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Precarious Designers and the Transformative Potential of Biopolitical Production and the Commons

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In this paper, I will explore the potential of an autonomist and feminist Marxist approach that aims to transform the precarious working conditions of designers. For this, I am mobilising Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's notion of biopolitical production as one arena in which contemporary political struggles take place by way of the production of the common. I will think through the transformative potential of the common in relation to open design. Confronted with the continual precariousness and (self-) precarisation in this field, I draw heavily on the call for production and inventive resistance made by the Michel Foucault scholar Judith Revel. Finally, I link Revel's call with the feminist economic geographer J.K. Gibson-Graham's invite to engage in an ethical praxis of being-in-common, which can foster de-precarising practices that have a transformative potential beyond the field of design.

Keywords

Precariousness, Biopolitical production, Commons, Open design.

Precarious working conditions are a reality for many designers in Europe between the ages of 25 and 45 (e.g. Gill, 2002; McRobbie, 2010a; Manske & Ludwig, 2010; Cantiere per pratiche non-affermative, 2013). These conditions are characterised, among others, by bulimic work patterns, low pay, little or no social protection, no paid holidays and unemployment compensation and with work taking over life, while being unable to plan ahead for the future. In part, designers are precarised by these conditions from the outside through the dismantling of the welfare state and the legal apparatus protecting the rights of workers as well as a market saturated by designers. In part designers are also embracing self-precarising practices – such as basing their livelihoods solely on projects, working for prestigious clients for very little or no pay, subsuming every aspect of their lives to work – as this allows them to align themselves with the imaginary of what it means to be successful within the creative industries (Lorey, 2006).

Given this tricky and eventually for many exhausting situation – to which I myself am exposed as a designer, I want here to explore how design work can be approached in a way that encourages designers to transform the parameters that precarise them, while at the same time making ways of working and living desirable (as well as feasible) that do not require self-precarisation. In my exploration, I take as a starting point the way the autonomist Marxist thinkers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri frame cognitive work as inherently political, as

it contributes to the constitution of new subjectivities.¹ Through the engagement with their concept of biopolitical production, I will work through the social and material implications of the production processes designers are involved in. More specifically, I will draw on examples of open design as it currently galvanises a lot of people's imagination and energies. From there, I will draw on the work of Foucault scholar Judith Revel and feminist Marxist economic geographers J.K. Gibson-Graham to suggest an inventive material expansion of biopolitical production in order to accomplish a substantial move away from procedures of precarisation. Overall, my exploration considers how designers can draw on noncapitalist concepts and practices in order to create a milieu able to nurture practices which make the creation of desirable futures a real possibility (Stengers, 2008).

DESIGN AS BIOPOLITICAL PRODUCTION OF THE COMMON

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri – as autonomists more generally – conceive of labour as the creative, non-linear driving force of history that has the potential to transform and refuse the exploitative, precarising, force of today's capital social relation (Cleaver, 2000). In fact, they argue that although workers are the subordinated part in the capital social relation² and at least a portion of the wealth they produce through their productive and reproductive labour is constantly

¹I acknowledge that Hardt and Negri's focus on the transformative, subversive potential of cognitive workers is often controversial as it tends to water down the political force of other actors, such as people struggling for better lives in the global South or the gender-imbalance involved in post-Fordist production (e.g., Caffentzis & Federici, 2007; Federici, 2010; McRobbie, 2010b) and that it tends to sideline the entanglement of cognitive work with exploitative labour elsewhere, for example in the production of digital technology (e.g., Dias, 2009; Wu Ming 1, 2011). Keeping these shortcomings in mind, I nevertheless think their approach is an interesting contribution to consider the transformative potential of design work.

²The capital social relation is given when the means of production are separated from the producers, when some people only own them, while others own only their labour-power. This implies that such a separation is only overcome by bringing together the means of production and the producers in an exchange of seeming equality, i.e. when workers accept to sell their labour-power to the employers for a defined period of time. However, in the capitalist mode of production, this apparent equality between workers and employers is broken once the worker accepts a contract. From that moment onwards, all their capacities will be directed towards working under the command of the employer in order to increase the wealth of the latter (Ingrao & Ranchetti, 1996, p. 171).

taken from them,³ they are not powerless. This is because through their labour, they are today also constituted en masse by the mobilisation of creative and social skills, workers are the source of all wealth (Hardt & Negri, 2004, p. 333). In fact, in a system of post-Fordist production, designers are amongst the group of workers who contribute to the production of ideas, codes, images, affects and social relationships – and with them to the constitution and transformation of contemporary subjectivities (Hardt & Negri, 2009). This production of subjectivity is key for Hardt and Negri, as in their approach it is the major terrain on which contemporary workers can play out their power and through which they can articulate political struggles between themselves and capital.

