each other part, as within a closed system (with no reference to a “naturalistic whole,” of course). Marx calls the relation between the two levels of composition—of technical composition and value composition—the organic composition of capital, and in this way he measures the evolution of the rate of profit, or rate of exploitation, which is also the basis of the renowned law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall.

According to Harvey (1982, 127; emphasis in the original) Marx appears to reserve “the term organic composition of capital to indicate those shifts in technology within an enterprise that affect the value composition of capital.” Crucially then, this formula also frames the conflict between worker and machine, which is identified immediately as political antagonism between technological innovation and working-class resistance. The OCC is thus a trinitarian formula in which Marx manages to contain and compose labor, value, and technology.

Operaismo will enter this objective economic formulation to turn it into a subjective political diagram: “The capitalist tendency is paralleled by the working-class tendency, the extension of the exchange relation through circulation is paralleled by its destruction” (Negri 1991, 125). Harvey (1982, 134) himself underlines that “the necessary limits here are social, not mathematical” in Marx’s OCC, which is to say that in the end this economic formulation is cut along the silhouette of political subjectivities. The first aspect of Marx’s OCC I will discuss through operaismo is not so much the economico-mathematical axis but the fundamental subjective antagonism between workers and fixed capital. Rather than as an economic formula, I will analyze Marx’s OCC as a diagram of subjectivities (see fig. 1).

**Tronti’s Turn: The Organic Antagonism of Labor**

One of the founding texts of operaismo is the editorial “Lenin in England” written by Tronti in 1964. In this something of a manifesto for the first issue of the journal Classe Operaia, Tronti advances his famous Copernican turn about the primacy of the working class in capitalist development. Against previous Marxist traditions, the organic relation between capitalist development and the working class is inverted: while Marx’s variable capital was formerly understood as a function of the general capital, Tronti on the contrary points out that the working class comes first as an autonomous agent and that capitalist development is always second. Technological innovation and the division of labor have always to follow and adjust themselves to the pressure, friction, resistance, and sabotage performed by a rebellious working class. Across the history of operaismo, Tronti’s intervention can be taken as the first
exemplary rupture of Marx’s OCC.¹ In more imaginative language, it could be defined as the passage from an organic composition to an organic antagonism, as development process and technological innovation are no longer seen from the general point of view of capital but from the particular point of view of the working class. It is precisely from this place within the formula of the organic composition of capital—from the first declaration of the autonomy of the working class against capital and technology—that we can start to follow the theoretical and political adventure of operaismo. Interestingly, already in the 1962 article “The Factory and the Society,” Tronti had described working-class struggle as an antagonism within the organic composition of capital: “Working-class struggle has forced the capitalist to modify the form of its dominion. That is to say that the pressure of labor force is capable of forcing capital to modify its own internal composition; it intervenes within capital as an essential component of capitalist development.” (Tronti 1962, 43; translation mine, emphasis in the original).

Tronti moreover moves away from Marx’s distinction between the production process and the value process. In the former, the workers use the machines, while in the latter the machines use the workers. Tronti intervenes so as to reverse and break from within the totality of Marx’s capital. From within and not from the outside, Tronti advances an antagonistic political form that is precisely within and against the totality of capital.

The error of the old maximalism was to conceive this polarity, so to speak, from the outside; it saw the working class entirely outside of capital and as its general antagonist ... The working class must materially discover itself as a part of capital, if it wants then to oppose the whole capital against itself. It must recognize itself as a particular of capital, if it wants to emerge as its general antagonist. The collective worker is positioned not only against the machine, as constant capital, but against labor power itself, as variable capital. It must come to have the whole capital as enemy and therefore also itself as part of capital. (Tronti 1962, 52; translation mine, emphasis in the original)

In the same article, Tronti conceptualizes another crucial turn of operaismo. He introduces the idea of the “social factory” by expanding Marx’s OCC to the whole territory of the metropolis. Interestingly, Tronti saw society as an extension of the factory, whereas today it is the factory that is perceived as a moment of the general social productivity—a good example of how concepts often accelerate beyond their authors.

