

A social history of the internet

Of conjuration, bubbles, and subsumption to capital

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1. UNSTOPPABLE FORMS OF UNTAMABLE SOCIAL CONTENT

The initial public appearance of the Internet (1990s, with the World Wide Web)¹ generated a series of unprecedented social circumstances which capital for decades was unable to really subsume to the commodity- and capital-form. For about twenty years, piracy (of software, knowledge, and art) was irrepressible and widespread. There were literally thousands of media (debate forums, sites dealing with specific themes) where it was possible for anyone – usually operating under pseudonyms – to appropriate, develop, create, and share all sorts of knowledge and art for free, directly, with any human being on the face of the earth searching for them on the Internet.

The physical infrastructure of the initial Internet was a material form reared and fattened by an immense influx of capital from around the world, in crazed pursuit of promising ventures for accumulation. A side-effect of all this was to create unruly [*selvagens*] technical conditions, which gave rise (at least intellectually and artistically) to a proliferation of free social content. Here the principle “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs” was directly practiced, as a general rule, not merely given lip service.

Faced with this social content, private property – and therefore the extraction of surplus value – was not only inadequate, but impracticable. There was formal subsumption to capital, since the physical infrastructure was privately owned (such that access to it had to be paid for), but no real subsumption, since the social content which emerged from this physical infrastructure was beyond the reach of capital. Companies tried all the time to really subsume this content, but always failed. The *locus classicus* of such attempts during this era was the ISP AOL with its walled garden, the first attempt, totally defeated, to imprison Internet users inside bubbles which isolate them from the contents made universally available on the Internet. Unable to capture them inside bubbles (digital enclosures) so as to extract profit, the immense influx of capital pouring in from around the world turned the Internet itself into an immense financial bubble, one that would burst in the early 2000s (the infamous “dot-com bubble”).

Of course, this online effervescence by itself was not enough to overcome or abolish capitalist society, since this depends on the struggle of the proletariat. The proletariat meanwhile was still suffering all the consequences of the defeat of the global wave of struggles stemming from 1968. Private property remained offline and intact when it came to the “physical layer” of social conditions (including the very form of the Internet, means of connection, telecommunications). Despite this, delightful relations emerged which, though extremely marginal (since only a small proportion of the world’s population had access), were not substantially subsumed under capital.

Leaving aside all the ideological illusions of that era, which were not a few, it was not unusual to take the restructuring of global society according to the principles of the world wide web as feasible and obvious: a society in which not just intellectual and artistic private property, but even its “physical” counterpart, would be abolished along with commodity-production, capital,

¹ A brief history on how the Internet was created, and how, by accident, its fundamental communication protocols were developed by hackers who voluntarily contributed to the IETF (Internet Engineering Task Force) with a universalist bias, where every resource should be freely and equally accessible to anyone on the network, can be found in the article “Immaterial Aristocracy.”

borders, and the State.² Many assumed this would happen automatically, once the separation between the online and offline worlds was gone.³

2. CONJURATION OF UNCONTROLLABLE CREATIVE FORCES

All the untamed effervescence [*efervescência indomesticada*] unleashed in this moment was subject to a great deal of criticism. Some said it was no more than technological fetishism, an illusory form of virtual liberation that had nothing to do with struggles in the offline world. To such critics, all this was merely an escape from “raw and undigested” [*crua e indigesta*] reality, whose essence was pain, sacrifice, and death, where “real value” was measured by self-denial, by suffering heroically buoyed along only by hope.

In reality, class struggle — the movement of direct and universal association in which workers affirm their desires, augment their capacities, and strive for the satisfaction of their needs in opposition to capital, private property, and the state — historically never occurs against such an empty (much less funereal) background. Nor does it occur by mere force of will, by individuals or collectivities holding out hope in the face of “brute reality.”

Quite the contrary: the struggle for control over the productive forces of humanity always takes place within the human species itself. It consists precisely in developing the needs and faculties of human beings as ends in themselves, not as means for the ends of others. This is what periodically puts at risk the production and reproduction of capital, which nevertheless cannot expand without invoking these very forces. But it invokes them only to separate them violently, using the *policial-penal* wedge that is private property. On the one hand, in order to control and shape human needs (subjecting them to continuous scarcity, as this is the only way to continually sell commodities). On the other hand, in order to exploit and extract surplus value from human faculties (for continuous scarcity requires that money constantly be procured to pay for it, imposing competition every individual to continually sell his own capacities, his very self, to capital in the labor market). From there, proletarians are variously subjected to threats of punishment or promises of reward to keep them working to the max, producing commodities

² On some obvious potentialities of the internet for the proletariat to abolish private property and the state, creating generalized communism, see “Against the Metaphysics of Scarcity, for Practical Copiousness.”