When framing post-Fordist work within the terrain of the production of subjectivity, Hardt and Negri take up Foucault's notions of biopower and biopolitics. On the one hand, identifying biopower as the power exercised over life in order to regulate and govern entire populations. On the other hand, framing biopolitics as the «power of life to resist and determine an alternative production of subjectivity» (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 57). For them, this power of life to resist and produce non-hegemonic subjectivities is linked to the fact that “the common” – in the form of knowledge, languages, codes, information and affects – can be considered neither public nor private, neither regulated by the state nor by individuals, but instead as held in common and regulated by its community of producers and users. So despite cognitive workers fuelling capital accumulation through collaboration, autonomous work and network organisation, they also contribute to a transformative process that allows for the emergence of subjectivities that through the collective production of “the common” are potentially inscribed in a counter-conduct. This counter-conduct fuelled by the common – when directed against multiple precarising procedures – can be framed in Foucaultian terms as an enacted desire to «not to be governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them (Foucault, 1997).» This is because the common in Autonomist Marxist thought does not fall into conventional capitalist categories and exceeds both the private and the public. The latter being considered to be representative of capital since the state guarantees the right to private property, a cornerstone of capitalist society, whilst also administering public property according to its own governmental rules, which do not necessarily respond to the needs and desire of the population (Hardt & Negri, 2009, pp. 272–273) – a fact we clearly experience with current precarising austerity measures implemented around Europe despite protests in the streets and at the ballot box.

³It is important to note that feminist Marxist work has brought to the fore how unpaid reproductive labour, such as the labour performed to care for waged labourers and their children or elderly family members, contributes to capital accumulation by significantly reducing the living cost of the paid worker, who in turn can be paid a lower wage (e.g., Dalla Costa & James, 1971; Federici, 1975; Fortunati, 1995; Mies, Bennholdt-Thomsen, & Werlhof, 1988).

THE DILEMMA OF THE COMMON

Despite its potentially transformative force, the biopolitical production of the common by designers – constituted by the production of images, ideas, languages, social relations, affects, knowledges – risk running into an impasse regarding the precariousness of its producers. Although these commons are transformative at the level of subjectivity and do not lose their potential to function when shared with others, the wage conditions of “authors” within regimes of post-Fordist production appear to follow the same law as in a traditional industrial economy. Philosopher and net activist Matteo Pasquinelli clearly frames this in his reflection on real-life practices around the production of the common:

Immaterial conflict is the norm between intellectual workers, despite all the rhetoric of knowledge sharing and digital commons. It is manifested in the well-known rivalry within academia and the art world, to the economy of references, the race of deadlines, the competition for festival selection and between festivals themselves, the envious and suspicious attitudes among activists (2008, p. 49).

Thus we see that precarising rivalry among designers is not necessarily created by the common they generate, but by its function within the real economy. Unlike material and social commons that produce and reproduce goods that provide nourishment, shelter or care (De Angelis, 2007; Federici, 2011), the common that Hardt and Negri attribute to the production of cognitive workers does none of this. And so despite its transformative potential at the level of subjectivity, it is unable to rupture the material dependence on precarious labour since those producing the common are still required to earn substantial amounts of money to pay in the market for the goods necessary to reproduce themselves. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that in the current moment the productive processes of most cognitive workers – even if they would themselves no longer be precarious – would remain firmly entangled in highly exploitative relations and environmentally destructive practices at other junctures in the productive system, for instance through their reliance on digital communication technologies.