The more capitalist development advances, that is to say the more the production of relative surplus value penetrates and extends, the more the

1. Panzieri’s works are fundamental to understanding the ground from which operaismo moved. His text on machines and “neocapitalism” and his general framing of capitalist development in the first issue of Quaderni Rossi can still be perceived at work behind Tronti’s turn. It is precisely because of the “ambiguity” of Panzieri’s position, however, that Tronti is taken here as the first proper beginning of operaismo (see Negri 1975).
circuit production-distribution-exchange-consumption necessarily realizes itself; that is to say that the relationship between capitalist production and bourgeois society, between factory and society, between society and state, becomes more and more organic ... In short, the whole of society lives as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive dominion over the whole of society. (Tronti 1962, 19–20; translation mine)

Tronti thus broke Marx’s OCC to free the autonomy of the working class but still recognized the framework of the wholeness of capital. Since then, the motto “within and against” (in Italian, dentro e contro) has become a political and stylistic signature of operaismo, and this sort of organic claustrophobia has been applied, step-by-step, to diverse spaces of power: the party, the factory, the university, the state, and finally the empire. Its postmodern echo can be found in Hardt and Negri’s (2000, 186) claim that capitalism no longer has an outside.

Aside from Marx’s notions of value composition, technical composition, and organic composition, operaismo claimed the necessity to introduce and investigate the definition of political composition. Already sketched in the early issues of Quaderni Rossi and discussed again in more complex form by Negri in “Partito operaio contro il lavoro,” here is the definition in the words of Bologna (1991, 16):

I used the term “technical composition” to define the totality of socio-professional contents and its associated culture of work, and I defined as “political composition” the totality of autonomous and class conscious ways of behaving and their associated culture of working-class insubordination. Finally I advanced the thesis that Fordism as a technological-social system ... was aimed at destroying the figure of the highly qualified skilled worker, in order at the same time to destroy the cultures of autonomy and control and self management of production, which had expressed themselves in exemplary fashion in the shape of the Soviets and the workers’ councils. Fordism created a new figure, that of the mass worker, in order to destroy the history and memory of that generation of the working class which—albeit only in one part of the world—had produced a communist revolution.

The historical event that profoundly marked the first years of operaismo was the 1962 riot of Piazza Statuto in Turin, which signaled the birth of the new metropolitan subjectivity of the mass worker, famously pictured by Tronti as a “rude pagan race” (rude razza pagana). But in that very year and in the same issue of Quaderni Rossi in which Tronti introduced the concept of the “social factory,” Alquati wrote another influential essay about a model of production uncommon in those years—a computer factory!—thereby beginning the recording of further political subjectivities.

Alquati’s Cybernetic Factory: Information Becoming Value

Against the common perception that notions such as immaterial labor and cognitive capitalism are recent theoretical acquisitions of operaismo, it must be noted that as early as 1961 Alquati investigated the “cybernetic” factory of Olivetti, an Italian
company producing typewriters and mainframe computers. In a verbose text titled “Organic Composition of Capital at the Olivetti Factory,” Alquati (1962, 1963) attempted one of the first Marxist analyses of cybernetics. Alquati entered the gears of Marx’s OCC to insert for the first time the semiotic and cognitive dimension of information within living labor, thus suggesting information as a mediator between variable capital and fixed capital, workers and machinery. More precisely, Alquati proposed the idea of valorizing information as a conceptual bridge between Marxian value and cybernetic information.

Alquati first encountered the cybernetic apparatus (what today could be easily identified with a digital network) as an extension of the internal bureaucracy of the factory, which monitors the production process by means of control information. Bureaucracy descends into the bodies of the workers via the mediation of the circuits of cybernetics and machinery. In this context, Alquati introduces the concept of valorizing information, the flow running upstream and feeding the circuits of the whole factory. Such valorizing information is continuously absorbed by machinery and finally condenses into products. “Information is the most important thing about labor-power: it is what the worker, by the means of constant capital, transmits to the means of production upon the basis of evaluations, measurements, elaborations in order to operate on the object of work all those modifications of its form that give it the requested use value” (Alquati 1963, 121; translation mine).

