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The Ideology of Free Culture and the Grammar of Sabotage

Abstract. Bringing *post-Operaismo* into network culture, this text tries to introduce the notion of surplus in a contemporary media debate dominated by a simple symmetry between immaterial and material domain, between digital economy and bioeconomy. Therefore a new asymmetry is first shaped through Serres' conceptual figure of the parasite and Bataille's concepts of excess and biochemical energy. Second, the crisis of the copyright system and the contradictions of the so-called Free Culture movement are taken as a starting point to design the notion of *autonomous commons* against the *creative commons*. Third, a new political arena is outlined around Rullani's cognitive capitalism and the new theory of rent developed by Negri and Vercellone. Finally, the sabotage is shown as the specular gesture of the multitudes to defend the commons against the parasitic dimension of rent.

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The parasite invents something new. He obtains energy and pays for it in information. He obtains the roast and pays for it with stories. Two days of writing the new contract. He establishes an unjust pact; relative to the old type of balance, he builds a new one. He speaks in a logic considered irrational up to now, a new epistemology and a new theory of equilibrium. He makes the order of things as well as the states of things — solid and gas — into diagonals. He evaluates information. Even better: he discovers information in his voice and good words; he discovers the Spirit in the wind and the breath of air. He invents cybernetics.

— Michel Serres, *The Parasite*

The living energy of machines: Michel Serres and the cybernetic parasite

Below technology, there is energy — living energy. In *The Accursed Share* Bataille described society as the management of energy surplus that constantly reincarnates itself in new forms of state and economy.¹ Being consequent with his intuition, even the contemporary mediascape can be framed as an ecosystem driven by the growth of natural energies. Media are indeed feral habitats whose underground belly is crossed daily by large torrents of pornography and whose surface provides the battlefield for geopolitical warfare. Media are fed by the same excess of energy that shapes economy and social conflicts. But has the energy surplus of media ever been described in an effective way? If not, which understanding of energy is unconsciously employed by the schools of media criticism? What is the role of technology in the production, consumption and sacrifice of surplus? And exactly what kinds of surplus are involved: energy, libido, value, money, information? Looking at today's media discourse, Bataille is enrolled only to justify a sort of *digital potlatch* — a furious but sterile reproduction of digital copies. On the contrary, under his "general economy," energy seems to float around and inside the machines, crossing and feeding a multitude of devices. To overcome an endogamic destiny media culture should be redesigned around a radical understanding of surplus. Bataille himself considered technology as an extension of life to accumulate energy and provide better conditions for reproduction. Like "tree branches and bird wings in nature" technology opens news spaces to be populated.² However something new happened when information networks entered the biosphere. What kind of energy do digital machines incarnate? Are they a further extension of biochemical energy like the classical technologies that Bataille had in mind? Digital machines are a clear bifurcation of the *machinic phylum*: semiotic and biologic domains represent two different strata. The energy of semiotic flows is not the energy of material and economical flows. They interact but not in a symmetrical and specular way, as propagated by the widespread digital ideology (that I will introduce later as *digitalism*).

Energy always flows one way. Acquainted with the scenario of the network society and the celebration of its *space of flows*,³ a safari with Bataille along the ecosystems of excess is useful to remind the dystopian nature of capitalism. In Bataille economic surplus is strictly related to libidinal excess, enjoyment and sacrifice. Yet between endless fluxes and their "glorious expenditure"⁴ a specific model that explains how surplus is accumulated and exchange is missing. In his inspiring and seminal book *The parasite* Michel Serres catches the asymmetry of universal life in the

conceptual figure of the *parasite*: there is never an equal exchange of energy but always a parasite stealing energy and feeding on another organism. At the beginning of the computer age (the book was published in 1980), the parasite inaugurates a materialistic critique of all the forms of thought based on a binary model of energy: Serres' semiconductors steal energy instead of computing.

Man is a louse for other men. Thus man is a host for other men. The flow goes one way, never the other. I call this semiconduction, this valve, this single arrow, this relation without a reversal of direction, "parasitic."⁵

If Bataille calls attention to the expenditure of energy after its production, Serres shows how "abuse" is at work since accumulation: "abuse appears before use." Serres introduces an *abuse-value* preceding both use-value and exchange-value: "quite simply, it is the arrow with only one direction." The parasite is the asymmetrical arrow absorbing and condensing energy in a natural continuum from small organisms to human beings: "the parasite parasites the parasites." The parasite is not binary but ternary. The concept of parasite appears like a dystopian version of Deleuze and Guattari's desiring machines, as it is focused more on surplus exploitation than on endless flows. Serres shares the same vitalism of Bataille, but provides in addition a punctual model to understand the relation between material and immaterial, biologic and semiotic, economy and media. In this sense the *organic* model of the parasite should be embraced as the core concept of a new understanding of media ecosystems.⁶ Indeed Serres prophetically introduced cybernetics as the latest manifestation of the parasitic food chain (as the opening quote of this text reminds).

Moreover, Serres uses the same parasitic model for intellectual labour and the network itself (as Technology is an extension of the deceptive nature of Logos): "this cybernetics gets more and more complicated, makes a chain, then a network. Yet it is founded on the theft of information, quite a simple thing." Serres' opportunistic relation between intellectual and material production may sound traditionalist, but even when Lazzarato and Negri started to write in 1991 about the "hegemony of intellectual labour"⁷, the exploitive dimension of capital over mass intellectuality was clear. Today the immaterial parasite has become molecular and endemic — everybody is carrying an intellectual and cybernetic parasite. In this scenario what happens to the notion of multitude when intellectual labour enters the political arena in the form of a parasite? What happens to network subcultures when the network is outlined as a massive cybernetic parasite? It is time to re-introduce a sharp asymmetry between the semiotic, technological and biological levels, between material and immaterial.