However, within this dilemma of the common, we see that although designers qualify as cognitive workers, the processes and outcomes of the biopolitical production they are involved in do not only fall into the realm of languages, codes and images. Depending on the take designers have on their work, they are very often active at the intersection of immaterial, social and material production. Being active at these crossing points, means that designers are positioned in a way that holds a great potential for them to create the common(s)⁴ across

⁴While Hardt and Negri insist on using the term “common” to denote the products of cognitive work, other autonomist thinkers such as Massimo De Angelis, Silvia Federici and George Caffentzis insist on the plural “commons” to denote the necessity of creating a base for counter-conduct that is also material and social (An Architektur, 2010; Caffentzis & Federici, 2007; Federici, 2010). I here use the form common(s) to denote a mash up of cognitive, material and social elements.

different spheres, including very material ones that can nurture the creation of de-precarising economies.

OPEN DESIGN AND THE COMMON(S)

To explore the production of the common(s) in a material sphere, I am considering here the potential of open design – defined as design whose makers allow for its free distribution and documentation and permit modification and derivations (Van Abel, Evers, Klaassen, & Troxler, 2011, p. 11), thus setting it free from the limits of private property. By drawing on this form of design, I want to think through how designers' involvement in the transformation of material production links up with the production of subjectivity and how this link might be worked materially in ways that allow them to collectively and strategically resist and undo precarisation.

Starting from the practices of open design, we can for example inquire into what language designers' use when describing open design, and what this language tells us about a possible socio-economic transformation linked to this kind of practice. What do designers and producers of open design – such as of the iconic 3D printer MakerBot – mean when they ask, «what kind of project can we, as a worldwide community of sharing, do together (Pettis, 2011)?» What do they mean by “project” and what is the political agenda of the projects they might have in mind? Do they conceive of them in relation to the successes of 3D printing they make reference to, such as the printing of vodka glasses during a tech-fair? What do they mean by “world-wide community”? Does this community, in any sense, include those who mine the materials needed to make 3D printing possible in the first place? What do they mean by “sharing”? Does this sharing also refer to the profits made from selling 3D printing kits, which are now worth \$10 million (P2P Foundation, 2012)?

Currently, open design tends to be mobilised by large, private firms to create and capture value around and on top of the material common(s) that is being produced. In fact, the P2P Foundation's advice to corporations, that might be afraid of open design (and the collaborative economy that comes with it), is to see the common as a source of knowledge and innovation and as a pool of value to which they can contribute to in small portions, but out of which they receive the totality of the common in return: «Give a brick, get a house (P2P Foundation, 2012, p. 167).» This move, which is not concerned with substantially transforming economic relations but rather with transforming the way accumulation happens, does for instance not address the working conditions of the people involved in the production of value and is to date not very promising in terms of breaking with precariousness. The MakerBot, for example, besides the labour that went into its realisation at different places around the world, relies on the availability of free designs on websites such as Thingiverse, while the 3D printer itself, the materials for printing or the journals for the 3D community, are lucratively mobilised. It might almost be feared that the energies put into open design – if

not politicised in the Foucaultian terms of counter-conduct introduced before – lead to a new round of accumulation that bears similarity with the cottage industry of the 19th century, when production of “slave-cotton” was taking place within people’s dwellings and the value from this production was extracted and channelled into the hands of only a few (Marx, 1976, pp.555-601). But open design is still a vibrant field of contestation that mobilises people’s desire for other ways of producing and living and as such it can also still be mobilised to support the building of an economy that strategically fuels collective processes of de-precarisation.

When designers critically engage with the complexities of relations and values within a precarising capitalist economy, then their practices, ideas, proposals can stop replicating ways of doing and designing for the world that take competition, profit and private property as the norm. They can instead begin to build open design into structures that appropriate and distribute value in ways that are de-precarising for many, both at the level of subjectivity and materiality. De-precarising actions can then be framed as an activation of designers’ time and skills in ways that make them constitutive of other worlds. This implies that in the field of design – marked by competition and individualisation – there is a need to experiment with solidary relations, subjectivities and ways of working. Because for designers the move against procedures of precarisation cannot only be about rendering more stable what they currently are and do because this is precisely part of what contributes to the perpetuation of precariousness and because at this historical moment of multiple unfolding crises, there is a pressing and widely acknowledged need to reframe the ways in which designers contribute to the world.