At the beginning of the industrial age, capitalism was exploiting human bodies for their mechanical energy, but soon it became clear that the most important value was coming from the series of creative acts, measurements, and decisions that workers constantly have to make. Alquati defines as information precisely all the innovative microdecisions that workers have to make throughout the production process not only to give form to the product but also to give form to the machinic apparatus. As information enters the modern definition of production, it therefore affects the definitions of living labor and surplus value themselves. “Productive labor is defined by the quality of information elaborated and transmitted by the worker to the means of production via the mediation of constant capital, in a way that is tendentially indirect, but completely socialized” (Alquati 1963, 121; translation mine, emphasis in the original). This statement by Alquati could be understood avant la lettre as the very first postulate of that paradigm of cognitive capitalism that operaismo would develop forty years later: it is dated 1963(!) and advances an incredible acceleration within the organic composition of capital. The proletarian here is no longer just a thermodynamic animal steaming in front of a machine but is already a brain worker.

From the point of view of technical composition, valorizing information enters the cybernetic machine and is transformed into a sort of machinic knowledge. Specifically, it is the numerical dimension of cybernetics that is able to encode workers’ knowledge into digital bits and consequently transform digital bits into numbers for economic planning (Alquati 1963, 134). In other words, operating as a numerical interface between the domain of labor and capital, cybernetics transforms information into surplus value. The Marxian “organic” distinction can easily be imagined and applied here: living information is understood as continuously produced by workers to be turned into dead information crystallized into machinery and the whole bureaucratic apparatus.
But how does information circulate differently than labor within the industrial factory? It is in fact only the cybernetic factory that eventually makes this flow of information visible: capital steals not just energy but knowledge from the worker. The mediation of machinery along the whole organic cycle of information and knowledge accumulation is manifest. The internal bureaucracy of the factory is a specific division of labor that is mirrored, implemented, and extended by cybernetics. In fact, the important insight advanced by Alquati is that of an organic continuum merging bureaucracy, cybernetics, machinery, and the division of labor: cybernetics unveils the machinic nature of bureaucracy and conversely the bureaucratic role of machines working as feedback apparatuses to control workers and capture their know-how of the productive process.

From the point of view of political composition, cybernetics cages variable capital and deepens the political isolation of workers yet still socializes their work at a further level (Alquati 1963, 137). Applying Marx’s lesson on machinery to the computer age, Alquati (1962, 89) is keen to repeat that any “new” machine nevertheless always expresses the power relation between classes in a specific historical moment. With Alquati we thus already visit the belly of an abstract machine, a concretion of capital that is no longer made of steel.

Deleuze and Guattari: The Becoming-Machine of Society

It should not be forgotten that a crucial reading of Marx’s OCC was also advanced by Deleuze and Guattari in their Anti-Oedipus (1972). Until perhaps the late 1970s, this critique was developed parallel to the development of operaismo, at which time Negri, Berardi, and other expats in Paris started to collaborate, especially with Guattari, and the two lineages properly encountered and contaminated each other while maintaining a different focus: Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy of desire would never take antagonism as the central axis of its ontology as operaismo did. Nevertheless, Deleuze and Guattari were to write in A Thousand Plateaus a few passages that fully resound with the social factory described by operaismo. For instance, “In the organic composition of capital, variable capital defines a regime of subjection of the worker (human surplus value), the principal framework of which is the business or factory. But with automation comes a progressive increase in the proportion of constant capital; we then see a new kind of enslavement: at the same time the work regime changes, surplus value becomes machinic, and the framework expands to all of society” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 458).

In 1972 Deleuze and Guattari had introduced this very double innovation: the extension of the machine paradigm toward the whole society and, at the same time, the inclusion of cybernetic code within the definition of production. The notion of code appears more advanced than the simple information found in Alquati, since it shows the machinic and operative nature of information in a much more evident way. Ideally merging Alquati and Tronti’s insights, code describes the very cybernetic, informational, and abstract nature of the new machines that makes the colonization of the social possible.
In a footnote in *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 232n76) acknowledge the so-called fragment on machines found in Marx’s *Grundrisse*. Following the transformation of the main axis of Marx’s OCC, they noticed the shift of balance from labor force to machinery and introduced the concept of “machinic surplus value produced by constant capital ... recognizing that machines too work or produce value, that they have always worked, and that they work more and more in proportion to man, who thus ceases to be a constituent part of the production process, in order to become adjacent to this process” (232). How to receive such a definition of machinic surplus value? Machines cannot be exploited, they cannot produce surplus value, so this surplus value can only be something else that passes from workers to machines: a cognitive capital incarnated in machines from the outside. Deleuze and Guattari refer clearly to the process of transforming the general intellect into constant capital: that is, the transformation of a surplus value of *code* (knowledge) into a surplus value of *flow* (in their language this is what they call Marx’s surplus value proper).

