

Raqs Media Collective
**A Knot Untied in
Two Parts**

e-flux journal #65 SUPERCOMMUNITY — may–august 2015 Raqs Media Collective
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Negative Negation

It is said that one should always begin with the simplest questions.

Why did Marx observe that corporations (i.e., stock companies) were the negative negation of capital?

Everything that follows is an attempt to address this question.

The capitalist stock companies, as much as the co-operative factories, should be considered as transitional forms from the capitalist mode of production to the associated one, with the only distinction that the antagonism is resolved negatively in the one and positively in the other.¹

Towards the end of his life, while working on the third volume of *Capital*, Marx made extensive notes on the stock companies that were just beginning to emerge in his time. Theoretically, however, he placed it as a “counteracting influence” when he was working out the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall. This then would imply that the entirety of the twentieth century (and after) stands outside of the tendency that was to lead to the demise of capital!

Published in 1997, *Reflections on Marx’s Critique of Political Economy* expanded on this specific contradiction and pointed out that the tendency of the rate of profit to fall correctly describes the demise of individual-owned factories, and presents the fact that ownership is not the decisive factor in the definition of capitalism after the late nineteenth century.²

This can also be deduced from the data that is offered by Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, when it speaks of the insignificance of the weight of inheritance and the rise of super-managers, managers, and professionals, along with the very high appropriation of surplus by the state beginning from the early twentieth century.

Let us now attend to some of the reasons that Marx lists for the formation of stock companies, and some of the phenomena that accompany their formation.

1) An enormous expansion of the scale of production and of enterprises, that was impossible for individual capitals. At the same time, enterprises that were formerly government enterprises, become public.

2) ... Capital, which in itself rests on a social mode of production and presupposes a social concentration of means of production and labour power, is here

directly endowed with the form of social capital (capital of directly associated individuals) as distinct from private capital, and its undertakings assume the form of social undertakings as distinct from private undertakings. It is the abolition of capital as private property within the framework of capitalist production itself.

In short, the abolition of private property is not the abolition of capital.

3) Transformation of the actually functioning capitalist into a mere manager, administrator of other peoples' capital, and of the owners of capital into mere owner, a mere money-capitalist ... i.e., as mere compensation for owning capital that now is entirely divorced from the function in the actual process of reproduction, just as this function in the person of the manager is divorced from ownership of capital.³

The critical discourse of the twentieth century grapples again and again with this anomaly. And in the twenty-first century, this predicament has only become more heightened and intense. Sometimes, it can bring both Slavoj Žižek (of Ljubljana, London, Buenos Aires, and New York) and Ram Sagar (of Faridabad, Haryana) onto the same page.

The labyrinthine paper trails of the cloth mill that I, Ram Sagar, worked in for thirty years and, like thousands of others, thought myself to have been a worker of, have revealed themselves as belonging to seventeen different companies. This started in 1992 when, a year after having been dismissed, I filed a case with the Labour Court. I won in 1999, but the company didn't comply with the court's order. In 2001, the Labour Commissioner issued summons against the Chairman-Managing Director. It's 2005 now, and sixteen summons and a non-bailable arrest warrant haven't managed to produce a soul in court. We have learned that factories belong to no one; no one owns them; names keep multiplying in documents. Ownership is only a masquerade; owners do not exist.⁴

If the old capitalism ideally involved an entrepreneur who invested (his own or borrowed) money into production that he organised and ran, and then reaped the profit from it, a new ideal type is emerging today: no longer the entrepreneur who owns his company, but the expert manager

(or a managerial board presided over by a CEO) who runs a company owned by banks (also run by managers who don't own the bank) or dispersed investors. In this new ideal type of capitalism, the old bourgeoisie, rendered non-functional, is refunctionalised as salaried management: the members of the new bourgeoisie get wages, and even if they own part of their company, earn stocks as part of their remuneration ("bonuses" for their "success").⁵

In the contestations and confrontations that we hear about every day (from the Maruti Suzuki factory in Manesar, to the financial negotiations around Greece), there are no "owners." The variations of expressed intensity that we encounter, that we read about, are of a social relation; it is a foregrounding of the "hard-speak" of enforced wage labor-based commodity production, combined with the interventions of the state to dispossess populations or to heighten capacities for production, or to provide distributive and redistributive acts. Confused and contending factions battle each other every hour. Some situations can go the Iraq way, and some go the Greece way. The stripping of assets and the reduction of the conditions of life are all for the sustenance of a shape-shifting, mobile, armed, terrified production relation called capital – an exhausted yet hungry relative of life and nonlife.

This is the abolition of the capitalist mode of production within the capitalist mode of production itself, and hence a self-dissolving contradiction, which prima facie represents a mere phase of transition to a new form of production. It manifests itself as such a contradiction in its effects. It establishes a monopoly in certain spheres and thereby requires state interference. It reproduces a new financial aristocracy, a new variety of parasites in the shape of promoters, speculators and simply nominal directors; a whole system of swindling and cheating by means of corporation promotion, stock issuance, and stock speculation. It is private production without the control of private property.⁶

That was one hundred and forty years ago.

In the interim, the scale and concentration of production has expanded exponentially. Managerial mediation has reached labyrinthine proportions. The electronic and digital accelerations and enlargements of the last three decades have blurred the conceptual landscape with thousands of prefixes to capital:

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(State capitalism; late capitalism; just-in-time capitalism; soft capitalism; hard capitalism; petro-capitalism; porno-capitalism; turbo-capitalism; euro-capitalism; info-capitalism; finance capitalism; postcapitalism; capitalism with Chinese, Korean, Indian, North Indian, South Indian, Italian, Iranian, German, Argentinian, Azerbaijani, Saudi, African, and Pan-African characteristics.)