³ In the 2000s there was even a technocratic tendency that preached that the development of 3D printers will make the “communism of the internet” overflow to the offline world, causing a technical revolution that will wipe out capitalism (these ideas were advocated, for example, by Adrian Bowyer, Jeremy Rifkin, Paul Mason, and Alex Williams). Briefly, the idea was as follows: the diffusion of 3D printers will allow anyone to produce anything that he want, using digital designs and models created freely by their users and made available for free on the internet. The 3D printers themselves will be reproduced exponentially in the same way, by other other 3D printers, so that anyone who want will own one for free. This will bring to an end the need to exchange commodities, therefore, to the end of money, to the end of the private property of the means of life, and, consequently, to the end of capital. The perfect ideal would be to develop a molecular 3D printer, which would form any raw material and build everything from hydrogen atoms, which are the most abundant thing in the universe.

The misconception of all this view, as of all technocracy, is that it attributes to technology an imaginary power, which presupposes in fact the commodity fetishism, in which the technics, things, and means of production are seen as having an autonomous, independent virtue, separated from social relations and determining it. In reality, the very concept of “technology” — i.e., an autonomous logic that governs technics regardless of social relations, human needs and capacities, and the class struggle — is nothing less than a synonym for capital, dead labor’s self-movement.

that will be sold so as to realize surplus value and thus reproduce capital on an expanded scale [*ampliamente*].

In short, since the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century the expansion of capital cannot occur without provoking an irruption of productive forces — human capacities and needs — which periodically escape its control and overflow its limits, threatening to abolish or defeat it. Capital then struggles against these living, creative energies, trying to contain them. They must be transmuted into deadly, destructive forces that deny, dull, diminish, vampirize, and impoverish the faculties and needs of the human species. Nevertheless, capital is nothing other than these same capacities and needs (the productive forces themselves) which turn accidentally against themselves, through a mechanism (dead labor, capital) that reproduces cumulatively as if it were a self-moving, automatic, and spontaneous power, as irresistible as natural law. This is the background of the class struggle.⁴

3. CREATION INTO DESTRUCTION: REACTIONARY NETWORKS

Everything indicates that the Internet today has at last been converted from a creative into a destructive force. Over the last ten years, it has become increasingly clear that the social content generated by the Internet is really subsumed under capital.

The free, universalist internet of unbridled piracy, open fora, freeware communities, etc., was brutally depopulated and abandoned during this period. Its former participants were then sucked into the windmill *en masse* by privately-owned “social media” or “social networks,” which render

⁴ See *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* by Deleuze & Guattari, as well as the concept of class composition, developed by *autonomia operaia* between 1960 and 1970, and the book *Signs, Machines, and Subjectivities*, by Maurizio Lazzarato. Marx's *Grundrisse*, as well as Marx's *Draft of an Article on Friedrich List's book*: «Industry can be regarded as a great workshop in which man first takes possession of his own forces and the forces of nature, objectifies himself and creates for himself the conditions for a human existence. When industry is regarded in this way, one *abstracts* from the circumstances in which it operates today, and in which it exists *as industry*; one's standpoint is not from within the industrial epoch, but *above* it; industry is regarded not by what it is for *man* today, but by what present-day man is for *human history*, what he is historically; it is not its present-day existence (not *industry* as such) that is recognized, but rather the power which industry has without knowing or willing it and which *destroys* it and creates the basis for a human existence... This assessment of industry is then at the same time the recognition that the hour has come for it to be done away with, or for the abolition of the material and social conditions in which mankind has had to develop its abilities as a slave. For as soon as industry is no longer regarded as a huckstering interest, but as the development of man, man, instead of huckstering interest, is made the principle and' what in industry could develop only in contradiction with industry itself is given the basis which is in harmony with that which is to be developed... The *Saint-Simon* school has given us an instructive example of what it leads to if the *productive force* that industry creates unconsciously and against its will is put to the credit of present-day industry and the two are confused: *industry* and the *forces* which industry brings into being unconsciously and without its will, but which will only become human forces, man's power, when industry is abolished. [...] The forces of nature and the social forces which industry brings into being (conjures up), stand in the same relation to it as the proletariat. Today they are still the slaves of the bourgeois, and in them he sees nothing but the instruments (the bearers) of his dirty (selfish) lust for profit; tomorrow they will break their chains and reveal themselves as the bearers of human development which will blow him sky-high together with his industry, which assumes the dirty outer shell — which he regards as its essence — only until the human kernel has gained sufficient strength to burst this shell and appear in its own shape. Tomorrow they will burst the chains by which the bourgeois separates them from man and so distorts (transforms) them from a real social bond into fetters of society.» (Marx, “Draft of an Article on Friedrich List's Book *Das Nationale System der Politischen Ökonomie*,” March 1845)