THE POWER OF POLITICISED SUBJECTIVITIES

To strategically direct this desire for transformation – both of the working conditions themselves and the way designers relate to the world – I suggest that it is key to link designers’ multiform processes of biopolitical production to concerns of socio-economic and naturocultural justice. This linking and crossing with concerns of naturocultural justice avoids that the struggle against precarious working conditions stays parochially limited to the conditions of designers and to questions of money. This is important because, on the one hand, designers are not at the worst off end of the spectrum of precarious work and because, on the other hand, limiting the issue to a question of money would miss the point that the design profession as it stands today is far from unproblematic. By creating links with bigger concerns around naturocultural justice, designers can politicise their position in ways that allow them to reclaim not only the way they work, but also what, why and for whom they produce.

As Foucault scholar Judith Revel (2003) points out, gaining control – together with others – over one’s biopolitical production is a potent gesture because it affirms that people are not only disciplined and controlled, but that they

can also always inventively resist the procedures they are exposed to. Revel locates the power for resistance and counter-conduct not only within people's work and language but also their bodies, affects, desires and sexuality. For my argument here, this means that designers can mobilise the power of life – in all its different material, social and immaterial forms – in order to make a world that does not systemically rely on procedures of precarisation. Just imagine what could become possible if ever more designers were to inscribe their multiform processes of production (and the way they organise their practice and their lives) in Revel's call to "resist and produce, to resist through production, to produce while resisting (Revel, 2003, p. 65)?"

In many ways, Revel's call for production and resistance echoes the Autonomist call for the "refusal of work," which refers to a tradition of radical workers around the world who «have always tried to get out of work, to subtract themselves from exploitation and the capitalist relation (Hardt, 1996, p. 5).» However, this refusal must not be mistaken for a call to stop all activity, production or innovation. It must rather be taken as a call for a movement of invention that goes beyond the relations and imaginaries linked to capital and that can thus provoke yet unimagined, empowering relations for producing and reproducing livelihoods. By taking up a position at the crossing of biopolitical production and matters of socio-economic and naturocultural justice, designers can indeed contribute to a proliferation of economic experiments around the commons that create «novel economic subjects with new desires and visions of possibility (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 2).» In fact, the proliferation of the commons and other empowering economic experiments can be taken up as a brief that invites the mobilisation of design skills and creativity to create structures, relations, procedures, resources and so forth that undo the multiple procedures of precarisation – both within and beyond the field of design – while simultaneously cultivating new ways of being in and relating to the world.

The brief to design against precarisation and for a reinvention of how the ways in which livelihoods are secured, is also an invite for designers to redirect their time, skills and creativity away from the narrow values of the market and towards the constitution of a life around the commons and in common that is not based on competition, individual success and profit. Such an invite encourages to think and focus on what designers can become when they imagine and engage with the expansion of their collective needs and desires in ways that exceed what capital can "offer", while at the same time continuing to seek links with wider issues of naturocultural justice and progressive social change. Inhabiting such a politicised position can then take innovative movements such as open design towards yet unexplored possibilities in terms of an «ethical praxis of being-in-common» (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 88). A being-in-common, which cultivates an acute awareness and collective negotiation of how surplus is produced and distributed and which in turn, can create desirable, non-precarising socio-economic cultures whose effects go well beyond the field of design.

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THE VIRTUOUS CIRCLE

CUMULUS CONFERENCE 2015

DESIGN CULTURE AND EXPERIMENTATION

Design comes out of the interaction between a practice, which seeks to change the state of things, and a culture, which makes sense of this change. The way this happens evolves with time: practices and cultures evolve and so do the ways they interact; and the attention that is paid at different moments to one or other of these interacting polarities also evolves. In the current period of turbulent transformation of society and the economy, it is important to go back and reflect on the cultural dimension of design, its capacity to produce not only solutions but also meanings, and its relations with pragmatic aspects. Good design does not limit itself to tackling functional and technological questions, but it also always adopts a specific cultural approach that emerges, takes shape and changes direction through a continuous circle of experimenting and reflecting. Because the dimension and complexity of the problems is growing, it is becoming evident that to overcome them it is, above all, necessary to bring new sense systems into play. This is ground on which design, by its very nature, can do much. Indeed, the ability to create a virtuous circle between culture and practical experimentation is, or should be, its main and distinctive characteristic. However, for this really to happen it is necessary to trigger new discussion and reflection about the nature and purpose of design practice and culture.