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From the digitization of culture to digital culture

Another Life: social cooperation and a-organic life*

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Abstract

In this paper the author draws attention to some key concepts of the political economy of digital culture asking whether new theories of social production and sympathetic cooperation, in the work of authors such as Yochai Benkler and Maurizio Lazzarato, can offer an alternative to the neoliberal logic of market-based competition as the basis for the production of new forms of life.

Keywords

biopolitics, cooperation, markets, neoliberalism, networks, political economy, social production

Una altra vida: cooperació social i vida anorgànica

Resum

En aquest article, l'autora crida l'atenció sobre alguns conceptes clau de l'economia política de la cultura digital i es pregunta si les noves teories de producció social i la cooperació solidària, en el treball d'autors com Yochai Benkler i Maurizio Lazzarato, poden oferir una alternativa a la lògica neoliberal de la competència basada en el mercat com a base per a la producció de noves formes de vida.

Paraules clau

biopolítica, cooperació, mercats, neoliberalisme, xarxes, economia política, producció social

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So, since there has to be an imperative, I would like the one underpinning the theoretical analysis we are attempting to be quite simply a conditional imperative of the kind: if you want to struggle, here are some key points, here are some lines of force, here are some constrictions and blockages. [...] Of course, it's up to me, and those working in the same direction, to know on what fields of real forces we need to get our bearings in order to make a tactically effective analysis. But this is, after all, the circle of struggle and truth, that is to say, precisely, of philosophical practice.

Foucault (2007, p. 3)

The notion that markets are endowed with a kind of 'life' was an admittedly controversial but persistent motif in the 1990s debate on the 'new economy' of the internet. In no other economic field have notions of self-organization inspired by biological and physical models been so crucial. Scientific theories such as neo-evolutionism and chaos theory have been mobilized to account for the peculiar character of the internet as an informational milieu able to support and accelerate the emergence of new economic, but also cultural and social forms—a perspective spread by a successful new genre of popular science literature that never ceases to account for the continuity of the natural, the economic and the biological (Axelrod *et al.*, 2001; Kelly, 1999).

Most of this literature has served to popularize the notion of the internet as a kind of 'bio-medium', a new synthesis of the natural and the artificial that reinforces neoliberal understandings of the free market. However, some authors writing from within the liberal tradition have also posed the possibility that the internet is enabling the rise of a 'non-market' mode of production. Such a 'non-market' mode of production would thus constitute a new economic reality—in the sense that Foucault would give to the term, that is, something that could constitute an intrinsic limit to neoliberal governmentality. Non-market production, in fact, is defined as driven by mechanisms of social cooperation rather than economic competition, and as intrinsically more 'effective' than market-based production—at least within some domains. The question that is asked here is whether such new theories can be seen to support the formulation of an alternative political rationality or whether they would only allow for a further refinement of neoliberalism as Foucault understood it.

For example, in his widely read *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, Yale Law professor Yochai Benkler produces an explanation of nonmarket production from a liberal perspective which is "centered on social relations, but operating in the domain of economics, rather than sociology" (2006, p. 16). According to Benkler, the *networked information economy* has allowed the concrete emergence of a new economic reality, social production, which represents a

genuine innovation when compared to the other two dominant forms of economic organization: the firm and the market. Social or non-market production emerges from "the very core of our economic engine", affecting first of all the key economic sector of "the production and exchange of information, and through it information-based goods, tools, services and capabilities". Such a shift would suggest "a genuine limit on the extent of the market [...] growing from within the very market that it limits in its most advanced loci" (2006, p. 19). Benkler sets out to describe "sustained productive enterprises that take the form of decentralized and non-market-based production, and explain why productivity and growth are consistent with a shift towards such modes of production" (2006, p. 34). Social production mobilizes the "life of the social", that is, the productive power of social relations between free individuals who act "as human beings and as social beings rather than as market actors through the price system" (2006, p. 7). Thanks to the networked information economy, social production would have become directly "effective" (hence productive) as demonstrated by the success of "free software, distributed computing, and other forms of peer production [that] offer clear examples of large-scale, measurably effective sharing practices" (2006, p. 121).