collectively-produced content scarce by processing it with algorithms and restricting it to private, familial, and even neo-feudal virtual spaces (so-called “bubbles”).

All signs point toward ensnarement in a Pavlovian trap.⁵ In exchange for addictive stimuli responses, occupying all of its users’ free time, it exposes them to a constant stream of advertisement while at the same time imposing a fee (by which some of the content thus created becomes momentarily accessible to wider feudal domains). One hypothesis is that this ensnarement has become so total a critical mass has been reached, so that after a certain point anyone outside the Pavlovian trap is incommunicado, excluded from social life and even the labor market, thus forcing even the most recalcitrant to accept capture.

“Social networks” are at root networks of *reactions*. They are thus deeply *reactionary* in their essential structure. Indeed, this is so much the case that any content falling under their purview is immediately voided of its universalistic, rational aspect. Every aspect which might contribute humanity, compulsively dragged and converted into yet another of the endless personal disposable rubbishes that compete for an interminable “now” that an infantilized, or even animalized mass responds in Pavlovian fashion [*pavlovianamente*] with emotional reactions. Under these conditions, memory, reason, and history are unfeasible and no longer exist, and everything is reduced to the last emotional polarization on this or that “urgent” fashion issue. In social networks there is nothing left of the richness of human expressions; the only permissible expression is the uninterrupted advertisement of oneself, of products or enterprises.

In the period immediately preceding this catastrophe, the struggle for free and open content on the Internet even seemed incredibly victorious, with almost all the great innovations of the internet appearing to go against the companies.⁶ As we have seen, unlike conditions of private property, the internet was initially composed of circumstances in which the freedom of each individual was not based on competition. Therefore it did not deprive others of their freedom, but on the contrary potentiated the freedom and autonomy (i.e., capacities and needs) of all throughout the human species. For example, with each person contributing his or her knowledge, information, etc., to a certain subject, alongside the knowledge of everyone else in the world similarly interested, a much richer and deeper knowledge would be generated — one that was universally accessible, or at least accessible to anyone in the world with access to the internet. This was a basic feature of the internet since its inception in the 1990s.

Around 2006–2010, however, this began to be termed “the sharing economy” or “collaborative economy.” Strangely, from then on, these terms have seemingly appeared everywhere, applied to businesses, governments, advertisements for any product, and even self-help books. Most critics were wary, but many naïve individuals were seduced by the thought that the “anarcho-communist model” of the internet had proved itself so superior that businesses and governments were now adhering to it. This would then change the world in a more cooperative (even postcapitalist) direction, contrary to competition.

⁵ This behavioral manipulation owes much to an academic field of study, part of the so called cognitive psychology, that exists since the 1980s called “attention management” or “attention economy,” whose objective is to manipulate the perception and the cognition of the population, at the service of capital accumulation. “Social networks” have been designed by companies using this “science,” so that users are addicted to directing their attention to them, leaving everything else out of focus.

⁶ E.g., Linux, Apache, PHP, MySQL, Python, wiki, etc.

Suddenly, many noticed — albeit too late — that these fashionable “collaborative economies” being used *en masse* were in reality private enterprises: YouTube, Google, Facebook, Twitter, etc.

What had happened was that numerous enterprises, emitting visionary or utopian auras (virtually all utilized freeware and open source technologies)⁷ that concealed their capitalist nature, were able to induce Internet users to generate content for their private ventures. Users did not realize they were no longer contributing to the free community of the internet, a community which had been emptied and replaced by companies whose fixed capital algorithmically determines the conditions through which users meet and access the rest of the web.