By the conceptual figure of the *immaterial parasite* I name precisely the exploitation of the biological production through the semiotic and technological domain: material energy and economic surplus are not absorbed and consumed by digital machines but simply allocated. The immaterial flow extracts surplus from the material flow and through continuous exchanges (energy-commodity-technology-knowledge-money). The immaterial parasite functions first as a spectacular device: simulating a fictional world, building a collaborative environment or simply providing communication channels, it accumulates energy through and in favour of its physical substratum. The immaterial parasite belongs to a diverse family, where rents seems to be the dominant form of metabolism. It survives in different kinds of habitat. Its tentacles innervate the metropolis (real estate speculation through the Creative Industries hype), the media (rent over material infrastructures and monopoly of online spaces), software (exploitation of Free Software to sell proprietary hardware), knowledge (revenues on intellectual property), financial markets (stock exchange speculation over collective hysteria) and many other examples.

Digitalism: the impasse of media culture

Digitalism is a sort of modern, egalitarian and cheap gnosis, where knowledge fetishism has been replaced by the cult of a digital network.⁸ Like a religious sect it has its peculiar theology. *Ontologically* the dominant techno-paradigm believes that the semiotic and biologic domains are perfectly parallel and specular to each other (like in the Google utopia of universal digitisation). A material event can be easily translated on the immaterial plane, and conversely the immaterial can be embodied into the material. This second passage is the passage of a millenary misunderstanding and anthropology has a lot to say about the relation between magic and logocentrism. *Economically* digitalism believes that an almost energy-free digital reproduction of data can emulate the energy-expensive material production. For sure the digital can dematerialise any kind of communication but it can not affect biomass production. *Politically* digitalism believes in a mutual gift economy. Internet is supposed to be virtually free of any exploitation and tends naturally towards a social equilibrium. Here digitalism works as an disembodied politics with no acknowledgement of the offline labour that is sustaining the online world (a class divide that precedes any digital divide). *Ecologically* digitalism promotes itself as an environmentally friendly and zero emission machinery against the pollution of the old Fordism. Yet it seems that an avatar on Second Life consumes more electricity that the average Brazilian.⁹

As Marx spotlighted commodity fetishism right at the beginning of *Capital*, a fetishism of code should be put at the basis of the network economy. "God is the machine" was the title of Kevin Kelly's digitalist manifesto whose points proclaimed distinctly: computation can describe all things, all things can compute, all computation is one.¹⁰ Digitalism is one of those political models inspired by technology and not by social conflicts. As McLuhan once said, "We shape our tools, and afterwards our tools shape us."¹¹ Internet in particular was fuelled by the political dreams of the American counter-culture of the '60s. Today according to the Autonomist Marxist tradition¹² the network is at the same time the structure of the Empire and the tool for the self-organisation of the multitudes. But only the Anglo-American culture conceived the faith in the primacy of technology over politics. If today activists apply the Free Software model to traditional artefacts and talk of a "GPL society"¹³ and "P2P production"¹⁴ they do so precisely because they believe in a pure symmetry of the technological over the social. In this sense the definition of Free Culture gathers all those subcultures that shaped a quasi-political agenda around the free reproduction of digital file. The kick-off was the slogan "Information wants to be free"¹⁵ launched by Stewart Brand at the first Hackers' Conference in 1984. Later the hacker underground boosted the Free Software movement and then a chain of new keywords was generated: Open Source, Open Content, Gift Economy, Digital Commons, Free Cooperation, Knowledge Sharing and other do-it-yourself variants like Open Source Architecture, Open Source Art and so on. "Free Culture" is also the title of the book of Lawrence Lessing, founder of Creative Commons. Without mentioning the social improvements and crucial battles of the Free Software movement within the digital sphere, what it is questioned here is the off-line application of these paradigms.

An old saying still resounds: *the word is made flesh*. A religious unconscious is at work behind technology. Florian Cramer in his book *Words made flesh*¹⁶ provides a genealogy of code culture rooted in the ancient brainframes of Western world belonging to Judaism, Christianity, Pythagoreans and Hermeticism. However, as Serres may suggest, the primordial saying must be reversed: *the flesh is made code*. The spirit itself is a parasitic strategy of the flesh. The flesh is first, before the Logos. There is nothing digital in any digital dream. Merged with a global economy, each bit of "free" information carries its own micro slave like a forgotten twin.

