

Antonio Negri
**Notes on the
Abstract Strike**

01/05

e-flux journal #65 SUPERCOMMUNITY — may–august 2015 [Antonio Negri](#)
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In the most recent sermons on the inescapable power of capital, we hear increasing praise for the dominance of the algorithm. But what is this algorithm? It is nothing but another machine, born of the cooperation of workers, and one that the boss then places on a level above this same cooperation. The algorithm is, as Marx used to say, a machine that runs where there has been a strike, where there has been resistance or a rupture in the valorization process: a machine produced by the same strength and autonomy expressed by living labor.

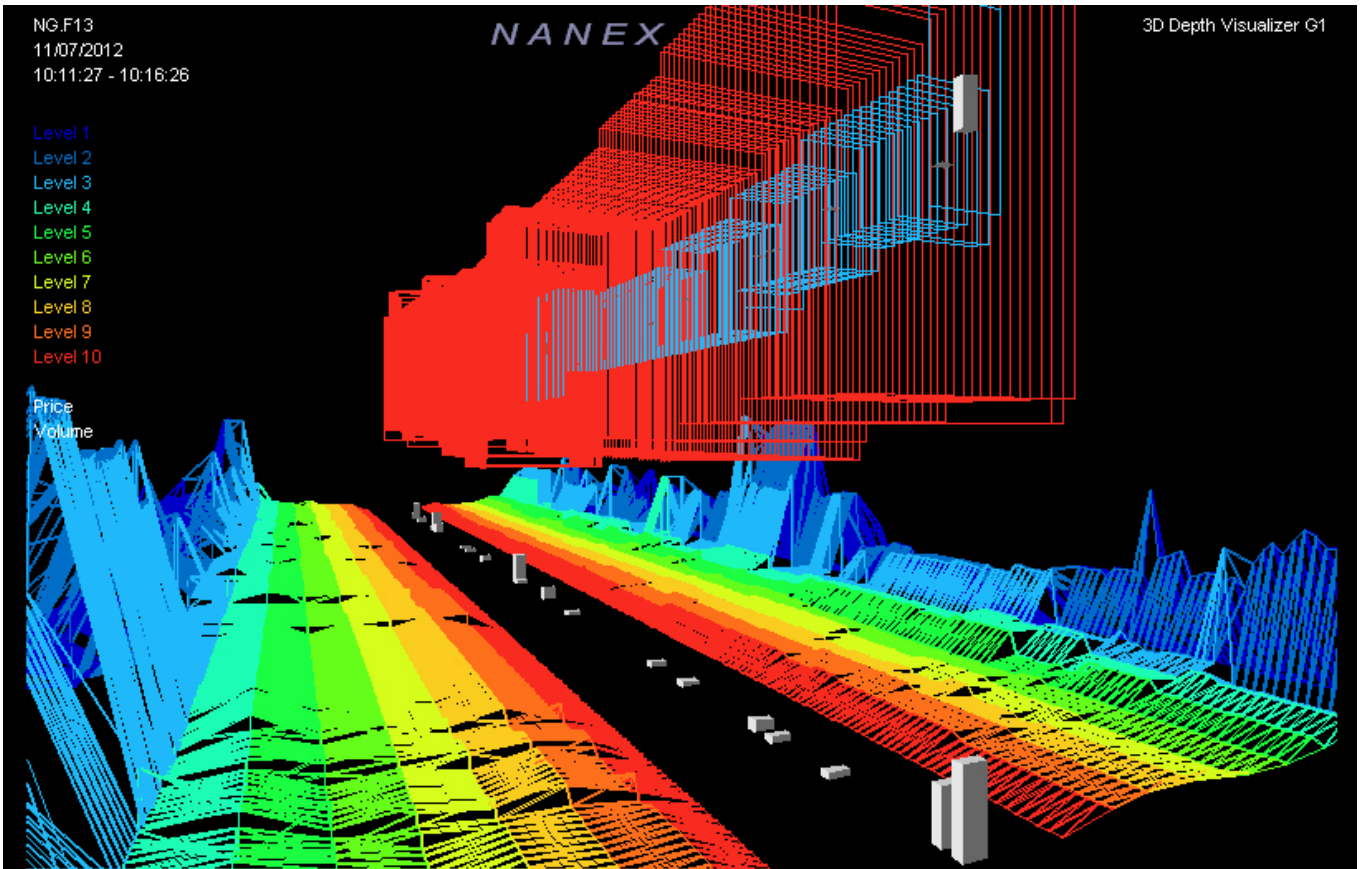
The big difference between the labor processes Marx studied and those of today consists in the fact that today cooperation is no longer imposed by the boss, but produced “from within” the labor force; the productive process and the machines are not brought “from without” by the boss, nor are the workers forcibly obliged to join them.

Today we can speak of the appropriation of fixed capital by the workers and the construction of what we can call a cognitive algorithm for valorizing every form of labor. Such an algorithm is capable of producing languages, for which it will become the master language. But these languages are still created by workers who possess the key to the algorithm, to its cooperative engine.

