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Communicative capitalism:
this is what democracy looks like

Capitalismo comunicativo:
isto é o que parece a democracia

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Abstract

The article reflects the communicative capitalism discussing how the central values of democracy take shape from networked communication technologies at the service of capital. When communication is the means of capitalist subsumption, what are the repercussions for democracy? In order to guide us to the answer to this question, an in-deep analysis looks at the horizon of democracy from the changes in communication and information networks and the consequent impact on capitalism and democracy. Communicative capitalism materializes and repurposes democratic ideals and aspirations in ways that strengthen and support globalized neoliberalism, thus contemporary capitalism, based on a democratic rhetoric of access, transparency, voice and participation, is strengthened in the network society.

Keywords: communicative capitalism; democracy; communication and information networks

Resumo

O texto reflete o capitalismo comunicativo discutindo como os valores e aspectos centrais da democracia tomam forma a partir das tecnologias de comunicação em rede à serviço do capital. Quando a comunicação está submissa ao capitalismo quais as consequências para a democracia? No sentido de guiar-nos à resposta a essa questão uma análise aprofundada perscruta o horizonte da democracia a partir das mudanças nas redes de comunicação e informação e o consequente impacto no capitalismo e na democracia. O capitalismo comunicativo se materializa e reaproveita os ideais e aspirações democráticas para fortalecer o

neoliberalismo, assim o capitalismo contemporâneo, a partir de uma retórica democrática de transparência, voz, acesso e participação, se fortalece na sociedade em rede.

Palavras-chave: capitalismo comunicativo; democracia; redes de comunicação e informação.

Introduction

Communicative capitalism designates a specific convergence of capitalism and democracy, one where the values heralded as central to democracy take material form in networked communications technologies. Ideals of access, voice, inclusion, discussion, and participation come to be realized in and through expansions, intensifications, and interconnections of global telecommunications. Changes in information and communication networks associated with digitalization, speed (of computer processors as well as connectivity), and memory/storage capacity impact capitalism and democracy, accelerating and amplifying elements of each as they consolidate the two into a new formation (Dean 2002, 2004, 2005, 2009a).

When communication is the means of capitalist subsumption, what are the repercussions for democracy? That is, if participation and debate – sharing and exchanging ideas, mobilizing politically, dissenting, even revolting – are primary components of the production and circulation of capital, what efficacy do they have as mechanisms for the rule of the people? My answer is that communicative capitalism's realization of democracy eats up democracy's use value. Democracy is not enough. It's inadequate as a political ideal. Under conditions of communicative capitalism where democracy is the ambient milieu of inescapable participatory media, it cannot express the people's desire and need for economic basics like food, shelter, education, work, and health (not to mention economic equality, ecological sustainability, and the end of exploitation).

For the last thirty years or so – in fact, throughout the period of neoliberal capitalism's consolidation – participatory media has offered quick, easy, universal democracy: anyone with a mobile phone or access to the internet can make her voice heard. Everyone has a voice – and the internet lets us all express them. In this setting, democracy is a marketing slogan – the means of extension for AT&T and T-mobile and Microsoft. When linked to new media, democracy tags a politics lite that anyone can get behind (it's not controversial or antagonistic) and that is especially attractive to purveyors of mobile phones, notebook computers, software, and social media platforms.

Our setting, then, is one of the convergences of communication and capitalism in a formation that incites voice, engagement, and participation only to capture them in the affective networks of mass personalized media. These networks materialize a contradiction. On the one hand, social media networks (and communicative capitalism more generally) produce a common, a collective information and communication mesh through which affects and ideas circulate (Hardt and Negri 2011). On the other, these networks presuppose and intensify individualism such that widely shared ideas and concerns are conceived less in terms of a self-conscious collective than they are as viruses, mobs, trends, moments, and swarms. It's odd, isn't it, this transformation of collectivity into the terms of epidemiology – an idea or image with an impact “goes viral.” Channeled through cellular networks and fiber optic cables, onto screens and into sites for access, storage, retrieval, and counting, communication today is captured in the capitalist circuits it produces and amplifies (Dean 2010).