Every technical machine presupposes flows of a particular type: flows of code that are both interior and exterior to the machine, forming the elements of a technology and even a science. It is these flows of code that find themselves encasted, coded, or overcoded in the precapitalist societies in such a way that they never achieve any independence (the blacksmith, the astronomer). But the decoding of flows in capitalism has freed, deterritorialized, and decoded the flows of code just as it has the others—to such a degree that the automatic machine has always increasingly internalized them in its body or its structure as a field of forces, while depending on a science and a technology, on a so-called intellectual labor distinct from the manual labor of the worker. (232–3)

These passages show that, already in 1972, Deleuze and Guattari were aware of the new form of value accumulation driven by knowledge and by an active cognitive component that is part of surplus labor:

In brief, the flows of code that are “liberated” in science and technics by the capitalist regime engender a machinic surplus value that does not directly depend on science and technics themselves, but on capital—a surplus value that is added to human surplus value and that comes to correct the relative diminution of the latter, both of them constituting the whole of the surplus value of flux that characterizes the system. Knowledge, information, and specialized education are just as much parts of capital (“knowledge capital”) as is the most elementary labor of the worker. (234)

This spectrum of sensitivities among Alquati and Deleuze and Guattari shows that between 1962 and 1972 the toolbox for a cognitive turn in Marxism was already potentially given.
Cognitive Capitalism: The Exodus of Living Knowledge from the Factory

After the social, informational, and machinic metamorphoses of Marx’s OCC, a fourth one may be discussed. This further metamorphosis of Marx’s OCC, operated by operaismo, is cognitive and takes collective knowledge as an abstract machine in itself, performing the most radical rupture from the traditional perimeter of the industrial factory (and, polemically, we should remind ourselves how many of our political concepts are still so many metaphors born within that perimeter). Related to debates on post-Fordism, this turn is found in the famous “immaterial canon” written by Negri, Virno, Lazzarato, and Marazzi in the 1990s. Indeed, only at that time would operaismo’s idea of the autonomy and primacy of living labor be extended to living knowledge, rediscovering that so-called “fragment on machines” in the Grundrisse (Marx 1993, 690–712) that had been translated by Solmi in the fourth issue of Quaderni Rossi as early as 1964. Together with Lazzarato and Negri (1991), Virno (1996, 265) was one of the first thinkers to extract and liberate resolutely the general intellect of Marx’s Grundrisse from the greasy gears of the industrial machines and to make it “breathe the city air”: “Mass intellectuality is the composite group of Postfordist living labor, not merely of some particularly qualified third sector: it is the depository of cognitive competences that cannot be objectified in machinery.”

According to Virno, the general intellect is not just crystallized into industrial fixed capital but is diffused across the whole “mass intellectuality” of the metropolis. This is an important shift to underline and a very rare attempt for that time to politicize the new subjectivities of the so-called knowledge society. Metaphorically, if industrial knowledge is actually designing and operating machines, the collective knowledge outside the factory must also somehow be “machinic” (regardless of the fact that Virno always dismissed Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology). For sure, in this exodus from the factory, the old Marxian borders of fixed and variable capital no longer hold: a more sophisticated notion of technical composition is needed. Indeed, this essay does not aim to focus again on a banal immaterial dimension of labor, but on the organic function (that is, the antagonistic function) of any form of knowledge, information, or data across the new social machine. For instance, collective knowledge can be understood as a zero-cost software for all the industrial and postindustrial apparatuses, a sort of fixed capital that is paid by the collective worker, as it happens also in the new BYOD work practice (“bring your own device,” such as a laptop, tablet, etc.).

In a minor critique of Virno, Vercellone has shown that, in the Grundrisse, Marx also recognized that the principal fixed capital is becoming man himself (Vercellone 2007; see also Marx 1993, 711). In a rigorous reading of Marx, Vercellone (2005, 2006, 2007) has criticized the neoliberal theories of knowledge economy under the new general paradigm of cognitive capitalism. For Vercellone, materialistically, “general intellect” means a new division of labor, a new organic composition of capital. The history of capitalism can be read along the three following stages of antagonism and exploitation: formal subsumption (manufacturing capitalism), real subsumption (industrial capitalism), and general intellect (cognitive capitalism). “Marx uses the
notions of formal subsumption, real subsumption and the general intellect in order to qualify, in their logical-historical succession, profoundly different mechanisms of subordinating the labor process by capital (and of the type of conflicts and of crisis which they generate)” (Vercellone 2007, 19).