The ideology of Free Culture

Literature on *freeculturalism* is vast but can be partially unpacked through focusing the lens of surplus. Reading authors like Stallman and Lessig, a question rises: where does profit end up in the so-called Free Society? Free Culture seems to focus only on the issue of immaterial property rather than production. Although given a closer look, the ghost of the surplus reappears. In his book *Free Culture* Lawrence Lessig connect the Creative Commons initiative to the Anglo-American libertarian tradition where *free speech* always rhymes with *free market*.¹⁷ Lessig takes inspiration from the copyleft and hacker culture quoting Richard Stallman,¹⁸ but where the latter refers only to software, Lessig applies that paradigm to the whole spectrum of cultural artefacts. Software is taken as an universal political model. The book is a useful critique of the copyright regime and at the same time an apology of a generic digital freedom, at least until Lessig pronounces the evil word: taxation. Facing the crisis of the music industries, Lessig has to provide his “alternative compensation system”¹⁹ to reward creators for their works. Lessig modifies a proposal coming from Harvard law professor William Fisher:

Under his plan, all content capable of digital transmission would (1) be marked with a digital watermark [...]. Once the content is marked, then entrepreneurs would develop (2) systems to monitor how many items of each content were distributed. On the basis of those numbers, then (3) artists would be compensated. The compensation would be paid for by (4) an appropriate tax.

In the “tradition of free culture” the solution is paradoxically a new *tax*. Tracking internet downloads and taxation implies a public and centralised intervention quite unusual for US and imaginable only in a Scandinavian social-democracy. The question remains unclear. More explicitly another passage suggests the sacrifice of intellectual property to gain a larger internet. Here Lessig’s intuition is right (for capitalism). Lessig is aware that the market needs a dynamic and self-generating space to expand and establish new monopolies and rents. A dynamic space is more important than a lazy copyright regime.

Is it better (a) to have a technology that is 95 percent secure and produces a market of size x , or (b) to have a technology that is 50 percent secure but produces a market of five times x ? Less secure might produce more unauthorized sharing, but it is likely to also produce a much bigger market in authorized sharing. The most important thing is to assure artists’ compensation without breaking the Internet.

In this sense Creative Commons licences help to expand and lubricate the space of market. As John Perry Barlow puts it: “For ideas, fame *is* fortune. And nothing makes you famous faster than an audience willing to distribute your work for free.”²⁰ Despite its political dreams, the friction-free space of digitalism seems to accelerate towards an even more competitive scenario. In this sense Benkler in his *The Wealth of Networks* is absolutely wrong when he writes that “information is nonrival.” The nonrivalry of information is another important postulate of *freeculturalism*: Lessig and Benkler take for granted that the free digital reproduction does not cause more competition but only more cooperation. Of course rivalry is not produced by digital copies but by their friction on real space and other limited resources. Benkler celebrates “peer production” but actually he is merely covering *immaterial reproduction*. Free Software and Wikipedia are extensively over-quoted as the main examples of “social production” but these examples actually only points to *online* social production.

Against the Creative Anti-Commons

After an initial honey-moon the Creative Commons (CC) initiative is facing a growing criticism that comes especially from the European media culture. Scouting articles from 2004 to 2006, two fronts of critique can be distinguished: those who claim the institution of a real commonality against Creative Commons restrictions (non-commercial, share-alike, etc.) and those who point out Creative Commons complicity with global capitalism. An example of the first front, Florian Cramer provides a precise and drastic analysis:

To say that something is available under a CC license is meaningless in practice. [...] Creative Commons licenses are fragmented, do not define a common minimum standard of freedoms and rights granted to users or even fail to meet the criteria of free licenses altogether, and that unlike the Free Software and Open Source movements, they follow a philosophy of reserving rights of copyright owners rather than granting them to audiences.²¹

Berlin-based Neoist Anna Nimus agrees with Cramer that CC licences protect only the producers while consumer rights are left unmentioned: "Creative Commons legitimates, rather than denies, producer-control and enforces, rather than abolishes, the distinction between producer and consumer. It expands the legal framework for producers to deny consumers the possibility to create use-value or exchange-value out of the common stock."²² Nimus claims the total freedom for consumers to produce use-value out of the common stock (like in Free Software) but more important to produce even exchange-value (that means commercial use). For Nimus a commons is defined by its productive consumers and not merely by its producers or passive consumers. She claims that CC licences close the commons with many restrictions rather than opening it to real productivity. In a new nickname, they are "Creative Anti-Commons."

Both Nimus and Cramer's critiques remain closer to the libertarian tradition with few accounts of the surplus-value extraction and large economy behind IP (in any form: copyright, copyleft or CC). On the contrary, among post-Autonomist Marxists a stronger criticism is moved against the ideology implicitly pushed by CC and other forms of *digital-only commonism*. For instance activist Martin Hardie thinks that "The logic of FLOSS seems only to promise a new space for entrepreneurial freedom where we are never exploited or subject to others' command. The sole focus upon 'copyright freedom' sweeps away consideration of the processes of valorisation active within the global factory without walls."²³ Hardie criticise FLOSS precisely because it never questions the way it is captured by capital and its relations with the productive forces.

In conclusion a tactical notion of *autonomous commons* can be imagined to include new projects and tendencies against the hyper-celebrated Creative Commons. In a schematic way, autonomous commons 1) allow not only passive and personal consumption but even a *productive* use of the common stock — implying commercial use by single workers; 2) question the role and complicity of the commons within the global economy and place the common stock out of the exploitation of large companies; 3) are aware of the *asymmetry* between immaterial and material commons and the impact of immaterial accumulation over material production (e.g. IBM using Linux); 4) consider the commons as an hybrid and dynamic space that dynamically must be built and defended.