This entrapment in capitalist circuits is the condition of possibility for communication's transformation of production. Because contemporary capitalism is communicative, democratic rhetorics of access, transparency, voice, discussion, reflection, and participation strengthen the hold of capitalism in networked societies. Thus, the problems this democratic rhetoric identifies and the solutions it entails channel political energies into activities that reinforce the conditions of inequality it ostensibly contests. Disruptive events, intense debates, are economic opportunities – ratings drivers, chances for pundits to opine and opinions to be expressed and circulated – as much as they are political exercises.

To clarify the way preoccupation with process and media protect neoliberalism's redistribution of wealth to the very, very rich, I set out three key features of communicative capitalism: the change in the form of our utterances from messages to contributions, the decline of symbolic efficiency, and the reflexive trap of the circuits of drive. In describing these features, my concern is with the effects of the merger of communication and capitalism on the subjects we are – what are the repercussions for the way we communicate, the way we think of ourselves, the way we enjoy? I then take up forms of exploitation specific to communicative capitalism. Whereas industrial capitalism exploited labor (the industry of workers), communicative capitalism exploits communication. Again, my basic claim is that communicative capitalism materializes and repurposes democratic ideals and aspirations in ways that strengthen and support globalized neoliberalism. The proliferation, distribution, acceleration, and intensification of communicative access and opportunity produce a deadlocked democracy incapable of serving as a form for progressive political and economic

change. What we have now – debate, discussion, inclusion, opportunities for dissent – is democratic. This is what democracy looks like. And since this is what democracy looks like, we should aspire to and fight for something else, something that will smash the hold of capitalism and claim the common for and as the common.

Streets not screens

Some might think that the protests and revolutions prominent across the globe in recent years disprove my point. Doesn't the movement around Occupy Wall Street, not to mention the revolution in Egypt, indicate that networked social media are powerful forces for egalitarian people's struggles and that democracy is a powerful political ideal? I have two responses – yes and no.

Yes, democracy is a powerful political ideal, particularly for those of us who like to project it onto the energies that others have that we seem to lack. Some of us were deeply thrilled by initial unfolding of the Egyptian revolution, impressed and even awed by the collective will of the people. Those of us unable (or unwilling) actually to occupy parks and streets, have nonetheless followed, liked, and forwarded Occupy Wall Street through and throughout our networked media. We should hesitate a bit here, though, as our enthusiasm for political change merges into an enthusiasm for the media we use to participate in the events, condensing and displacing the events such that the media – particularly Facebook and Twitter – become the story, not the people fighting or dying on the street. When the unfolding events are condensed into a story about social media, we lose sight of the economic inequality crucial to the revolutionary situation. We contain a struggle against neoliberalism within a democratic script. This lets us convince ourselves that networked participatory media are primarily in our interest, that they serve egalitarian ends, that revolutionary change is available through a quick technological fix (there's an app for that), that networked media are not a form of capture and distraction, and that our communicative entertainment practices are the best political ones. It lets us persist in our denial of the fact that accompanying our distraction in the media nets has been the greatest increase in economic inequality in world history. So, yes democracy is a powerful political ideal, one that is materialized in social media technologies that let us cover over our current political impotence and imagine ourselves as active political participants.

No, revolutions and protests are not indications that social media are powerful forces for egalitarian people's struggles. Rather, they unfold in a turbulent information and communication environment where information and communication are weapons and forces

as well as setting and environment. The struggles over what they mean and what will come next are ongoing. In fact, they are so ongoing that we need to be cognizant of the way enthusiasm is generated, augmented, and circulated. Consider the Alliance of Youth Movements, what Jack Bratich describes as a “genetically modified grassroots movement” (2011a, 2011b). Participating in the inaugural summit of this group in 2008 were the US State Department, Google, Facebook, MTV, and multiple NGOs. Also attending – the April 6th group, a Facebook group from Egypt. They would subsequently meet with Mohamed ElBaradei in February 2010. And they would campaign for the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak.