If this is indeed the case, then it is only by abstracting itself ever more from working processes that capitalist command can operate algorithmically. It is no coincidence that we now speak of the “extractive exploitation” of social cooperation, and not about the exploitation connected to the industrial and temporal dimensions of labor and of valorization. What do abstraction and extraction mean for a temporally continuous and spatially extensive productive enterprise, as a collective and cooperative invention? What does it mean for the labor process (in the hands of the worker) and the capitalist process of valorization to become separated – with the former entrusted to the autonomy of living labor, and the latter deferred to pure command?

It means that labor has reached such a level of dignity and strength that it refuses the form of valorization imposed on it. Even within the imposition of command, it is capable of developing its own autonomy. But a complex, yet essentially linear “production of subjectivity” also plays out, meaning that production occurs by means of subjectification, while at the same time, the worker must be constantly reduced to a commanded subject. The ambiguity in this game is the same ambiguity found in all the different figures of living labor in postindustrial organization.

Who is the worker and who is the boss



This Nanex animation covers approximately less than a second of high frequency trading transactions performed by algorithms.

today? Let's look first at the worker. The worker operates in an intangible net, constituted by the worker himself but controlled by a boss who simultaneously extols his productivity and extracts value from him. Here the worker develops within an increasingly intense context of cooperation, delivering a growing productive capacity and considering his own labor force the motor of the productive system. In other words, it is within the context of cooperation that labor becomes increasingly "abstract," and thus increasingly capable of organizing production, while at the same time becoming subject to mechanisms of value extraction to an ever greater extent. In developing an increasingly autonomous relationship to the cooperative context, the worker thus organizes the expression of his own productive energy.

What is the boss today? In the context of cognitive labor, the boss is financial capital which extracts social value. But now, this form of extraction begins to show a progressive reduction of the boss's function from an entrepreneurial figure to a purely political figure. The verticalization of capitalist command must traverse in an increasingly abstract manner the relationship with cooperation and the processes of productive subjectification. Consequently, within this verticalization, a kind of governmentalization of command expresses an increasingly complex effort to control the machinic/algorithmic mechanisms through which living labor has proposed and built cooperation. From this perspective, finance capital is presented as a "dictatorship" – not in the sense of a fascist dictatorship, certainly, but as an abstraction of command and its governmental standardization in the effort to assert its authority over the abstraction process. In other words, it must make *abstraction* coincide with *extraction*.

Here it is necessary to distinguish two different aspects of the new figure of capitalist command. We have already discussed the first: abstract/extractive command and its aspiration to recover the entire valorization process. This is the preparation for political command. But alongside this aspect, there is the other: that neoliberalism is in its own way constituent. In addition to developing a governmental role of pure command – essentially financial command backed by a maximum of state force – it also develops as a network (with numerous forms of governmentality) and acts as participatory command over an extensive micropolitical network prepared to include needs and desires.

The neoliberal constitution does not simply gather (and extract value from) living labor expressed as value, but also tends to organize consumption and desires and to make them – in

their material expression – reproductive, cooperative, and functional in the reproduction of capital. It is the *currency* that, in the age of financial capital, mediates between production and consumption, between needs and capitalist reproduction, thus equalizing and consolidating in a single abstraction both the labor that produces it and the labor that consumes it. Is it possible to pass through this complex consolidation by reappropriating the labor that produces, by freeing consumption from its capitalist directives?

We know that the relationship with capital is always varied, both because the working subject in each phase of capitalist development is differently qualified, and because command over labor in each phase is contextually different. The strike, then, is always different too: the strike of the industrial worker and that of the farmhand were different experiences, different adventures. Even if each put the same substance on the line, the industrial workers faced the continuity of sabotage and of prolonged abstention from labor, while the farmers' struggle faced carnal, targeted, and extremely harsh violence. For farmers the struggle could not last long – they describe the desperate lowing of un milked cows, the rotting of unharvested crops – making it necessary to intensify the conflict in the short time available. For industrial workers, timelines and approaches were completely different, and didn't demand to be settled by the criterion of the wages necessary for survival.

From the perspective of the boss, the strike appears unified: the economic rupture of the valorization relationship and the political rupture of the hierarchy are nullified in an act of repression that always has political and highly symbolic motives of reestablishing order. When neoliberalism was introduced in the 1980s as the overall plan for transforming the organization productive labor in relation to the political control of the working class, we know that this was made possible by the automation of factories and the spread of digital technology to all spheres of human activity. In fact, it is entrepreneurship in the field of cybernetics that lies at the base of the neoliberal success story.

But a symbolic act opened this transformation of control – a political act demonstrating that the bosses now knew how to withstand attacks from workers: Thatcher's suppression of the Welsh miners' strike and Reagan's attack on air traffic controllers were presented as the necessary precondition for transforming the mode of production. Here the symbolic – or biopolitical – character of the suppression of the struggles appeared in its extreme violence, pushing every possibility of

03/05

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negotiation outside the context of resolution. The workers' strike was opposed through this "biopower."