The most innovative element of Benkler's analysis, within the framework of liberal theory, is the notion that the distance between the nature of political economy and the nature of civil society can be bridged by social production: "a good deal more that human beings value can now be done by individuals who interact with each other socially, as human beings and social beings, rather than as market actors through the price system" (2006, p. 7). This would produce a new quality of economic life that would no longer be based on a split within the subjectivity of *homo oeconomicus* between economic interest (based on a calculation of utilities) and the disinterested, but partial interests that, according to Foucault, liberal political theory confined to the transactional reality of civil society (see Lazzarato, 2009). Social life and economic life would thus find a point of convergence where the former would no longer find its expression exclusively within the reproductive sphere of civil society, but would become directly productive in the economic domain. We would thus be confronted with the historical emergence not only of a new mode of production, but also a new mechanism—cooperation—that would relieve "the enormous social pressure" that the logic of the market exerts on existing social structures (2006, p. 19). As Benkler emphasizes, this would not necessarily spell the end of standard economic analysis, and more specifically economic understanding of human economic behaviour or economic theory's belief in the emerging patterns produced by the abstract nature of economic life.

We need to assume no fundamental change in the nature of humanity; we need not declare the end of economics as we



know it. [...] Behaviors and motivation patterns familiar to us from social relations generally continue to cohere in their own patterns. What has changed is that now these patterns of behavior have become effective beyond the domains of building social relations of mutual interest and fulfilling our emotional and psychological needs of companionship and mutual recognition. They have come to play a substantial role as modes of motivating, informing, and organizing productive behavior at the very core of the information economy. (Benkler, 2006, p. 91–2)

Benkler's account of the new economic reality of social production thus saves "the nature of humanity", that is neoliberal postulates around the nature of social and economic life, within a new economic integrated life whose engine would be the "social relation of mutuality" springing from within the emotional and psychological needs of autonomous individuals. The nature of political economy will also be safeguarded and re-actualized within social production, which would however have the merit of compensating for the pressure of market mechanisms on society while at least partially recomposing the division between social and economic life.

It could be argued that theories of social production such as the one outlined by Benkler offer liberal and neoliberal economics a refinement of its logic that does not significantly break with its overall political rationality. Non-market production, in fact, is based on social cooperation, but it becomes economically effective, that is it achieves the status of an economic phenomenon, because "it increases the overall productivity in the sectors where it is effective [...] and presents new sources of competition to incumbents that produce information goods for which there are now socially produced substitutes" (Benkler, 2006, p. 122). The mechanisms of social cooperation would thus simply correct some inefficiencies inherent in the mechanisms of economic competition, satisfy those needs that are not catered for by markets and even feed directly into them—improving the productivity of economic life as a whole, now reconfigured as an ecology of different institutional and organizational forms. However, social production becomes measurably effective, that is, it acquires the abstract value that makes it an economic phenomenon, only as long as it manages to spur innovation and hence competition in the market economy. Although nothing in principle prevents social production from

outperforming competitive markets as a more efficient economic form, it still seems destined to remain subaltern to the logic of the neoliberal market as a whole.¹

In a way it seems as if, once passed through the 'reflective prism' of political economy, social production loses all potential to actually produce and sustain radically different forms of life—which would neither coexist nor compete with neoliberal governmentality, but which could question its very logic. As Foucault taught, the encounter between a form of knowledge and a social phenomenon does not have the same implications as its encounter with a physical phenomenon. A change of scientific paradigm, such as the Copernican revolution, did not affect the movement of the planets, but what political economy says about social production will affect what social production will become. And yet nothing prevents social production—that is, the capacity of free social cooperation to produce new forms of life—from entering a different reflective prism—connecting to other kinds of knowledge, that are less accommodating towards the neoliberal way of life and that potentially relay back to more radical practices.

Social production, and especially cooperation, are also key concepts developed by another author, Maurizio Lazzarato, who writes from a very different perspective than Benkler, that is, within a framework that mobilizes and extends Marxism through the 'philosophy of difference' to be found in the writings of authors such as Bergson, Tarde, Deleuze and Guattari and also Foucault. In particular, in his book on Gabriel Tarde's economic psychology, Lazzarato endorses Tarde's argument, formulated at the end of the 19th century, that "sympathetic cooperation", that is, autonomous, independent and creative cooperation, is the "ontological and historical premise of the production of economic value and of the division of labour" (Lazzarato, 2002, p. 8).² For Tarde, in fact, unlike the political economists or Marxists, the source of wealth lies "neither in land, nor labour, nor capital, nor utility, but within invention and association" (2002, p. 8). Sympathetic cooperation is the ontological basis of economic value once the latter is understood in terms of the production and diffusion of the new—that is, in terms of "the emergence of new economic, social and aesthetic relations" (2002, p. 8).