Henceforth, captured in this Pavlovian trap, voluntary contributions no longer potentiate one’s own autonomy or that of others, but on the contrary only serves to accumulate more capital. This in turn breeds more dependence, more scarcity, and more subjection to the propertied class.

And so capital finally found the formula to convert the Internet into destructive force, after decades of effort. Destructive because it denies the needs of the human species while dulling and impoverishing its faculties, which are vampirized by dead labor or capital.

From that point on, with the Internet at last domesticated, the rigid barrier that formerly held between offline and online has been more or less suspended. The “real” and the “virtual” become increasingly indistinguishable.

4. PACKAGED WITHIN THE COMMODITY-FORM

One of the most basic features of computing is the exact copy of information at almost zero cost.⁹ Even before the Internet, ever since the emergence of digital computers (especially PCs),

⁷ This text, written at that time, describes what was happening. See also: “Fetishism of Digital Commodities and Hidden exploitation: The Cases of Amazon and Apple.”

⁸ The freeware and open source community, which was made voluntarily by hackers against private ownership of software, and against corporate and state domination, was largely emptied and the function previously filled by them was overwhelmingly replaced by “startup” enterprises. In them an immense mass of young people (“nerds”) is financed directly by the world capital to create “innovations,” developing more and more ways to profit and “monetize” everything that until then had not been able to be submitted to private property.

⁹ Signals transmitted in the old analog telecommunications networks degraded with every retransmission and copy, adding to the signal received the accumulated noise along the whole route from initial point to the end. On the contrary, the signal transmitted in digital networks is regenerated in its exact original form at each copy and retransmission, since what is transmitted is no longer a continuously variable signal (i.e., analog), but a binary signal (i.e., digital: “zeroes and ones”). Thus, it is necessary to detect in the received signal only those two discrete levels to regenerate it and to copy it. This allows to discard the noise between the two levels (or measure it, correct it by calculations or, if the signal-to-noise ratio is too low, discard the signal and request a retransmission, all automatically), while in the analog era, it was necessary to detect the entire waveform of the levels in continuous variation, which made it impossible to distinguish the original signal from the noise added by the transmission medium (hence, in the analog era, the original noise-free signal was necessarily the private property of the transmitter in front of the receivers, whereas in the digital age this physical basis for private ownership of information was intrinsically overcome, since everyone may have the exact copy of the original). In addition, unlike the old analog transmission, once a digital transmission network has been established, the energy consumption needed to regenerate (retrieve the original binary signal, correct errors, etc.) and retransmit the digital signal on all physical links (submarines cables, optical fibers, satellites, electric cables, microwave radios) is always the same, whether or not network users are transmitting information to each other. Because links always have their band occupied by “zeroes and ones” symbols due to the layer 1 and layer 2 (physical and link layer) control protocols of the OSI model (an exception is some microwave radio systems, which use a dynamic bandwidth width scheme, but also not due to the transmission of more or less

there was already an extensive network of users around the world who transmitted free or pirated programs, files, books, images, codes, etc., on magnetic tapes or diskettes. The world wide web is nothing other than this data-copying network become automatic and instantaneous via telecommunication repeater stations, which span the entire globe with fiber optics, cables, and radio frequencies.

The copying and dissemination of information thus becomes a universal community where data can be made available by anyone for everyone and vice versa. Moreover, this occurs almost in real time. It can include everything from live reporting on events to reserves of knowledge, both practical (how to fix things or even construct them) and theoretical. A multiplicity of reports equally accessible to all who sought them, combined with a variety of views on any given topic, allowed individuals to form fairly objective ideas about events and topics that affected their life.

Digital transmissions of information fundamentally ignore scarcity, which forms the basis of private property, because such transmissions are themselves already copies. Not by chance, this word “copy” originated from the Latin *copia* – as in copiousness, meaning “abundance, ample supply, profusion, plenty” (from *co-* “together, with, in common” + *ops* [genitive *opis*] “power, wealth, ability, resources”).

Yet this is absolutely intolerable in a society founded upon constant buying and selling, which requires everyone to strive tirelessly for the continued imposition of scarcity – i.e., privation – as the absolute condition for survival within generalized competition.