Towards an Autonomous Commons

Among all the appeals for "real" commons only Dmytri Kleiner's idea of 'Copyfarleft' condenses the nodal point of the conflict in a pragmatic proposal that breaks the flat paradigm of Free Culture. In his article "Copyfarleft and Copyjustright"²⁴ Kleiner notices a *property divide* that is more crucial than any digital divide: 10% of the world population owns 85% of the global assets against a multitude of people owning nearly nothing. This material dominion of the owning class is consequently extended thanks to the copyright over immaterial assets, so that these can be owned, controlled and traded. In the case of music for example intellectual property is more crucial to the owning class than musicians, as they are forced to resign author rights over their own works. On the other side the digital commons do not provide a better habitat: authors are sceptical that copyleft can earn them a living. In the end the authors' wage conditions within cognitive capitalism seem to follow the same old laws of Fordism. Moving from Ricardo's definition of rent and the so-called "Iron Law of Wages"²⁵ Kleiner develops the "iron law of copyright earnings."

The system of private control of the means of publication, distribution, promotion and media production ensures that artists and all other creative workers can earn no more than their subsistence. Whether you are biochemist, a musician, a software engineer or a film-maker, you have signed over all your copyrights to property owners before these rights have any real financial value for no more than the reproduction costs of your work. This is what I call the Iron Law of Copyright Earnings.

Kleiner recognizes that both copyright and copyleft regimes keep workers earnings constantly below average needs. In particular copyleft helps neither software developers nor artists as it reallocates profit only in favour of the owners of material assets. The solution advanced by Kleiner is *copyfarleft*, a license with a hybrid status that recognises *class divide* and allow workers to claim back the "means of production." Copyfarleft products are free and can be used to make money only by those who do not exploit wage labour (like other workers or co-ops).

For copyleft to have any revolutionary potential it must be Copyfarleft. It must insist upon workers ownership of the means of production. In order to do this a license cannot have a single set of terms for all users, but rather must have different rules for different classes. Specifically one set of rules for those who are working within the context of workers ownership and commons based production, and another for those who employ private property and wage labour in production.

For example "under a copyfarleft license a worker-owned printing cooperative could be free to reproduce, distribute, and modify the common stock as they like, but a privately owned publishing company would be prevented from having free access". Copyfarleft is quite different from the 'non-commercial' use supported by some CC licences because they do not distinguish between endogenous (within the commons) commercial use and exogenous (outside the commons) commercial use. Kleiner suggests to introduce an asymmetry: endogenous commercial use should be allowed while keeping exogenous commercial use forbidden. Interestingly this is the correct application of the original institution of the commons, which were strictly related to material production: the commons were land used by a specific community to harvest or breed their animals. If someone cannot pasture cows and produce milk on it, it will not be considered a real common. Kleiner says that if money cannot be made out of it, a work does not belong to the commons: it is merely private property.

Rent is the other side of the Commons

How does cognitive capitalism make money? Where does a digital economy extract surplus? While digerati and activists are stuck to the glorification of peer production, good managers — but also good Marxists — are aware of the profits made on the shoulders of the collective intelligence. For instance the school of post-Operaismo has always had a dystopian vision of the *general intellect* produced by workers and digital multitudes: it is potentially liberating but constantly absorbed before turning into a true social autonomy. The cooperation celebrated by *freeculturalists* is only the last stage of a long process of socialisation of knowledge that is not improving the life conditions of the last digital generations: in the end online “free labour”²⁶ appears to be more dominant than the “wealth of networks.” The theory of rent recently advanced by the post-Operaist school can uncover the digital economy more clearly.

Autonomist Marxism has become renown for shaping a new toolbox of political concepts for the late capitalism (such as multitude, immaterial labour, biopolitical production and cognitive capitalism to name a few). In an article²⁷ published in 2007 in *Posse Negri* and Vercellone make a further step: they establish rent as the nodal mechanism of contemporary economy thus opening a new field of antagonism. Until then Autonomist Marxism has been used to focus more on the transformations of the labour conditions than on the new parasitic modes of surplus extraction. In classical theory rent is distinguished from profit. Rent is the *parasitic* income an owner can earn just by owning an asset and it traditionally refers to land property. Profit on the contrary is meant to be *productive* and it refers to the power of capital to generate and extract surplus (from commodity value and workforce).²⁸ Vercellone criticises the idea of a “good productive capitalism” pointing to the becoming rent of profit as the driving force of the current economy: below the hype of technological innovation and creative economy, the whole of capitalism is breeding a subterranean parasitic nature. So Vercellone's motto goes “rent is the new profit” in cognitive capitalism. Rent is parasitic because it is orthogonal to the line of the classic profit. Parasite means etymologically “eating at another's table,” sucking surplus not directly but in a furtive way. If we produce freely in front of our computers, certainly somebody has his hands in our wallet. Rent is the other side of the commons — once it was over the common land, today over the network commons.

Becoming rent of profit means a transformation of management and the cognitive workforce too. The autonomisation of capital has grown in parallel with the autonomisation of cooperation. Today managers are dealing more and more often with financial and speculative tasks, while workers are in charge of a distributed management. In this evolution the *cognitariat* is split into two tendencies. On one side the high-skilled cognitive workers become “functionaries of the capital rent”²⁹ and are co-opted within the rent system through stock options. On the other side the majority of workers faces a declassing (*déclassement*) of life conditions despite skills getting richer and richer in knowledge. It is not a mystery that the New Economy has generated more McJobs. This model can be easily applied to the internet economy and its workforce, where users are in charge of content production and web management but do not share any profit. Big corporations like Google for instance make money over the attention economy of the user-generated content with its services AdSense and Adwords. Google provides just a light infrastructure for web advertisement that infiltrates websites as a subtle and mono-dimensional parasite and extracts profit without producing any content. Part of the value is shared with users of course and the Google coders are paid in stock options to develop more sophisticated algorithms.

