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The Art of Collectively Loving Well in the Digital Age

Kate Milberry[1]

Abstract In this response to Pieter Lemmens' post-autonomist evaluation of the liberatory potential of digital network technologies (DNTs), Kate Milberry finds the concept of *pharmakon* as a diagnostic to uncover what ails the worker in technocapitalism wanting. Through an exploration of Marxian concepts and critical theory of technology, she explores ways to augment political responses to capitalist exploitation in the digital age. Milberry concludes that it is not possible to change the sociotechnical foundation of contemporary life until we fundamentally alter the capitalist social relations concretized in technology. This can only be done through adopting an ethic of care, that is to say: only through love.

Keywords Critical theory of technology · Marx · Technocapitalism · Information society · General intellect · Social factory

Pieter Lemmens offers a post-autonomist evaluation of the liberatory potential of digital network technologies (DNTs—the internet and all that flows from it) using Stiegler's concept of *pharmakon* as a diagnostic to uncover what ails the worker/citizen subsumed by capitalism in the digital age—in other words, technocapitalism. The central thesis is an optimistic one: that although riven, complex and contested, DNTs can be "recruited" to the service of deepening the democratic project.

Lemmens constructs his argument through the lens of cognitive capitalism—a concept that may not be as robust as what may be found in the well-developed literature on

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immaterial labour in terms of understanding how work has co-evolved alongside capitalism in the so-called Information society (network society, digital era, Internet age etc.). He grounds his discussion in two powerful Marxian concepts: the general intellect and the dialectic. Lemmens also invokes two ideas drawn from Feenberg's (1999) critical theory of technology: the ambivalence of technology and creative appropriation.

The use of general intellect invites a more fulsome treatment. Lemmens marshals the post-autonomist reading, which broadens the concept to include living labour or human capital—the fixed capital that resides in the human brain. Thus "thoughts and discourses function in themselves as productive 'machines' in contemporary labour and do not need to take on a mechanical body or an electronic soul" (Virno 2001) In this more expansive understanding of the general intellect, we sense in Marx the anticipation of the dematerialization of the resources of production based on continuing advances in scientific and technical knowledge. On this reading, the general intellect is thus co-operative labour, socialized under capitalist relations of production: it is immaterial labour, affective and intellectual.

Marx (1973) positions the general intellect under a capitalist regime alongside machinery and against workers: "the accumulation of knowledge and of skill, of the general productive forces of the social brain, is thus absorbed into capital, as opposed to labour, and hence appears as an attribute of capital" (694). Nevertheless, we can detect liberatory potential in the co-operation on which the general intellect depends: "the labouring action of the general intellect presupposes the common participation to the 'life of the mind,' the preliminary sharing of generic communicative and cognitive skills" (Virno 2001). Hardt and Negri advance this line of thought, stating that the socialization of living labour that occurs through its exploitation creates the conditions for resistance by activating "the critical elements that develop the potential of insubordination and revolt through the entire set of labouring practices" (29). In brief, the concept of the general intellect may have more explanatory robustness than Lemmens acknowledges.

Lemmens rightly critiques the tendency in post-autonomist thought toward cyberoptimism, employing a dialectical approach as a corrective: DNTs are at once deeply implicated in technocapitalism's totalizing project, and potentially an alternative to it—something Dyer-Witheford (1999) noted of the internet's early days. Cyberoptimists like Hardt and Negri (2000) gloss over some of the contradictions raised by digital network technology, favouring an emancipatory view of DNTs as providing "the soico-technological condition for a global radical democracy..." Lemmens contrasts this with the cyberpessimist argument, showcased by a rather overlong discussion of Berardi, whose psychoanalytic critique could benefit from dialectics. Rather than nuance and complexity, Beradi presents a singular treatment of the internet, its wildly varied potentialities and outcomes reduced to psychic disorder—a sort of postmodern anomie. The reifying notion that the "cognitariat" are "glued to demanding screens" and "more and more disconnected from their bodies" invokes a Gibsonian dystopia that is totalizing and hyperbolic—and not empirically borne out.