The role of machines and technological evolution appears secondary in Vercellone, as his focus is generally on the technical composition and the more important “abstract machine” of the division of labor. As with any machine in Marx’s thought, knowledge may be said to occupy a place previously described by division of labor, and before that defined by antagonism. Vercellone (2007, 18) notes,

The conflictual dynamic of the relation of knowledge to power occupies a central position in the explanation of the tendency of the increase of the organic and technical composition of capital. This tendency, Marx writes, results from the way the system of machines arises in its totality: “This road is, rather, dissection [Analyse]—through the division of labor, which gradually transforms the workers’ operations into more and more mechanical ones, so that at a certain point a mechanism can step into their places.”

Moreover, in the hypothesis of cognitive capitalism—and this again is a crucial point for understanding operaismo—fixed capital is absorbed by variable capital (i.e., cognitive workers). Here Marx’s OCC appears to follow movements of deterritorialization and reterritorialization: industrial machines reterritorialize the division of labor of manufacturing inside the factory, whereas in cognitive capitalism machines deterterritorialize the division of labor across society. The chain described by Vercellone running through antagonism, division of labor, machinery, and general intellect as abstract machine should clarify at once the immanence and materiality of the paradigm of cognitive capitalism.

To sketch a schema of the new OCC according to operaismo: there is a machinic dimension of knowledge external to the industrial capital fixed into machinery. In Marx’s Grundrisse the collective dimension of machinic knowledge is called “general intellect,” “general scientific labor,” “general social knowledge,” and so on. This collective dimension is productive in two ways: as embodied in industrial machinery, communication infrastructures, and digital networks, but also as a mass intellectuality managing the division of labor of the social factory and producing new forms of life. The individual dimension of this immaterial labor (Lazzarato and Negri, 1991) can be differentiated into cognitive labor (creating new material, immaterial, or social machines) and informational labor (operating in front of a machine and producing valorizing information, as with Alquati’s workers of the cybernetic factory).

Marazzi’s Anthropogenic Industries: The Living Becomes Fixed Capital

The fifth metamorphosis of Marx’s OCC to be explained is that of becoming-fixed capital: not just of the brain but even of the body of workers, not just of knowledge but also of all the metropolitan forms of life. In an essay dedicated to digital capitalism, Marazzi (2005) underlines how traditional fixed capital (capital invested
into machinery in its physical form) is losing importance as a factor of wealth production. From the point of view of fixed capital, Marazzi continues, knowledge has today a massive productive agency in itself, as the case of big software companies indicates. By replacing living labor with dead labor (i.e., with new immaterial machinic apparatuses), knowledge has thus to be considered a sort of new “cognitive machine.” In such a new OCC, however, not only the general knowledge but also the very physical body of the human becomes fixed capital. In this sense, Marazzi describes an emerging anthropogenic mode of production that has also been defined by Boyer (2002) as the production of man by means of man. Cognitive capitalism is thus better described as biopolitical capitalism, as it seems to be based on the machinic production of forms of life. This new mode of production is called more prosaically the service sector, or tertiary sector—that is, the soft industries of healthcare, biotechnology, new media, cultural industry, and education. Under this biocapitalism or “industry of the living,” eventually Marazzi totally liquefies the machine to introduce the living as fixed capital.