The four dimensions of cognitive capitalism

The digital revolution made the reproduction of immaterial objects easier, faster, ubiquitous and almost free. But as the Italian economist Enzo Rullani points out, within cognitive capitalism, “proprietary logic does not disappear but has to subordinate itself to the law of diffusion.”³⁰ Intellectual property (and so rent) is no longer based on space and objects but on time and speed. Apart from copyright there are many other modes to extract rent. In his book *Economia della conoscenza* Rullani writes that cognitive products that are easy to reproduce have to start a process of diffusion as soon as possible in order to maintain control over it. As an entropic tendency affects any cognitive product, it is not recommended to invest on a static proprietary rent. More specifically there is a rent produced on the multiplication of the uses and a rent produced on the monopoly of a secret. Two opposite strategies: the former is recommended for cultural products like music, the latter for patents. Rullani is inclined to suggest that free multiplication is a vital strategy within cognitive capitalism, as the value of knowledge is fragile and tends to decline. Immaterial commodities (that populate any spectacular, symbolic, affective, cognitive space) seem to suffer from a strong entropic decay of meaning. At the end of the curve of diffusion a banal destiny is waiting for any meme, especially in today's emotional market that constantly tries to sell unique and exclusive experiences.

For Rullani the value of a knowledge (extensively of any cognitive product, artwork, brand, information) is given by the composition of three drivers: the value of its performance and application (v); the number of its multiplications and replica (n); the sharing rate of the value among the people involved in the process (p). Knowledge is successful when it becomes self-propulsive and pushes all the three drivers: 1) maximising the value, 2) multiplying effectively, 3) sharing the value that is produced. Of course in a dynamic scenario a compromise between the three forces is necessary, as they are alternative and competitive to each other. If one driver improves, the others get worse. Rullani's model is fascinating precisely because intellectual property has no central role in extracting surplus. In other words the rent is applied strategically and dynamically along the three drivers, along different regimes of intellectual property. Knowledge is therefore projected into a less fictional cyberspace, a sort of invisible landscape where cognitive competition should be described along new space-time coordinates.³¹ Rullani describe his model as 3D but actually it is 4-dimensional as it runs especially along time.

The dynamic model provided by Rullani is more interesting than for instance Benkler's plain notion of “social production” but it is not yet employed by radical criticism and activism. What is clear and important in his perspective is also that the material can not be replaced by the immaterial despite the contemporary hypertrophy of signs and digital enthusiasm. There is a general misunderstanding about the cognitive economy as an autonomous and virtuous space. On the contrary, Rullani points out that knowledge exists only through material vectors. The nodal point is the friction between the free reproducibility of knowledge and the non-reproducibility of the material. The immaterial generates value only if it grants meaning to a material process. A music CD for example has to be physically produced and physically consumed. We need our body and especially our time to produce and consume music. And when the CD vector is dematerialised thanks to the evolution of digital media into P2P networks, the body of the artist has to be engaged in a stronger competition. Have digital media galvanised more competition or more cooperation? An apt question for today's internet criticism.

A taxonomy of the immaterial parasites

A taxonomy of rent and its parasites is needed to describe cognitive capitalism in detail. Taxonomy is not merely a metaphor as cognitive systems tend to behave like living systems.³² According to Vercellone, a specific form of rent introduced by cognitive capitalism is the cognitive rent that is captured over intellectual property such as patents, copyrights and trademarks. More precisely Rullani contextualises the new forms of rent within a speed-based competitive scenario. He shows how rent can be extracted dynamically along mobile and temporary micro-monopolies, skipping the limits of intellectual property.

The possibility of the cognitive rent has been strictly determined by the technological substratum. Digital technologies have opened new spaces of communication, socialisation and cooperation that are only virtually "free." The surplus extraction is channelled generously along the material infrastructure needed to sustain the immaterial "second life." Technological rent³³ is the rent applied on the ICT infrastructures when they established a monopoly on media, bandwidth, protocols, standards, software or virtual spaces (including the recent social networks: Myspace, Facebook, etc.). It is composed by different layers: from the materiality of hardware and electricity to the immateriality of the software running a server, a blog, a community. The technological rent is fed by general consumption and social communication, by P2P networks and the activism of Free Culture. The technological rent is different from the cognitive one as it is based on the exploitation of (material and immaterial) spaces and not only knowledge. Similarly also attention economy³⁴ can be described as an attention rent applied on the limited resource of the consumer time-space. In the society of the spectacle and pervasive media the attention economy is responsible for commodity valorisation to a great extent. The attention time of consumers is a like a scarce piece of land that is constantly disputed. In the end the technological rent is a large part of the metabolism sustaining the techno-parasite.

It is well known how the new economy hype was a driving force of the speculation over stock markets. The dot-com bubble exploited a spiral of virtual valorisation channelled across the internet and new spaces of communication. More generally the whole finance world is based on rent. *Financialisation* is precisely the name of rent that parasites domestic savings.³⁵ Today even wages are directly enslaved by the same mechanism: workers are paid in stock options and so fatally co-opted in the destiny of the owning capital. Finally even the primordial concept of land rent has been updated by cognitive capitalism. As the relation between artistic underground and gentrification shows, real estate speculation is strictly related to the "collective symbolic capital" of a physical place (as defined by David Harvey in his essay "The Art of Rent"³⁶). Today both historical symbolic capital (like in Berlin or Barcelona) and artificial symbolic capital (like in Richard Florida's marketing campaigns³⁷) are exploited by real estate speculation on a massive scale.