The Alliance for Youth Movement’s website is Movements.org. Their stated goal is training digital activists, in part by connecting them to each other and to technology experts. Again, the sponsors are big corporations, particularly media corporations, and the US State Department is a key participant. Their message at the summits – use media, particularly digital media, to effect change. Movements.org encourages blogging and podcasting; it suggests ways of telling stories to get specific messages across. With full support by the State Department and a variety of media organizations, it provides activists with “how to” guides (literally, including how to remain connected when there are internet shut downs). In fact, Jared Cohen, an AYM founder, worked in the State Department under Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton. He wrote an influential policy paper, arguing that the US should fight extreme forces like Islam and communism by encouraging young people to use social media because of its deradicalizing effects – social media incorporates young people in global capitalist culture and consumption (2009).

With respect to Occupy Wall Street, some (primarily in the mainstream media) argue that what’s most significant about the movement is the use of social media. This is a mistake that works to deradicalize the movement whose significance comes from its break with “clicktivism.” Rather than remaining inside in front of their screens, people went outside. They experienced working directly, face-to-face together with strangers for a political purpose. The movement was a collective realization that circulating petitions on the internet is inadequate as a political practice.

Social media are not powerful forces specifically for egalitarian people’s struggles, particularly when they occlude antagonism. Anyone can use them – states, capitalists, nationalists, fascists. Appeals to social media as essentially or necessarily media that enable the people to shape the world they want posit a rather fantastic moment of unity and security in what is actually a turbulent field. That is, they put in place a language of connection and

cooperation, as if conservatives, neoliberals, and states didn't use social media, as if networked communications were somehow outside the purview of dominant power. The language of unity and security displaces our attention from nefarious and conservative media practice – as if only old media could be manipulated, as if all our contemporary communicative pleasures were innocent.

This field of connection and cooperation is what democracy looks like, how democracy appears when politics is contained in a democratic imaginary – a field without antagonism, without unattractive dogmatism, without fundamental division. For us, in communicative capitalism, this is democracy, a reduction of politics that disavows organization, struggle, duration, decisiveness, and division.

It doesn't have to remain this way (and actually it won't; if we do nothing, capitalism will continue to wring out every bit of value from the rest of us, sending us into ever-increasing debt and immiseration). We can move through the democratic disavowal of antagonism to grasp the common setting within which antagonism appears, communication. We can claim this common, this productivity as ours, not theirs. Differently put, that capitalism and democracy converge in communication makes expressing antagonism in a way that has resonance and duration extraordinarily difficult. Yet this very difficulty suggests an alternative, namely that the communicative common necessarily and unavoidably exceeds the capitalist relations into which it is currently inscribed and which incite and exploit it (after all, capital, for all its stimulation of communication, is having a hard time monetizing it; what monetization it has achieved relies heavily on free contributions and unpaid labor, that is work that exceeds the wage relation, but this can't go on indefinitely). The excess of the common thus opens another political and economic path – one being theorized today under the name of communism (Douzinas and Žižek 2010).

Basic features

Communicative capitalism is characterized by three primary features. First, in communicative capitalism messages are contributions. As developed by Claude Shannon (1949), the mathematical model of communication emphasizes a speaker who sends a message to a receiver. Warren Weaver (1949) added to Shannon's work the additional factor of response: messages are sent with an aim toward eliciting some kind of response in their hearer. Under communicative capitalism, things are different. Now, messages are contributions to circulating content, not actions that elicit responses. It's like a shift from the primacy of a message's use