Capital desperately needed to create an artificial layer or interface to interrupt the universal physical network of free copies and make information scarce or otherwise difficult to access. It was necessary to inject into the Internet a deafening and constant noise, an entropic wall against which information stands out as something separate, rare, private, and thus valuable/salable. After all, only that which can be monopolized can have a price, becoming private property, a commodity, with the power to impose payment (and consequently labor) as a condition for its access, under the protection and legal guarantee of the police, the courts, the state.

Generalized scarcity of information was achieved, in the final analysis, due to the depopulation and emptying of the Internet led by the “social networks” described above. The deserted internet is a no man’s land, a desert occupied by billions of fake websites endlessly pumped out by algorithms and robots on an almost industrial scale. Such websites only exist to display advertisements, fraudulent and incomplete information, misleading links, scams, traps to extort money from Internet users, steal information to be sold, use their processors for hidden purposes, install malware, viruses.

From then on, every Internet user, immersed in the algorithmically-forged bubbles of social networks, is perpetually subjected to comprehensive scarcity, thrown into a vast quagmire of frenzied entropy, a numbing avalanche of low-quality, useless, manipulative, or false information. In these bubbles, each user himself becomes a robotic noise injector, repeater, and diffuser of information for all the others, regardless of his will. Under such circumstances, it finally becomes possible to demand payment for information (practical and theoretical knowledge, art, programs,

information by the users, but in function of the signal-to-noise ratio in the propagation medium of the signal, the Earth’s atmosphere, which varies continuously). The variation of power consumption occurs only in information processing, which is concentrated predominantly in the user’s own computer (layers 4, 5, and 6 of the OSI model) and in the routers (layer 3 of the OSI model), but even this variation is insignificant.

etc.) which promises to stand out from the diarrheal flood of artificial noise surrounding each Internet user.

Henceforth, the real subsumption of society to capital reaches depths previously thought unreachable. Social networks have managed to further subsume human subjectivity to the capital-form. Production for the sake of production (abstract labor), in other words, or production as an blind end in itself, has become a subjective imperative (in the “dialectic of recognition,” to use the Hegelian parlance). Social networks are designed down to the last detail by companies so that participants only “exist” for each other (and consequently, for themselves) if they produce content for sake of producing, frantically, in a ever-accelerating perpetual present. They become addicted to gazing at the screen nonstop, waiting for new opportunities to react and generate more content, more noise. It is a form of production fitted to private property in advance, since it reduces participants (who in a prior internet age as a rule used pseudonyms) to “real,” identifiable persons certified by private property (that is, by the State and the police) and classified according to bio-socio-psychometric [*bio-sócio-psicométricos*] profiles subjected to the commodity form for sale and profit.

5. PERSONALIZATION, OVERSIGHT, AND MASS TROLLIFERATION

As we said, in an earlier incarnation of the internet, use of pseudonyms was the rule. One effect of this rule was that things were never sought, debated, created, developed, or even enjoyed primarily under the personal, familial, feudal aspect that predominates today. Pseudonymous users communicated with each other because of their shared human interests, curiosities, and passions, not on account of some empty “identity” to be ceaselessly affirmed in the perpetual presence of an overwhelming avalanche of information.

In the Internet past, the universal and singular (but not personal) condition for each Internet user carried with it a perception of time and space that was simultaneously world-historical. Whenever some pseudonymous user published something on the internet, there was a perception it would be accessible to all humanity and forever available to future generations. The passions by which they related to one another thereby expressed themselves as a passion for humanity and the future of the species, contributing elaborate masterpieces never to be eroded by time or hemmed in by boundaries in space. Thousands of admirable websites existed which are now either abandoned or for the most part missing.

Exactly the opposite prevails today, at a time when everyone they already knows what they contribute only holds true for the here and now, for family, “friends,” and “friends of friends” to react to. Or else it will “go viral” among the amorphous mass, disappearing from public view and rejected as immediately obsolete. This implies that every user has the weary perception, before he even publishes something, that it is useless or not worth it to try to elaborate on anything beyond that “now”-time or feudal space of “friends and family” in the stultifying pursuit to “go viral.”

Moreover, most free Internet activities (above all piracy) were regulated by the state in “offline” life. Hence the use of pseudonyms was a vital necessity, since the methods used by companies and the State to identify users were still primitive when they were used at all. Of course there were also “trolls” — people who channeled their offline frustrations into destructive online behavior,

causing confusion in the forums, etc. — but they were no real threat because people were not crazy enough to expose themselves on the internet with their own name, photo, and address.