All these types of rent are immaterial parasites. The parasite is immaterial as rent is produced dynamically along the virtual extensions of space, time, communication, imagination, desire. The parasite is indeed material as value is transmitted through physical vectors such as commodities in the case of cognitive rent and attention rent, media infrastructure in the case of technological rent, real estate in the case of the speculation over symbolic capital, etc. (only financial speculation is a completely dematerialised machine of value). The awareness of the parasitic dimension of technology should inaugurate the decline of the old digitalist *media culture* in favour of a new *dystopian cult* of the techno-parasite.

The bicephalous multitude and the grammar of sabotage

Many of the subcultures and political schools emerged around knowledge and network paradigms (from Free Culture to the 'creative class' and even many radical readings of these positions) do not acknowledge cognitive capitalism as a conflictual and competitive scenario. Paolo Virno is one of the few authors to underline the "amphibious" nature of the multitude, that is cooperative as well as aggressive if not struggling "within itself."³⁸ The *Bildung* of an autonomous network is not immediate and easy. As Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter put it: "Networks thrive on diversity and conflict (the networking), not on unity, and this is what community theorists are unable to reflect upon."³⁹ Lovink and Rossiter notice that cooperation and collective intelligence have their own grey sides. Online life especially is dominated by passivity. Digitalism itself can be described as a sublimation of the collective desire for a pure space and at the same time as the grey accomplice of a parasitic mega-machine. A new theory of the negative must be established around the missing political link of digital culture: its disengagement from materiality and its uncooperative nature. Networks and cooperation do not always fit each other. Geert Lovink and Christopher Spehr ask precisely this: when do networks start to not work? How do people start to un-cooperate? Freedom of refusal and not-working are put by Lovink and Spehr at the very foundation of any collaboration (an echo of the Autonomist *refusal to work*).⁴⁰

"Free uncooperation" is the negative ontology of cooperation and may provide the missing link that unveils the relation with the consensual parasite. Furthermore, a new right and freedom to sabotage must be included within the notion of *uncooperation* to make finally clear also the individualistic and private gesture of "illegal" file-sharing. Obfuscated by the ideology of the Free, a new practice is needed to see clearly beyond the screen. If the positive gesture of cooperation has been saturated and digitalised in a neutral space, only a sharpened tool can reveal the movements of the parasite. As profit has taken the impersonal form of rent, its by-effect is the anonymity of sabotage. As rent changed its coordinates of exploitation, a new theory of rent demands a new theory of sabotage before aiming to any new form of organisation. Which kind of sabotage is affecting the *social factory*? In cognitive capitalism competition is said to be stronger, but for the same reasons sabotage is easier, as the relation between the immaterial (value) and the material (goods) is even more fragile.

The grey multitude of online users are learning a simple grammar of sabotage against capital and its concrete revenues along the immaterial / material conflict. To label as Free Culture the desolate gesture of downloading the last Hollywood movie sounds rather like armchair activism. If radical culture is established along real conflicts, a more frank question is necessary: does "good" digital piracy produce conflict, or does it simply sell more hardware and bandwidth? Is "good" piracy an effective hazard against real accumulation or does it help other kinds of rent accumulation? Alongside and thanks to any digital *commonism*, accumulation still runs. Nevertheless in the contemporary hype there is no room for a critical approach or a negative tendency. A pervasive density of digital networks and computer-based immaterial labour is not supposed to bring about any counter-effect. Maybe as Marx pointed out in his "Fragments on machines," a larger dominion of the (digital) machinery may bring simply an entropy and slowing down of the capitalistic accumulation. That means a more clouded and dense parasitic economy. A therapeutic doubt remains open to a dystopian destiny: is cognitive capitalism simply tending to slow-down capitalism instead of fulfilling the self-organisation of the general intellect?

A breaking point of capitalist accumulation is not found only in the cognitive rent of the music and movie corporations. The previous taxonomy of cognitive parasites has shown how the symbolic and immaterial rent affects daily life on different levels. The displaced multitudes of the global cities are starting right now to understand gentrification and how to deal with the new symbolic capital. In his novel *Millennium People* Ballard prophetically described the riots originating within the middle class (not the working class!) and targeting cultural institutions like the National Film Theatre in London. Less fictionally and less violently new tensions are rising today in East London against the urban renovation in preparation of the 2012 Olympics. In recent years in Barcelona a big mobilisation has been fighting against the gentrification of the former industrial district Poble Nou following the 22@ plan for a "knowledge-based society."⁴¹ Similarly in East Berlin the Media Spree⁴² project is trying to attract big media companies in an area widely renowned for its cultural underground. It is not a coincidence then the Kafkaesque saga of Andrej Holm — an academic researcher at Humboldt University — who was arrested in July 2007 and accused of terrorism because of his research around gentrification and radical activism in Germany.⁴³ As real estate speculation is one of the leading force of parasitic capitalism, these types of struggles and their connections with cultural production are far more interesting than any Free Culture agenda. The link between symbolic capital and material valorisation is symptomatic of a phenomenon which digitalists are not able to track and describe. The constitution of autonomous and productive commons does not pass through the traditional forms of activism and for sure not through a digital-only resistance and knowledge-sharing. The commons should be acknowledged as a dynamic and hybrid space that is constantly configured along the friction between material and immaterial. If the commons becomes a dynamic space, it must be defended in a dynamic way. Because of the immateriality and anonymity of rent, the grammar of sabotage has become the *modus operandi* of the multitudes trapped into the network society and cognitive capitalism. The sabotage is the only possible gesture specular to the rent — the only possible gesture to defend the commons.