value to the primacy of its exchange value, that is, to its capacity to circulate, to be forwarded, counted. Unlike a message, which needs to be understood, a contribution is just to be added. One adds one's two cents. One contributes one's opinion or idea to whatever discussion is going on. This additive feature of the contribution depends on a fundamental communicative equivalence. As a contribution, each message is communicatively equal to any other. No opinion or judgment is worth more than any other (they each count as one comment on my blog or one update on Facebook or a single tweet). Facts, theories, judgments, opinions, fantasies, jokes, lies – they all circulate indiscriminately. Again, as contributions they are equal; each adds “something” to the flow. What matters is not what was said but that something was said – points were made, questions were raised, people showed up... and then new comments can be made, additions to the stream, intensifying the circulation of contributions. Expressed as a logic of the count, democracy loses its capacity to provide a critical wedge against capitalism. The more opinions voiced, the more voices heard, the more democratic – and it doesn't matter what they say because each contribution is communicatively equivalent to any other.

Second, and consequently, communicative capitalism is characterized by the decline of symbolic efficiency (a term I get from Slavoj Žižek, 1999). Symbolic efficiency refers to the way that symbols symbolize, the way that they can move from one context to another and still mean something – so, a crucifix is a crucifix whether it is hanging in a church or on a chain around the neck of a rock star. The *decline* of symbolic efficiency points to a decrease in the circulatory capacities of symbols – outside a specific context, they are opaque, unmeaningful; they don't translate – think of Noam Chomsky and Justin Bieber in an airport waiting lounge. Neither would have a sense of the other's cultural capital. The decline of symbolic efficiency thus designates an entrapment in immediacy and locality such that we are unable to employ terms or ideas that can bring us out of this isolated setting.

I should add that as the efficiency of the symbolic declines, images and affective intensities may appear as all the more powerful, relevant, and effective. *A picture is worth a thousand words*. It's easier, smoother, more socially fluid to post and circulate images than ideas that seem so difficult to get right in language – the images don't confront us with the gaps and limits in our thinking. They feel better, more satisfying.

The decline of symbolic efficiency has effects on subjectivity. Lacanian psychoanalysis can help explain these effects. As is well known, Lacan uses the term “ego identity” to designate the point of view one adopts to assess oneself, the point of view one has to adopt to

see oneself as capable of acting. Take, for example, the boy who thinks of himself as a loser. Why does he think this? Is it because he judges himself from the perspective of his hardworking, self-sacrificing grandmother? Or, take the girl who is proud of her accomplishments. Is she proud because she looks at herself through the eyes of her father, whom she imagines would be proud of what she's done? Ego identity designates this point of symbolic reference – not who one imagines oneself as but before whom one images oneself acting.

Of course, one never really knows who one is. And, with the decline of symbolic efficiency, we become ever more doubtful and unsure. Our grandmother and father were never as one-dimensional as we thought – they were real people with hopes and dreams, faults, confusions. Their new specificity, their decline in symbolic efficiency, thus installs more doubt – we don't know how they looked or would look at us. In fact, in our contemporary media networks, we confront this uncertainty constantly – who is looking at our profile? Who is following us? What did they think about what we posted? What will future employers or lovers think? What will we think in the future?

Facebook tries to help us out on this front by supplying endless quizzes that promise to tell us who we really are – which *Lord of the Rings* character, which famous philosopher, which ferocious animal. These imaginary identities take the place of the missing symbolic ones. More precisely, the global information and financial networks of communicative capitalism offer myriad ways for us to imagine ourselves, immense varieties of lifestyles with which we can experiment. Each of us can and must be creative, different, unique. Each of us must develop a distinctive personal style. These unique identities, though, are extremely vulnerable. The frames of reference that give them meaning and value are constantly shifting. Challenges to our imaginary identities can appear at any moment. Others' successes, achievements, and capacities to enjoy too easily call our own into question. So while it may seem that the decline of symbolic efficiency ushers in a new era of freedom from rigid norms and expectations, the fluidity and adaptability of imaginary identities are accompanied by fragility and insecurity. Imaginary identities are incapable of establishing a firm place to stand, a position from which one can make sense of one's experiences, one's worlds.