The immateriality of Berardi's (and presently, Stiegler's) argument ignores the embodied nature of digital labour, its grounding in the material world, in the flesh casings of workers who get up from their devices and live out their lives under the grueling conditions of a capitalism that is not merely cognitive. Further, industrialism persists in the West and is growing in the global South and East, as capitalism seeks ever cheaper sites of material production. Without decentering capital as the dominant mode of organizing and exploiting workers to increase surplus value, we can still posit immaterial labour/DNTs as a new site of exploitation, as did Negri (1989). At the same time, the intellectual co-

operation (communication) that is both a precondition for and a product of DNTs suggests the possibility of new social relations that at once challenge and offer an alternative to those re/produced by capitalism. Here the Marxian dialectic reveals itself in technology's dual nature, or what Feenberg (1999, 2002) calls its ambivalence: on the one hand, the devastating effects of DNTs; on the other, their promise of emancipation.

The introduction of Berardi's notion of *therapy* is interesting—not necessarily as a substitute for political resistance and action, but certainly as part of a "future emancipatory politics." The effects of the social factory, wherein real subsumption breaches the factory walls and capitalist relations of production are projected onto social relations in general, are clearly debilitating. As Tronti (1971) notes, "the whole of society exists as a function of the factory and the factory extends its exclusive domination over the whole of society" (in Wright 2002, 37). In other words, "the fate of the worker becomes the fate of society as a whole" (Lukács 1971, 91). An ethic of care can stand in for therapy where the collective, rather than the individual, seeks to redress the ravages—social, political, emotional, psychological—of capitalism. Unlike Lemmens, however, I do not see this applying strictly to the "terrain of DNTs, the inevitable condition for political engagement in our time" but for all social relations, be they mediated by digital technology or not. Emancipatory social relations are premised on a commitment to care for one another: in the absence of an ethic of care, the technocapitalist horizon remains intact and with it the reproduction of exploitive, inequitable social relations that underpin it. Marx's insight that social relations rather than things are the heart of capitalism and the idea that the revolution will be social rather than political nevertheless resonate with Berardi's conceptualization of therapy as an emancipatory response.

Lemmens stretches the idea of therapy into a sociotherapy or politics that can operate on and through DNTs. As technical *pharmaka*, however, DNTs are ambivalent—and are therefore available for "alternative development with different social consequences" (Feenberg 1999, 7). Democratic control of technology, for instance, suggests the possibility of an alternative industrial civilization based on values different than those that currently underwrite globalized capitalism. Where Berardi fails, and mobilizing Stiegler, Lemmens wants to develop a theory that accounts for the adaptation of DNTs to counter the "short circuiting" of technical organs (technology)—that is, their subsumption by egoistic drive. This would require the creative appropriation of the technical milieu, which has been annexed by "consumerist and cultural capitalism." The general intellect of the digital workforce is becoming increasingly proletarianized, however, subjecting the cognitariat to the brutal imperatives of profit and competition. Due to the pharmacological dialectic, Stiegler nevertheless finds hope in the transformation of DNTs towards a "therapeutic countermovement", as evidenced by free software, creative commons, hacktivism and other contestatory online movements that embody a digital ethic of care.

Lemmens concludes by calling for a class-based "pharmacology of the digital", highlighting this lack in Stiegler. He rightly criticizes Stiegler for relying on state-sponsored initiatives to support alternatives to capitalism and it is here where we finally encounter a forthright capitalist critique—something lacking in the foregoing theoretical survey. In calling for the adoption of therapy as a political project that has the "new organization of society" as its aim, Lemmens reveals the radical potentiality of DNTs for civilizational transformation. But in asking how we can transform the technical code of technocapitalism, and redesign digital *pharmaka* as technologies of self care and care of the other, he approaches this question from the end rather than the beginning. We cannot change the sociotechnical foundation of contemporary social life until we fundamentally alter the values and mores that concretize in technology and that produce and reproduce

capitalist social relations. Only by adopting an ethic of care that informs a therapeutic countermovement—in other words, only through love—can we in any meaningful way alter the social relations that concretize within technology, as well as the social factory, and begin this transformation. "Love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence," concludes Fromm (1956, 112). Thus the art of living well with technology is also necessarily the art of collectively loving well.

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