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A copy of this file can be downloaded from:
www.rekombinant.org/mat

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Conceptual glossary

CREATIVE COMMONS (CC). A set of licences to release content and artworks under a semi-copyrighted status. Technically it relies on the copyright system as CC licences *per se* have no legal power. Instinctively endorsed by radical activists as a sort of empowered copyleft, CC are criticised for not establishing productive commons.

PRODUCTIVE COMMONS. The original definition of commons refers to a common land that farmers can exploit to produce food or biomass. In this sense commons that are not productive of material wealth are not technically commons.

COPYFARLEFT. An alternative license and compensation system for authors that (against both copyright and copyleft) allows commercial use of public domain works but only by other workers and small cooperatives that do not exploit wage labour. It is based on a productive notion of the commons. First proposed by Dmytri Kleiner in his article "Copyjustright and Copyfarleft."

AUTONOMOUS COMMONS. Commons that are based on a productive model, open to commercial use by single workers and small cooperatives, closed to capitalist exploitation and accumulation, defended in a dynamic way and on the basis of dynamic alliances.

DIGITALISM. A form of network culture obsessively relying on digital media and "code fetishism." It is the unconscious effect of the pervasive diffusion of digital technologies at the end of the 20th century. Politically it tries to translate all types of economic relation, material production and social conflict into the digital sphere. Cultural "implementation" of digitalism is *freeculturalism*.

FREE CULTURE. Derogatory: FREECULTURALISM, FREECULTURALIST. Ideological paradigm behind CC and political attempt to extend Richard Stallman's Free Software notion to cultural artefacts. Also called Remix Culture.

FREE HARDWARE. The missing point in the debate around Free Software and Free Culture (together with the notions of surplus-value and material property).

PARASITE. A non-binary and non-dialectical model for economy and biosphere introduced by Michel Serres in his book *Le parasite* (1980). It is based on a ternary model pointing all the time to surplus and accumulation. Serres says "the parasite invents cybernetics", but this concept does not necessarily imply a negative meaning.

RENT. The becoming parasite of capitalism. Concept upgraded by *post-Operaismo* (specifically by Carlo Vercellone) within the notion of cognitive capitalism against the traditional scheme labour/commodity/profit. David Harvey developed a similar approach in his essay 'The Art of Rent.'

SABOTAGE OF RENT. Form of conflict typical of cognitive capitalism and addressing specifically material assets to sabotage rent accumulation. The crisis of the music industry as a consequence of file sharing on P2P networks is the most common example. In Europe the struggles against gentrification are another example of the increasing awareness around the relation between symbolic capital and material valorisation. The sabotage is the anonymous gesture specular to the impersonal dominion of rent.

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- ¹ Georges Batailles, *The Accursed Share*, Vol. I, New York: Zone, 1988.
- ² Georges Batailles, *The Accursed Share*, cit., p. 36. "The space that labor and technical know-how open to the increased reproduction of men is not, in the proper sense, one that life has not yet populated. But human activity transforming the world augments the mass of living matter with supplementary apparatuses, composed of an immense quantity of inert matter, which considerably increases the resource of available energy."
- ³ "Space of flows" is a concept introduced by Manuel Castells in *The Informational City* (1989).
- ⁴ See: Georges Batailles, "The notion of expenditure" in *Vision of Excess*, University of Minnesota Press, 1985. And: *The Accursed Share*, cit.
- ⁵ Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982, p. 5.
- ⁶ Parikka offers an example of "parasitic media analysis" but focusing only on "(nonorganic) ways of network life": Jussi Parikka, "Contagion and Repetition: On the Viral Logic of Network Culture", *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organisation*, volume 7(2).
- ⁷ Maurizio Lazzarato and Antonio Negri, "Travail immatériel et subjectivité", in *Futur Antérieur* n. 6, Summer 1991, Paris.
- ⁸ As similarly Erik Davis shows in his book: Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic, Mysticism in the Age of Information*, London: Serpent's Tail, 1999.
- ⁹ Nicholas Carr, "Avatars consume as much electricity as Brazilians", Rough type (5 Dec. 2006), www.routhtype.com/archives/2006/12/avatars_consume.php
- ¹⁰ Kevin Kelly, "God is the Machine", *Wired*, Dec. 2002. www.wired.com/wired/archive/10.12/holytech.html
- ¹¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1964.
- ¹² See: Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin, 2004. And: Ned Rossiter, *Organized Networks: Media Theory, Creative Labour, New Institutions*, Rotterdam: NAI Publisher, Institute of Network Cultures, 2006.
- ¹³ "GPL society means a formation of society, which is based on the principles of the development of Free Software", Project Oekonux definition, www.oekonux.org.
- ¹⁴ See: Michel Bauwens, "The Political Economy of Peer Production", *Ctheory* (12 Jun. 2005), www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=499
- ¹⁵ See: Roger Clarke, "Information Wants to be Free," 2000, www.anu.edu.au/people/Roger.Clarke/II/IWtbf.html
- ¹⁶ Florian Cramer, *Words Made Flesh: Code, Culture, Imagination*, Rotterdam: Piet Zwart Institute, 2005.
- ¹⁷ Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture*, New York: Penguin, 2004: «We come from a tradition of "free culture" — not "free" as in "free beer" (to borrow a phrase from the founder of the free-software movement), but "free" as in "free speech," "free markets," "free trade," "free enterprise," "free will," and "free elections."»
- ¹⁸ Richard Stallman, *Free Software, Free Society*, GNU Press, 2002. www.gnu.org/doc/book13.html
- ¹⁹ See: www.crosscommons.org/acs.html, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alternative_Compensation_System
- ²⁰ John Perry Barlow, "The Next Economy of Ideas", *Wired*, Oct. 2000. www.wired.com/wired/archive/8.10
- ²¹ Florian Cramer, "The Creative Common Misunderstanding", 2006. Web: www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0610/msg00025.html
- ²² Anna Nimus (alias Dmytri Kleiner & Joanne Richardson), "Copyright, Copyleft & the Creative Anti-Commons", Dec. 2006. Web: subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors0/nimustext.html
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- ²⁴ Dmytri Kleiner, "Copyfarleft and Copyjustright", *Mute*, 18 Jul. 2007. Web: www.metamute.org/en/Copyfarleft-and-Copyjustright
- ²⁵ See: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron_law_of_wages
- ²⁶ As Tiziana Terranova states: "It is important to remember that the gift economy, as part of a larger digital economy, is itself an important force within the reproduction of the labor force in late capitalism as a whole. The provision of "free labor" [...] is a fundamental moment in the creation of value in the digital economies." Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy" in *Network Culture*, London: Pluto Press, 2004.