The third component of communicative capitalism I want to emphasize is reflexivity. The contemporary setting of electronically mediated subjectivity is one of infinite doubt, ultimate reflexivization. There's always another option, link, opinion, nuance, or contingency that we haven't taken into account, some particular experience of some other who could be

potentially damaged or disenfranchised, a better deal, perhaps even a cure. The very conditions of possibility for adequation (for determining the criteria by which to assess whether a decision or answer is, if not good, then at least adequate) have been foreclosed. *It's just your opinion*. And this foreclosure redirects us back into a loop of questioning and doubt.

In this same circuit, contemporary science and technology offer an unbearable, seemingly impossible freedom: the capacity to intervene in the world at the most fundamental levels of matter and energy without being restricted by knowledge of the outcome. Reflection is possible; reflection on the processes and conditions of reflection, on the languages we use and the sciences we have, on the values that lead us in one direction rather than another. Yet this universalized reflexivity cannot determine for us what we ought to do; we are free to do whatever we decide to do, without determination and without cover in some larger, complete, full knowledge, without (in Lacanian terms), a big Other of the Symbolic to ground and secure us. Reflexivity, reflexivity that goes *all the way down*, is thus another name for the decline in symbolic efficiency. The recursive loop is the circuit of the big Other's collapse.

It is also a circuit of drive. Psychoanalysis uses the term "drive" to designate this failure-induced repetition (Žižek 1991: 291). In drive, enjoyment (*jouissance*, the intense pleasure-pain that makes life worth living) comes from missing one's goal, from the repeated yet ever failing efforts to reach it that start to become satisfying on their own – examples include slot machines, channel surfing on television, clicking around on Facebook and YouTube. For the contemporary left, democracy follows this circuit of drive. We circle round and around, missing our goals, but still getting a little satisfaction – some of us might enjoy sharing our outrage over a setback; others might enjoy rehashing all the steps of our failure, arguing over where we went wrong; still others want to delve into the particulars of a process for its own sake, with little regard for the outcome. Democratic drive, then, names the reflexivity in which we are stuck, which we can't avoid, but which at the same time can't be understood as giving us what we want even as it gives us something else instead, some kick of enjoyment. We protest. We talk. We complain. We sign petitions and forward them to everyone in all our friends. In the reflexive circuit of communicative capitalism, democratic drive is the capture of our political engagements in networked media such that we feel active, feel engaged, even as our actions and engagements reinforce rather than undermine capitalism (Dean 2009b).

Exploitation and expropriation

What is to be done? If my thesis regarding the capture of communication in the circuits of capitalism is correct, if this is what democracy looks like, what sort of political response is possible under communicative capitalism? After all, this is not the same terrain, the same organization of labor, as the one that informed and inspired communism in the 19th and 20th centuries. One promising research area focuses on ideas of the commons and the common (Hardt 2010; Zizek 2010).

Cesare Casarino presents the *common* as another name for the self-reproducing excess that is capitalism. The common is a dynamic process – communicative production. Glossing Hardt and Negri, Casarino writes, “nowadays the common is virtually indistinguishable from that which continually captures it, namely, capital understood as a fully – that is, intensively and extensively – global network of social relations” (2008, 15). The intuition here is that circulation necessarily exceeds particular exchanges; circulation is process and setting – which means that, despite laws of property and profit, there is an unavoidable, insurmountable, and common aspect of capitalism, an aspect that manifests itself most clearly and dramatically under communicative capitalism.