Furthermore, according to Lazzarato, sympathetic cooperation also implies a vitalism, but "a temporal vitalism, that is no longer organic, a vitalism that relays back to the virtual and no

1. One could argue against it using the Marxist critique of early economic theories of self-organizing markets: that it continues to mystify the antagonism and asymmetry that lies within the interior of economic life, such as the relation between capital and labour, which would coexist somehow with the new capacity of subjects to cooperate within an economic process that capital does not directly organize. If such asymmetry / antagonism continues to persist at the interior of economic relations of production, such as in the relation between employers and employees, then in what way can a subject who participates in both—that is, in social and market production— achieve such reconciliation? In most cases, the reintegration of social and economic life would remain fatally flawed and tense. Subjective economic life would remain split: between a labour force that is subject to the command of the capitalist enterprise; an exchange-based, competition-driven economic rational subject competitively operating by means of a calculation of utilities in the marketplace; and finally a new socially productive being, unfolding within the new collaborative milieus of the networked information economy.

2. All translations from Lazzarato are mine.



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longer exclusively to biological processes" (1997, p. 116).³ Such "a-organic life" would be significantly different from the life of biopolitics, inasmuch as it would not refer back to the homeostatic optimization of the vital processes of the population, but would imply essentially the "life of the spirit" – that is, the life of subjectivity as memory (including sensory-motor memory), understood as implicating the ontological powers of time (see also Grosz, 2004).

In *Puissances de l'invention: la psychologie économique de Gabriel Tarde contre l'économie politique* (2002), Lazzarato returns to a key biological image on which to ground another theory of social production as the primary condition for the production of economic value: the brain. The brain is obviously not to be understood as a biological organ, but as an image of thought that draws on some of the peculiar characteristics of the brain as organ: the structural undifferentiation of brain cells and their relative homogeneity in spite of the more or less specific distribution of functions within each lobe. Such relative homogeneity of brain cells would fit much better the description of a social life where the segmentation operated by the division of labour (such as class) or by biological ruptures in the continuum of life (sex, gender and race) would coexist with the capacity of each individual cell to participate in multiple associations that are relatively deterritorialized from their specific function.

The equality and uniformity of the elements that constitute the brain, their relative functional indifference, provide the conditions for a richer and more varied singularization of the events that affect it and of the thoughts that it produces. By emancipating itself from the organ, the function produces a new plasticity and a new mobility that is the condition for a freer invention. Non-organic cooperation opens the possibility of a superior harmonization and explicates the tendency to the equality that opposes organic differentiation. [...] The general intellect is not the fruit of the natural history of capitalism, but is already ontologically contained within the emancipation from the organic division of traditional aristocratic societies. (Lazzarato, 2002, p. 35)

The image of the brain then performs two functions. In the first place, it allows us to imagine a socius where each individual element is bound at the same time to a specific function, but

also to a more fluid, less segmented dynamic engendering what cultural theory used to call *multiple identities*. Thus, one can be caught within the division of labour in the workplace, while also simultaneously being part of different networks or associations. Second, the image of the brain makes it possible to account for a subjective life that is woven out of the specific powers and forces that are attributed to such a brain: the effort of paying attention, that is, of retaining and reactualizing impressions, the forces of believing, desiring, feeling, and the 'social quantities' hence produced (beliefs, desires, feelings).⁴ Clearly, then, the brain that Lazzarato–Tarde mobilize as an image for thinking 'non-organic' cooperation is not literally the biological brain, but neither is it the individual brain. Beliefs, desires and feelings, in fact, are forces in the sense that:

[...] they circulate like flows or currents between brains. The latter, hence, function as relays within a network of cerebral or psychic forces, by allowing them to pass through (imitation) or to bifurcate (invention) [...] On the other hand, however, flows of desires and beliefs exceed brains from all sides. Brains are not the origins of flows, but on the contrary, they are contained within them. The ontology of the 'Net' is to be found within such currents, within these networks of cerebral forces, within these powers of differentiation and imitation. (Lazzarato, 2002, p. 27)

The engine of social production would hence not lie within the interior of the autonomous individual but within the in-between of the social relation. It would be constituted through that which Lazzarato–Tarde define as the *primitive social fact*, "as action-at-a-distance by a spirit (or memory-brain) on another spirit (on another memory-brain)" (Lazzarato, 2002, p. 31). This action-at-a-distance is defined by Tarde through the metaphor of photography: it is a matter of "impression", a "quasi-photographic reproduction of a cerebral cliché on a photographic plate" (2002, p. 31). It is also assimilated to an "act of possession", where the individual spirit or monad allows itself to be possessed by another one in a quasi-erotic relation that holds varying degrees of reciprocity and which can have different durations.⁵

Hence, for Lazzarato–Tarde, the process of subjectivation cannot originate in the individual brain, but must unfold within these cerebral networks and can be assimilated to "a fold, a retention, a

3. It is important to underline how this notion of *a-organic life* does not replace the notion of biological life, but, in Lazzarato's view, constitutes the site of a double individuation. What is invented at the level of a-organic life, that is, at the level of time and its virtualities, and within the network of intercerebral, sub-representative molecular forces, needs to be actualized in the concrete composition of bodies and in the expression of new forms of life. The two levels are thus autonomous but inextricably interrelated as in the two attributes of the Spinozist substance or the two floors of the Leibnizist monads (see Lazzarato, 2004).