- ²⁷ Antonio Negri, Carlo Vercellone, "Il rapporto capitale/lavoro nel capitalismo cognitivo", in Posse, "La classe a venire", Nov. 2007. Web: www.posseweb.net/spip.php?article17
- ²⁸ Carlo Vercellone, "La nuova articolazione salario, rendita, profitto nel capitalismo cognitivo", in Posse, "Potere Precario", 2006. Translated by A. Bove: "The new articulation of wages, rent and profit in cognitive capitalism", Web: www.generation-online.org/c/fc_rent2.htm
- ²⁹ Antonio Negri, Carlo Vercellone, cit.
- ³⁰ A. Corsani, E. Rullani, "Production de connaissance et valeur dans le postfordisme", *Multitudes*, n. 2, May 2000, Paris [translation mine]. Web: multitudes.samizdat.net/Production-de-connaissance-et.html. Original version in Italian in: Y. Moulier Boutang (ed.), *L'età del capitalismo cognitivo*, Verona: Ombre Corte, 2002.
- ³¹ See also the notion of time-space compression in: David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.
- ³² On living systems and cognitive systems see: Rullani, *Economica della conoscenza*, cit., p. 363.
- ³³ For a definition of infrastructural technologies see: Nicholas Carr, *Does IT matter? Information Technology and the Corrosion of Competitive Advantage*, Harvard Business School, 2004. Web: www.nicholasgcarr.com/doesitmatter.html: "A distinction needs to be made between proprietary technologies and what might be called infrastructural technologies. Proprietary technologies can be owned, actually or effectively, by a single company. A pharmaceutical firm, for example, may hold a patent on a particular compound that serves as the basis for a family of drugs. [...] As long as they remain protected, proprietary technologies can be the foundations for long-term strategic advantages, enabling companies to reap higher profits than their rivals. Infrastructural technologies, in contrast, offer far more value when shared than when used in isolation. [...] The characteristics and economics of infrastructural technologies, whether railroads or telegraph lines or power generators, make it inevitable that they will be broadly shared – that they will become part of the general business infrastructure. [...] In the earliest phases of its buildout, however, an infrastructural technology can take the form of a proprietary technology. As long as access to the technology is restricted – through physical limitations, intellectual property rights, high costs, or a lack of standards – a company can use it to gain advantages over rivals."
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- ³⁵ See: Christian Marazzi, *Capitale e linguaggio*, Roma: Derive Approdi, 2002. And: Randy Martin, *Financialization of Daily Life*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002.
- ³⁶ David Harvey, "The art of rent: globalization and the commodification of culture", chapter, in *Spaces of Capital*, New York: Routledge, 2001.
- ³⁷ See: Matteo Pasquinelli, "Immaterial Civil War", in Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter, *My Creativity Reader*, cit.
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- ⁴⁰ Geert Lovink, "The Principles of Networking", Inaugural speech, Hogeschool van Amsterdam, 2005. See also: Geert Lovink, "Out-Cooperating the Empire? Exchange with Christoph Spehr" in Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter, *My Creativity Reader*, cit.
- ⁴¹ See, www.22barcelona.com: "22@ Barcelona project transforms two hundred hectares of industrial land of Poblenou into an innovative district offering modern spaces for the strategic concentration of intensive knowledge-based activities. This initiative is also a project of urban refurbishment and a new model of city providing a response to the challenges posed by the knowledge-based society."
- ⁴² See: www.mediaspree.de
- ⁴³ See: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrej_Holm