This idea of the common becomes clearer in contradistinction to the *commons*. Both *common* and *commons* are material and immaterial, natural and historical. Although the *common* indicates language, affect, thought, and knowledge, that is, communication, it should not be and cannot be detached from its materiality and historicity. On this point, Casarino advances the discussion beyond misleading emphases on immaterial labor. Communication isn’t immaterial. It depends on a complex, conflictual, and uneven assemblage—satellites, fiber-optic cables, broad spectrum bandwidth, cellular networks, SIM cards, coltan, mobile phones, personal media devices, notebooks, screens, protocols, code, software, operators at call centers, search engines, radio signals, noise, blogs, discord, images, emotions, catch phrases, jingles, jargon, citations, archives, fears, omissions, comfort, denial. At any rate, Casarino’s insight into the *difference* between the *commons* and the *common* is that the commons is *finite* and characterized by *scarcity*. In contrast, the common is *infinite* and characterized by *surplus*. The common thus designates and takes the place of labor power (Marx’s source of surplus value), now reconceived in the broadest possible terms of the potential of creativity, thought, knowledge, and communication as themselves always plural, open, and productive.

The move from commons to common helps explain exploitation and expropriation in contemporary capitalism. As we learn from Marx, one of the problems with the expropriation of the *commons* is that a few get a lot and most are left with nothing. It’s the fact that these folks

have nothing but their labor power that renders their free choice to sell it not so free at all – those with nothing else *have* to sell their labor power in order to eat and live. Privatization, or the enclosure of the commons, leaves them deprived of what they had. Such privatization is pernicious and widespread today. The situation with the *common* is different. There is expropriation, but an expropriation that does not appear to leave many with little. There is more than enough, perhaps even too much. A question for the capture of the common in capitalism, then, is the crime or harm: if there is abundance or surplus why is expropriation a problem? Don't network logics exceed economies of scarcity? Doesn't the fact that consumers are producers make exploitation an outmoded concept? No. On the contrary, networked communications provide multiple instances of expropriation and exploitation of the common. Here are five: data, metadata, networks, attention, and capacity.

First, Facebook and Amazon claim ownership of information placed on their sites. They claim as their own property the products of unremunerated creative, communicative labor. Profiting from the voluntary and unpaid labor of millions, they extend into society exploitative practices already coincident with networked communications. As Tiziana Terranova (2000) argues, work on the internet does more than repeat television's use of the audience. It intensifies it, relying on the free labor of users actually to build sites and generate content. From America Online's thousands of volunteers, through the code produced as Free and Open Source, to more recent apps for smart phones, unpaid labor has been essential to the internet.

Second, a primary characteristic of most commercially successful internet platforms is the capacity to become a singular locus for multiple communicative engagements. Some of these, Google comes to mind, collect and store metadata about user actions. This is a second kind of expropriation, of metadata (our search patterns), and exploitation, of user desire to navigate a rich information field. Google treats the trace left by searching and linking as its own potential resource. Its search engine is less a tool for users to navigate the internet than it is one for generating patterns and traces that the company can mine and sell (Vaidhyathan 2011).

A third, broader, instance of expropriation and exploitation of the communicative common involves the structure of complex networks (those characterized by free choice, growth, and preferential attachment; for example, academic citation networks, blockbuster movies, best-sellers, the popularity of blogs and websites). As Albert-Laszlo Barabasi (2003) explains, complex networks follow a powerlaw distribution. The item in first place or at the top

has much more than the item in second place, which has more than the one in third and so on such that there is very little difference among those “at the bottom” but massive differences between top and bottom. So lots of novels are written; few are published; fewer are sold; a very few become best-sellers. Or lots of articles are written; few are read; the same 4 are cited by everybody. The idea appears in popular media as the 80/20 rule, the winner-take-all or winner-take-most character of the new economy, and the “long tail.”

In these examples, the common is the general field out of which the one emerges. Exploitation consists in efforts to stimulate the creative production of the field in the interest of finding, and then monetizing, the one. Expanding the field produces the one (or, hubs are an immanent property of complex networks). Such exploitation contributes to the expropriation of opportunities for income and paid labor, as we’ve seen in the collapse of print journalism and academic presses. We should recognize here a primary condition of labor under neoliberal capitalism. Now, rather than having a right to the proceeds of one’s labor by virtue of a contract, ever more of us win or lose such that remuneration is treated like a prize. In academia, art, writing, architecture, entertainment, design, and, in the US, increasing numbers of different areas (education, technology), people not only feel fortunate to get work, to get hired, to get paid, but ever more tasks and projects are conducted as competitions, which means that those doing the work are not paid unless they win. They work but only for a chance at pay.