A pale hysteria has emerged, in popular culture and in many critiques – disconnected as they are from the capacity to sense contending seismic currents. Beneath it lingers the morose serenity of the anticipation of a coming catastrophe. Perhaps this shows up as a failure of nerve, a loss of emancipatory horizons?

We are all tied up in knots now. Or are we?

Positive Negation

Even as the figure of the property owner retreats, unable to withstand its negative negation, the social relation of capital also brings to the fore the figure of the wageworker, more prominently than at any other time in history.

To recapitulate, the wageworker transacts her labor in exchange for a wage. This wage is socially determined through a calculus of time

and effort that transcends each worker's biography, but marks each worker's life. In order to be a wageworker, a person has to come into contact directly with many others such as herself, and indirectly with millions of others. The more capitalism expands, the more workers appear. Since the interests of capital and labor are antithetical to one another, the more capitalism expands, the more it gives rise to its own antagonist.

Each worker is dependent on, and embedded in, a matrix of social production. Everything she touches, each instrument she wields, is a vector of the experience of others coursing through her life. To labor is to produce in association with others. It is to be an associated producer.

Many artists – associated producers – find themselves functioning in a way that we might call “molecular”: constantly forming and reforming bonds with other producers in order to sustain an entire chemistry of signs and meanings. They are not the only ones who do so. Scientists do so as well, as do people working in every sector of the knowledge economy: teachers, commentators, media practitioners, software programmers, and researchers of all kinds.

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Actor Uttam Kumar plays the movie star Arindam in Satyajit Ray's 1966 movie *The Hero* (Nayak).

However, some artists, and the occasional scientist, still function as if they were “owner”-producers, testing innovations by themselves, making forays into markets, taking on the roller coaster of booms and busts on their own terms, in their stride. While this may still be the most visible, resented, and celebrated figure of the artist in the popular imagination, it does not quite stand up to empirical scrutiny in terms of how most artists function in the world. The heroic individual artist is to the art world what the individual proprietor is to the history of capitalism, a figure on the wane who still occupies a central place in our understanding. At best, it is a residue of an image of production in the nineteenth century, an instance of an active presence from the “past” that lingers on, reminding us of its own history. By its very presence, it can never fail to signify a deficit in charisma that haunts even the brightest super-manager. The artist has something that the manager can neither acquire nor hope to be.

The molecular forms of associated producers linking with each other are real, but they appear to be inchoate and elusive. Workers and artists become each other, become fluid placeholders for the general expansion of experimental and creative intelligence of all kinds. They tag, agitate, create software, read books together, cook and clean, maintain spaces of hospitality for travelers, invent social spaces and protocols of solidarity, disrupt what needs disrupting, and sustain all that needs maintenance.

These linkages keep appearing and disappearing, like the rise and fall of waves in the sea. No one can say that they are not there, but each effort to apprehend them ends in failure. These waves of association emerge around specific moments, sometimes around an invitation or a desire, at other times around an emergency. Acts of free association centered on production, such as witnessed in the ancient history of the exchange of seeds in agriculture, in the free software and “fabbing” communities, or in those who initiate free acts of symbolic exchange, bartering time and meaning, act as catalysts for possible reconstitutions of global political economy.

On what grounds can this reconstitution occur? Attempts at imagining the redistribution of power – because of their obsession with fighting an enemy that does not exist: private property – have tended to solve their problems either by invoking state ownership or “nationalization” (which preserves the wage relation and centralizes power, so it actually creates more problems than it solves) or by appealing for a paring down of productive life and assets in the name of small, egalitarian,

enclosed, modest, self-governing communities that seem to offer a retreat into austerity rather than a way forward towards plenitude.

A new working class is emerging all over the world: these are people who often hold more than one job or have long periods of fallow, unwaged time, to think and imagine. They are student-workers, apprentice-artists, practitioner-theorists, itinerant jugglers of skills and sensibilities. Their sphere of action is indeterminate. They have little investment in the structures of social and political life as they exist at present because they understand that they do not stand to gain in any way from their presence. They have few illusions about what the techniques of political representation can deliver. Each of these symptoms is seen as evidence of political apathy, as if the citizenry had fallen asleep and needed to be woken up. Perhaps this is a misreading, and as profound a misreading as that which identifies private property as the sigil of capital.

We still have access to a vision of what associated producers actually want when they can sit down to think for themselves. As early as April 1871 the Federation of the Artists associated with the Paris Commune formulated their manifesto. They stated their goals unambiguously: “We will work co-operatively toward our regeneration, the birth of communal luxury, future splendors and the Universal Republic.”⁷

The artists of the Commune imagined a reconstitution of social life that would allow all citizens, all workers, to be creative coproducers of social life. Interestingly, they categorically rejected state subsidies for the arts, and advocated the governance of museums and institutions for artistic education and display – “the factories of the arts” – by artists themselves. They expanded their definition of art to include not just objects of contemplation, but also tools, implements, barricades, objects of daily utility, clothes and shoes, houses and buildings, gardens, libraries, and zones of pleasure and recreation that would be open to all. They devised programs for schools, argued about the content of education and made proposals for a general renovation of all spheres of social and political life. Even though they were functioning under the difficult conditions of a military siege, they did not accept any arguments based on limitations of resources, nor did they restrict their proposals to the narrow stretch of space and time that they occupied. Their proposals were not just for Paris, but for the world; not just for 1871, but for the future.

A close look at the world we live in might yield surprising parallels to the conditions that gave rise to the Commune. What could be a

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commune in Paris in 1871 can be a community, a supercommunity with its own will to globality, now. That impulse exists today, and is distributed all over the world.

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Rags Media Collective is a New Delhi-based artist collective composed of Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta.

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4
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5
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7
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