Today it is just the contrary. Now almost everyone has agreed to be exposed to the trolls, psychopaths, mafias, police, bosses, and enterprises. Indeed, people are forced to expose themselves if they do not want to be rejected from social life. At the very least, they live in a state of constant fear of seeing their image destroyed (and in the society of the spectacle, that's all there is). Here this occurs in a highly personalistic and accelerated fashion, without time to reflect, which only allows for emotional reactions and obliges everyone thus frustrated to become a troll as well.¹⁰

6. SUBSUMPTION OF THE GEARS THAT MAKE UP THE MIND: MEMORY, THOUGHT, VOLITION, APPETITE

Not only are the social relations of each person's knowledge, abilities, and affections with others being increasingly subsumed to capital, but the relationship of each person to the ideas and capacities within themselves are being subsumed. By externalizing knowledge, faculties, and feelings in social networks, the data become, in a short time, uninteresting, obsolete and disposable. There is no time or space for deep development of any ideas, knowledge, or capacity for oneself, because there is no longer time or space in which they can be expressed to be enjoyed and confirmed (or not) as an objective, social human power.

Socrates criticized writing because it externalizes human memory into objects, which would make people unable to remember, becoming increasingly forgetful and less and less autonomous. Perhaps he was exaggerating, but it is an accurate description of what we are seeing today: memory of each one is increasingly outsourced abandoned, to be appropriated by companies, which makes it scarce, opaque and difficult to access the original form in which it was outsourced, so that it becomes a commodity when it is returned facilitated, "chewed" by algorithms, manipulated and formatted to create dependence on the enterprises. It is a *modus operandi* diametrically opposed to that of the previous free internet community, whose wealth consisted solely in increasing the autonomy, the abilities of those who participated in it, who became more powerful with the stories and memories that each one brought.

This algorithmic operationalization of the mind for private property can be seen in the current man-machine interfaces. They become increasingly bestializing, devoid of all the wide configuration and modification possibilities they had previously (even the simplest software of the 1990s looked like complex spacecraft panels). The current interfaces (from operating systems, applications, programs, to machines and even entire industries) are usually just big colorful kindergarten-style buttons with all the various possibilities locked, inaccessible or hidden.

Companies now sell a supposed maximum facilitation that saves the maximum amount of time (which is "money," the abstract time of capital), and this is made possible by algorithms that invisibly monitor the actions, the life of each person, and analyze their bio-socio-psychometric profile to present to them, at the human-machine interface, the free-choice objects she is supposedly al-

¹⁰ The book *A Theory of the Drone* by Grégoire Chamayou, explores the implications of systems of total vigilance, its relation with the repression and the war.

ready want to choose.¹¹ As we saw earlier in chapter 4, this “facilitation” was only possible due to the flood of artificially injected noise on the Internet. And so, programs like torrent, where movies, programs, and music were downloaded for free have been emptied, and private properties specialized in streaming whose algorithms “facilitate all” (as long as you pay), such as Netflix and Spotify, took their place overwhelmingly.

7. LABORIZATION OF EXISTENCE

A specific human-machine interface almost brings to the absolute the power of capitalist class over human existence. With the popularization of smartphones, miniaturized computers connected to the internet, with telephone and various sensors (cameras, camcorders, microphones, geolocation, accelerometers, gyroscopes, proximity, magnetometers, lux meter, thermometers, etc.) that are ubiquitous and made compulsory for those who do not want to be excluded from social contact, each person is monitored in virtually every aspect of their lives 24 hours a day by private property algorithms.

The data collected by companies allows them to implement, through the same smartphones, a subsumption of society to capital that covers the smallest details of daily life. The distinction between work and consumption disappears more and more, with everything becoming in one way or another some form of labor, a “value addition”. Even unconsciously, by the development and application of gamification techniques, that is, designing the conditions of any and all activities to make it look like a game, pavlovly manipulating the user to perform unpaid tasks under the command of the owner of these conditions capitalist class.