Hobbes’ description of merit is helpful here. In *Leviathan* (chapter fourteen), Hobbes explains that the one who performs first in the case of a contract *merits* that which he is to receive by the performance of the other. Because of the performance of the first, the second is obliged to give the first what is due him. In the instance of a prize, we also say that the winner merits his winnings, but there is a difference: the prize is the product of the event, the contest. The relation between the one awarding the prize and the winner depends on the good will of the giver; there is nothing that specifically links the winner to the prize. The implication of this shift from contract to contest, from wages to prizes (a shift the consent to which has been manufactured in part via so-called reality television competitions), is the mobilization of the many to produce the one. Without the work of the many, there would not be one (who is necessarily contingent).

The Obama administration has made inducement prizes a key part of its “Strategy for American Innovation.” Outlining its vision for a more competitive America, the White House (2009) said that government “should take advantage of the expertise and insight of people

both inside and outside" Washington by using "high-risk, high-reward policy tools such as prizes and challenges to solve tough problems." What goes unmentioned: the characteristics of those in a position to take risks. Contests privilege those who have the resources to take risks, transferring the costs associated with doing the work to the contestants (furthering neoliberalism's basic mechanism of socializing risk and privatizing reward). People pay to do the work for which they will not be remunerated. It sounds like art, blogging, most writing, most creative work.

Inducement prizes, contests, are thus amplifications of the entrepreneurial attitude, amplifications and alterations. The work is done and then maybe paid for (the winner) and likely not (the losers). The only link between the work and the remuneration comes from the prize giver, who is now in a position of judge, charitable giver, beneficent lord and who has no obligation to any of the contestants. As a governmental policy, or approach to funding, the logic of the prize is extended into an acceptable work relation. One might object that no one forces anyone to enter the competition. This is true, but what happens when this is a dominant approach to work? Those who don't choose to enter have fewer opportunities to enter into contract-based work because the amount of contract-based work diminishes. The overall field is changed such that people have little choice but to compete under these terms.

Two other instances of communicative expropriation and exploitation highlight the instability of the distinction between common and commons. These are attention and capacity. The myriad entertainments and diversions available on-line, or as apps on our iphones, are not free. We don't usually pay money directly for YouTube, Facebook, Flickr, or Twitter. These don't cost money. They cost time. It takes time to post and write and time to read and respond. We pay with our attention. Our attention isn't boundless. Our time is finite – even as we try to extract value out of every second. We cannot respond to every utterance, click on every link, read every post. We have to choose even as the possibility of something else, something wonderful, lures us to search and linger. Demands on our attention, injunctions for us to communicate, participate, share – ever shriller and more intense – are like so many speed-ups on the production line, attempts to extract from us whatever bit of mindshare is left. When we do respond, our contribution is an addition to an already infinite communicative field, a little demand on someone else's attention, a little incitement of an affective response, a digital trace that can be stored – and on and on and on. We pay with attention and the cost is focus.

This cost is particularly high for progressive and left political movements. Competition for attention – how do we get our message across – in a rich, tumultuous media environment

too often and easily means adapting to this environment and making its dynamic our own, which can result in a shift in focus from doing to appearing, that is to say, a shift toward thinking in terms of getting attention in the 24/7 media cycle and away from larger questions of building a political apparatus with duration. Infinite demands on our attention – demands we make on each other and which communicative capitalism captures and amplifies – expropriate political energies of focus, organization, and duration vital to communism as a movement and organized struggle. It's no wonder that communicative capitalism is participationist: the more participation in networked media environments, the more traces to hoard and energies to capture and divert.