In the model of the production of man by means of man, if fixed capital disappears in its material and fixed form, it nonetheless reappears in the mobile and fluid form of the living” (Marazzi 2005, 108; translation mine). Marazzi insists on the transposition of machinic fixed capital into the human living body. “According to our hypothesis, aside from the traditional faculty of labor, the body of the labor force has to become the container of the function of fixed capital, that is machinery, codified knowledge, and productive grammars, in other words, past labor” (Marazzi 2005, 107; translation mine). This passage of Marazzi is radical: if, according to Marx, capital is but a social relation, then indeed there is no need of heavy actors such as machinery, industrial management, and scientific research to describe contemporary production—the machinic source of profit can be externalized straight into the workers’ bodies themselves. “A working hypothesis that deserves our attention is the following: in the emerging anthropogenic model of the new capitalism, the living contains in itself both the functions of fixed capital and variable capital, that is the material and tools of past labor and present living labor. In other words, labor-force is expressed as the sum of variable capital (V) and constant capital (C; specifically, the fixed part of constant capital)” (110; translation mine). These interventions by Marazzi crucially underline once again that the notions of cognitive capitalism and the “hegemony of immaterial labor” do not refer to something banally intangible but to a power of abstraction that is able to engineer our bodies and social relations in a new way.

The living as machinic capital seems to suggest a totalitarian scenario where capitalism no longer needs machines to subject the population, as the technical composition has been introjected and socialized. On the other hand, this may constitute the horizon of a potential autonomy of the multitude, once freed from the heavy disciplinary apparatus of the factory. Is a postindustrial society really closer to political and economic emancipation? Is a postindustrial society really becoming a threat for the constitution of modern states, because of the social instability of its technical composition? Or vice versa, is such a precarious composition being engineered by capitalism as an obstacle to any new form of political antagonism? The problem of antagonism found in the latest debates of operaismo is also related to
the evolution of the Marxian concept of fixed capital. If fixed capital in the form of industrial machinery was the mediator and accumulator of surplus value, which “machine” occupies this very function in postindustrial society? The value magnitude and the degree of mobility of fixed capital in postindustrial society together seem to be the crucial issues in the recent debates of operaismo.

An interesting hypothesis emerges, then, in the latest works of Vercellone and Marazzi: a crisis of the valorization of fixed capital and profit extraction has forced capitalism toward new and desperate forms of financial speculation (derivatives and algorithmic trading, for instance) and new forms of economic rent (real estate speculation, information technology monopolization, debt governance). This is not an acknowledgment of the failure of knowledge society but is on the contrary a demonstration of its “successful” tendency: in the long term, knowledge society produces a drop in valorization and a push toward desperate practices of financial speculation and “parasitic” rent. In provocation we could state that the knowledge society has generated financial crisis. This is probably the historical point at which Marx’s OCC diminishes its pace, as technical composition is diluted across society, fixed capital loses its magnitude, and surplus value is extracted with difficulty. Though closer to potential autonomy at the end of the 2000s, nevertheless the productive class has found itself under new governance: that is, a world dominated by the new machine of debt, or to quote Lazzarato (2011), within the “factory of indebted man.”

Hardt and Negri: The Political Autonomy of the Common

The whole history of operaismo has been crossed by endless debates about the risk of mistaking a given technical composition of labor for a true political composition, which could mean to embrace, for instance, the cognitive worker as an antagonist figure that is already politicized in itself. Political composition thus implicates the need to intervene within the technical composition of labor in order to break and transform it into a new class composition (the idea of “class composition” was in fact introduced to skip traditionally trite debates on “class consciousness,” as noted in Mezzadra 2011). The final metamorphosis of Marx’s OCC explained here is thus the attempt by Hardt and Negri to consider the whole organic composition of capital as a veritable political composition. In my opinion, Hardt and Negri’s perspective aims to show the political ground of any economic form of production, to take antagonism as the immanence of economy, and also to show that a new composition can only be resolved as the production of a new subjectivity—that is, of a subjectivity politically organized. This is not the autonomy of the political but, on the contrary, the primacy of antagonism.

In their recent book, Commonwealth, Hardt and Negri (2009, 131) propose a new dissection of Marx’s OCC by the so-called “technical composition of biopolitical labor,” as composed by three trends: immaterial production, the feminization of work, and migrant labor. More specifically, Hardt and Negri criticize Marx’s OCC as still belonging to a very Western and Aristotelian tradition of the measurability of being, with surplus value (\(\Delta v\)) only measured in a quantitative way as surplus labor time.
(Δt). As Negri (1991) has been arguing since the publication of *Marx beyond Marx*, this model fails at understanding the “excessive” dimension of contemporary value production (see Hardt and Negri 2000, 354). Beside this, according to Hardt and Negri, the fragility of Marx’s equation stems from his belief in an objective crisis of capitalism, the idea of a sort of engine failure due to a lack of surplus value. To this fatalist credo, operaismo responded with the idea of a subjective crisis of capitalism—that is, a crisis produced by the active antagonism of new social subjectivities and new political organizations.