When, twenty years ago now, we began to speak of "immaterial labor," we were dismissed not only because we said "immaterial," when obviously all labor is material, but above all because by that immateriality we meant constituent acts of value, knowledge, language, desire – not simply manual labor, but living labor. Today, certainly, we can no longer be dismissed: it is all too clear that we are in a situation in which capital has entirely identified that new and very rich context and has placed it entirely under its command. Capital has geared itself toward the living production of languages on the one hand, while on the other it has functionalized needs and desires for the purposes of its own command.

In neoliberalism, capital wants to be recognized by the force of productive *subjectification* as the very *subject* of the capitalist relationship. It wants voluntary servitude. This ambiguity is pushed to the maximum: if without living labor there is no production, then, in the same way, without consumption there is no valorization (or reproduction). Keynesianism is internalized and renewed in an explicit (but nevertheless unrecognizable) way within the neoliberal constitution. From this often come the impotent mystifications repeated by too many honest (but fundamentally uncritical) men: it is asserted that capital is now capable of making the dominated happy. These are servitude's hesitations, taken as truth. What interests us instead is the idea that to exist within capital is necessarily to resist it.

What is an abstract strike today? That is to say, what is a strike that is measured against both the new nature of living labor and the neoliberal constitution of production and reproduction? What is a social struggle that has the capacity to "do harm" by showing itself to be newly in possession of a material, biopolitical, and effective power? First of all, we must ask if and how living labor can today rebel and interrupt the flow of valorization. In contrast to the tradition of the workers' struggle, which ruptured productive relations through walkouts, sabotage, etc., one must observe that the situation is different today, when labor has taken over life, when someone works all day outside of any set hours, when the productive capacities of every worker are taken into command networks. How is it possible under these circumstances to rediscover that independence of action demanded by the call to strike within both the spatial and the temporal properties of cooperation and its continuous

flow? How is it possible, for example, to occupy and close down the productive hub of the metropolis and/or interrupt the flow of social networks that never stop to take a break?

Here the answer can only lead us back to that singular composition that today is represented by the intimate algorithmic connection between production and command – where workers build meaningful and productive relations whose meaning is extracted by capital. In this case the strike can succeed when it not only breaks the valorization process, but when it also recovers its independence: the substance of living labor as a productive act. In a strike, machinic living labor breaks the algorithm for creating new networks of signification. It *can* do it because without production on the part of living labor, without subjectification, there is no algorithm. It *must* do it because, within capitalism, there are neither wages nor social progress, neither welfare nor the possible enjoyment of life without resistance. The strike reveals the future, breaking with the wretchedness of and subjection to command. The strike reclaims the workers' tradition, carried over to the entire terrain of life – the *social strike*. This is the figure of the strike against the capitalist techniques of the extraction of value from an entire society.

But there is a second, equally or perhaps even more important point of entry. It is found where the processes of society's reproduction intersect with financial capital, with the process of monetization. Consumption is always a good thing when one knows how to consume in relation to the reproductive needs of the species – not the natural, generically human species so much as that of the productive, "post-human" worker. Now, this is the ground of welfare as the organization of the dominion over services and consumption, and it should be crossed as the battleground where the abstract strike becomes a materialist strike. The abstract strike, at the level of production, thus imposes the restoration of the independence of living labor at the level of reproduction. It demands the construction and the imposition of a new sequence of needs-desires-consumption.

At the moment, we find an abundance of research dedicated to building spaces of labor independence within the productive networks most invested in the capitalist mode of value extraction. This rebirth of mutualism and the growth of online cooperation are only the first steps in the struggle. With regard to breaking the sequence of desire-consumption (and its forced monetization), there are widespread efforts to create currencies like Bitcoin and to build autonomous communication networks and/or independent consumption networks, and these

04/05

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efforts are partial but significant. They cannot become decisive, however, without offensively seizing that crucial point where capitalist production transforms productive subjectification into the autocratic production of subjects.

It is clear that the strike against the extraction of value and the strike that operates at the level of the capitalist abstraction of social exploitation are not the same thing. In the first case, the struggle is directed at the appropriation of profit; in the second, at the overturning of models of the reproduction of society, of its capitalist rule, and of the contextual minting of functional currency. Today it is clear that these two levels of struggle are not identical, but they are nonetheless closely connected. The first one is *horizontal*; the second is *vertical*. The first is a struggle for the emancipation of labor; the second for liberation from labor. From the point of view of the struggles, it would be impossible to distinguish them. Nor, however, can they be conflated – because the one struggles and the other builds. They must do it separately; they must do it together.

Therein lies the task. Analysis takes us this far; then comes the praxis. It is clear that if neoliberalism imposes the dictatorship of financial capital, then the struggle for liberation of and from labor, the communist struggle, imposes the capacity for workers to pursue an alternative project to the capitalist management of the currency. This is where we come up against the dictatorship. The comrades of Syriza today, those of Podemos tomorrow: they have brought the struggle here, to the intersection between the emancipation of labor and the liberation from labor. Will it be possible to build a coalition of workers that is equally powerful?

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This essay was originally delivered on May 8th, 2015 in Venice for a panel with Matteo Pasquinelli, Marco Assennato, and Florian Schneider at AB-STRIKE, a platform set up by S.a.L.E. Docks and MACAO.

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05/05

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