The limits of attention are not only the limits of individuals (and so resolvable by distributing labor and crowd-sourcing). They are the limits that make communication as such possible (I'm thinking here of the distinction between signal and noise as well as of the habits, environments, and processes that direct and thereby produce the circumstances of communication). Differently put, the limit of attention is itself common. The implication is that the common actualized in contemporary communication networks can function as a means of expropriation, which suggests the importance of theorizing overproduction and over-accumulation of the common as distinctly political problems.

The fifth instance of expropriation and exploitation of the common/commons concerns capacities. Just as industrial labor expropriated craft skill, breaking it into its smallest components and distributing these components via mechanization and assembly lines, so does communicative capitalism participate in the dispossession of our previously common knowledge and capacities. Computer chips and processors, smart phones and mp3 players, are primary components of the expansion and acceleration of disposability. Computers are antiquated in under three years; mobile phones become old-fashioned (if not quite obsolete) in about 18 months. What this means is that we don't learn to fix them. Capacities to repair the items we use daily have diminished; the supposition is that we can just buy a new one. Of course, this was already the case with the rapid expansion of domestic goods after WWII. Middle class households in the US became less likely to make the things they needed – clothes, furniture – and instead to buy them. Pressures on households to earn income, even while raising kids and participating in the care of others, has meant increased reliance on take out, fast, and frozen food, with a corresponding decrease in capacities to prepare and cook fresh food. Contemporary media highlight the expropriation of capacities many in the middle and former middle class currently confront – experts provide guidance in household organization,

how to dress, how to take care of one's children, basic cooking skills, and how to get along with others (most reality shows).

Neoliberal trends in higher education seem bent on extending these dynamics to the university. Capitalism in the US no longer requires a skilled, educated, middle class, so universal education is no longer necessary. It doesn't take as many people to service the top one percent as we have – so most of us are not necessary any more, except perhaps as the field out of which the one can emerge. In a society without skills, who needs a degree? In a setting that reduces education to knowledge, knowledge to information, and information to data, we are told that we can find out anything we want to know by googling it. We don't need professors to tell us, or at least not very many – a couple of great universities can probably supply all the lawyers, scientists, bankers, and novelists a country needs (and if not, well, there is a global elite from which to draw). For the most part, though, things, networked technologies, do it all for us so that we don't have to. We've outsourced basic skills – or, they've been expropriated from us (a new kind of capital accumulation).

Conclusion

Communicative capitalism celebrates and relies on constant, nearly inescapable injunctions to participate, to express, to be part of a common that is expropriated from us rather than shared by all of us. It enjoins us to share in an illusion, to embrace a fantasy that extreme inequality is accidental rather than essential to the capitalism of global communication networks. Because we know it's an illusion, a fantasy, at least part of the work of consciousness-raising is done. We can also claim the truth of this illusion: if our communicative interactions are common, why do a few at the top have so much more than the meaning at the bottom? Why does the work of the ninety-nine percent benefit primarily the one percent? The task is to claim the common against those who say they own it, accentuating the division between their claim to own and our communicative acts, power, and production.

By accentuating the division between rich and poor, the top one percent and the rest of us, we can ally, coordinate, and mobilize anti-capitalist sentiments into a new vision of a communist state. We won't get there automatically or through some kind of immanent becoming – the rich and powerful don't give up easily and things will get much worse as they continue to bankrupt economies and enact policies that lead to ever decaying infrastructures. We also won't get there simply via local practices – Goldman Sachs can persist in the short term just fine while some groups tend gardens and raise chickens and the rest of us work two

jobs, struggle to find ways to pay for our kids' education, keep our heads down, and circulate petitions on the internet. Discipline, preparation, and organization are necessary – and not because of the false notion of Leninism that we've been led to believe, namely, that the party knows everything. But because, as Lenin emphasized repeatedly, we can't predict what will happen (Dean 2012). Organization, discipline, preparation, and the appreciation and employment of multiple knowledges, are necessary in order to adapt to circumstances, to ride them rather than be crushed by them, to conceive them as elements of the world we have in common rather than the one we confront alone.

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