4. For another perspective on the value of thinking culturally and politically by means of the image of the brain, see Connolly (2002)..

5. As Michael Taussig (1993) has also argued in a different context, action-at-a-distance would thus be a mimetic act, a matter of "copy and contact" that would express the tendency of subjectivity to "becoming other".



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turning of the flows upon themselves". Tarde's metaphors for such a process of subjectivation are, once again, natural, but resolutely a-organic: the wave and the sea.

The wave, the individual brain, is the result of a process of individuation of the movements of the sea, the smooth space of associated brains. The wave is produced at the level of the surface through an in-rolling of the currents that traverse the sea in its depths in all directions. (Lazzarato, 2002, p. 27–8)

Like a wave, hence, subjectivation would not be the product of an original individualization, but it would be a question of "rhythms, speeds, of contractions and dilations, within a milieu that is never static, but which is itself a Brownian, molecular movement" (2002, p. 28). It is constituted out of the very seriality of events that defined the nature of political economy, but with a completely different inflection where the production of economic value does not presuppose the optimization of bioeconomic processes, but the invention and diffusion of new values and new forms of life.

The notion of *sympathetic cooperation* proposed by Lazzarato appears of particular value, inasmuch as it makes it possible to think of social cooperation as the *a priori* of all economic processes, rather than one particular form among others, or an *posteriori* reconciliation of economic and social life. It argues, in fact, that economic life cannot be considered as a distinct domain from the social life that underlies it. It grounds the productivity of social life in the relational action of psychological or spiritual forces, that is, within the life of the 'soul or spirit'. It makes it possible to think of the current production of economic value as that of a measure that only partially captures the immanent process of production of value that unfolds in the in-between of social relations. It counters the "exclusion of sympathy and love, strongly present within utopian socialism" and makes it possible to rethink the foundation of political communities that are not based on interests but on common beliefs, desires and affects; finally, it opens the possibility of thinking of a political rationality that allows for "a polytheism of beliefs and desires that are composed through a demultiplication and a differentiation of the associative principle [rather than] within a single large organization (state or party)" (Lazzarato, 2002, p. 27).

Can such theories provide viable alternatives to the neoliberal paradigm of market production as the concrete instantiation of an abstract eidos of competition? Can relations of cooperation displace the mechanisms of competition as the basis on which to find a new political rationality? Two examples of theories of social production or cooperation have been discussed in this article. Liberal accounts of social production, as exemplified by Yochai Benkler's work, seem to open up a different economic model for post-neoliberal governmentality. However, inasmuch as such accounts remain faithful to some key assumptions of neoliberal

economics, they tend to make social production subaltern to market-based production and hence do not appear to question neoliberal governmentality as a whole —but only to refine it. As valuable as such refinement is, especially when compared with the other contemporary evolution of neoliberal governmentality, that is, neoconservatism, it seems ultimately of limited use to those who reject the overall thrust of market-based life. The second example, Lazzarato's theory of sympathetic cooperation, elaborated by means of a philosophy of difference, seems to challenge neoliberal governmentality in more substantial ways. It questions both the human nature of liberal theory and the neoliberal formal nature of markets as competition. It makes the mechanism of competition just one possible means of organizing economic life and one that, anyway, is always dependent on the cooperative powers of the associative, a-organic life of the socius. It argues for social cooperation as the key mechanism in the production of a value that can no longer be abstractly economic —but is inseparable from subjective, social values such as truth-values, aesthetic-values, utility-values, existential-values. It thus introduces an immanent ethics into a social-economic life where value emerges out of the "powers of conjunctions and disjunctions [and] forces of composition and decomposition of affective relations" (Lazzarato, 2004, p. 24).

Such theories have been taken here as examples of the different ways in which a new economic reality, such as social production, can be thought of as a means to challenge and rethink the nature of markets and political economy. They have been taken as reflective relays that can be fruitfully connected to a number of practices. If an alternative to neoliberal governmentality can be invented, in fact, it will certainly not be by virtue of the application of a theory or by grounding "a political practice in truth [...]" but by drawing on thinking "as a multiplier of the forms and domains for the intervention of political action" (Foucault, 1984, p. xiv).

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