The originality of *Commonwealth* is its attempt to describe the new technical composition of capital around the production and expropriation of the common. Produced by the multitude in the form of the common of social relations, forms of life, and knowledge, the common is immediately put to work by capital, often without any need of material enclosures or intellectual property enforcement. The common can be produced and exploited only for its power of abstraction, where abstraction means not simply immateriality but the ability to compose and be composed across the most different of substrates (matter, energy, information, metadata, knowledge). The factory composes the division of manufacturing labor in a new way; the metropolis recomposes the labor force under new socialized forms; the network society composes sociality and organizes knowledge toward even more abstracted spaces (take the time spent on social media nowadays). The idea of the common is the ambitious attempt to frame not only the most complex organic composition of capital—that is, the becoming society, becoming machine, becoming code, becoming abstraction of capitalism—but also to size the common ground at the basis of any mode of production.

**Conclusion: The Method of Antagonistic Tendency**

Why focus again on Marx’s diagram of the OCC, and what can be retained today from that intuition? By way of a conclusion, I would like to sketch four basic reasons: namely, that Marx’s OCC represents (1) a ternary model, (2) a model of subjectivity, (3) a model of tendency, and (4) a model of antagonism. First, Marx’s most important lesson concerns the use of ternary concepts. For Marx, exploitation and oppression are never described by a binary tension of power—that is, by a mere confrontation of forces (as happens in many anarchist accounts and even in many academic accounts of biopolitics, for instance). Marx’s notion of capital as accumulation of surplus value is indeed a vortical movement: a gigantic circular movement, where the complexity of this vortex is ternary and not binary. A ternary concept must not be understood only as a Hegelian dialectical concept but also as a concept that unveils the internal transformations, becomings, and crises of a living system: a concept that includes in itself the problem of scale and the diagram of antagonism.

The second reason to focus on this formula is to show the role of economy behind any contemporary “cultural” study of subjectivity. In a tradition spanning many decades, Italian operaismo has introduced a new bestiary of political subjectivities: mass worker, social worker, cognitive worker, biopolitical worker, and so forth. Possibly, operaismo could be defined as a Marxism of subjectivities that extends the
figure of the industrial working class beyond itself. Such a revolution of subjectivities is heavily indebted to feminism and poststructuralism, and more recently to postcolonial and queer studies. Nevertheless, though there is no political economy without a history of subjectivities, there is no theory of subjectivity without political economy.

The third reason is precisely Marx’s focus on the tendency within capitalism—on its inner, intrinsic, and intensive evolution. As Tronti (1962) and other authors of operaismo have underlined in Marx’s work, the most advanced stage explains the less advanced stage, and not vice versa: “The anatomy of man is a key to the anatomy of the ape” (Marx 1971, 42). The city explains agriculture, the factory explains the metropolis, cybernetics explains the industrial division of labor, and so on. In the same way, the hypothesis of cognitive capitalism is supposed to clarify industrial capitalism as much as in Marx’s thought industrial capitalism clarifies the manufacturing-based economy.

The fourth reason is inspired by one of operaismo’s most important lessons: the method of the antagonistic tendency parallels the crisis of the capitalist tendency, as was pointed out at the beginning of this essay (Negri 1991, 41, 125). In particular, “The tendency: it is not simply what permits a passive construction of the categories on the basis of a sum of historical acquisitions; it is above all what permits a reading of the present in light of the future, in order to make projects to illuminate the future. To take risks, to struggle. A science should adhere to that” (49).

Marx’s analysis of industrial capitalism has been extended by operaismo to the society outside the factory gates, following a general socialization of capitalism and a technological acceleration beyond Marx’s imagination. We have witnessed the capitalist tendency as incarnated in the becoming-social, becoming-machine, becoming-code, and becoming-abstract of capitalism. Tendency is the definition of something beyond us: the contemporary economic crisis is once again caused by the tension between old political regimes and new forms of production exceeding them and putting them in crisis. Operaismo’s method of the antagonistic tendency seems to suggest but one thing: to anticipate the tendency of capitalism and to accelerate from the point of view of antagonism.

References