With a millenarianist and utopian ideology, companies of the “collaborative economy” like Uber announce to offer the Midas touch that transforms objects of consumption of proletarians (home, car, tools, furniture, appliances, toys, etc., which are only costs – are now consumed, that is, wear out every day, every use), as well as their body and mind. They announce the transubstantiation of the proletarians into capitalists, finally made free from wage labor and owners of their own time.¹²

In fact, with all this post-industrial futurist rhetoric, capital merely resurrected, with high technology, the most archaic form of subsumption of labor to industrial capital: the “putting-out system”, including even the gloomy figure of the “middleman”. The difference is that now, through its “frictionless” algorithms that analyze and compare the performance of everyone with each and each with everyone, to the extent that it involves the entire planet, the owner class more and more impose on the proletarians a continually optimized global competition for offering the maximum amount and intensity of work in exchange for the minimum wage. The only thing that separates this maximum from being absolute is the time of feeding and sleep (although often interrupted by bosses, thanks to smartphones). Eating and sleeping are still inescapable needs of

¹¹ Interesting article on this: Style Is an Algorithm <https://www.racked.com/2018/4/17/17219166/fashion-style-algorithm-amazon-echo-look>

¹² On this, *Dossiê: Luta nos aplicativos* (Passapalavra) <http://passapalavra.info/2016/11/110470>. Also, Adam Greenfield’s book *Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday Life*, it sheds light on the implications for everyday life of a range of technologies, such as smartphone, internet of things, augmented reality, digital fabrication, cryptocurrency, blockchain, automation, machine learning and artificial intelligence.

proletarians around the world. They are the last frontier of exploitation, unacceptable, intolerable, inconceivable for the system of private property.¹³

In addition, the production, transportation and distribution of all goods became inseparable from the internet. In supply chains, the increase or decrease in demand for goods commands directly (without human, with algorithms), through the transmission of information through the internet, the automatic activation of the various phases of production, assembly, stock and flow (maritime, road, rail, air) of goods throughout the world. Often the transmitted signals directly drive the machines, robots, conveyor belts, container handling to and from ships, and the hiring and mobilization of workers scattered and fragmented all over the planet, all of which are connected by these logistic chains, private property of mighty and invisible “middlemen”.¹⁴

Proletarians around the world have never been so close, but they are increasingly placed in a situation where they do not directly see that they are working for capital, for bosses, for the owner class. Everything makes them seem to work immediately for themselves and against the other competing proletarians (the renaissance of provincialism, racism, xenophobia, nationalism, left and right identitarianism, separatism, militarism, fascism ... which for many is an unfathomable mystery is nothing more than a banal expression of the extreme intensity of competition for survival among workers, competition for the “merit” of exclusive submission to “their” owning classes). They think they are only making money in return for satisfying the automatic demands of the world market that are signaled in the man-machine interfaces that surround them.¹⁵¹⁶

¹³ To understand how all these “novelties” only reiterate and intensify tendencies of capitalist society that have appeared since the defeat of the proletarian struggles of 1968 and the world crisis of profitability that lasts from the years 1970 until today, see this text of 1988, which remains incredibly current: *The Luster of Capital*, by Alliez and Michel Feher.

On sleep, see Jonathan Crary’s book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*.

¹⁴ See *Logistics and the factory without walls*, by Brian Ashton. <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/logistics-and-factory-without-walls>

¹⁵ This submission to the owner class which has the appearance of making workers small capitalists, entrepreneurs, human capital, petty-bourgeois, also leads to an illusory struggle on the part of the workers, a kind of Proudhonism. This illusion presupposes that, in order for their interests to be achieved, it is necessary to put an end to the monopolies of big corporations and to establish a society of small producers (self-management) that, with application softwares, exchange commodities “fairly” with each other, establishing the “fair value” which remunerates each one. However, this is illusory because the exchange of commodities is a social relation that, regardless of the will and good intentions, implies competition (for “customers” buy their goods instead of others, competition for buy cheap and sell expensive, etc.). By definition, competition is always competition for monopoly, for mutually exclusive ownership: private property. Competition and monopoly are mere adjectives of private property, which presuppose deprivation of property, i.e. proletarianization, and hence wage labor, accumulation of capital, capitalist class, state ... As for “value”, it is also a social relation that is independent of the will or good intentions: value is the command that a private property, through competition, obtains over the labor of others, by making the buyers have to work to the maximum to buy from it (i.e., to its commodity becomes equivalent to the maximum abstract labor of society in exchange for the minimum labor in it), and to impose that the workers agree to work at their maximum in exchange for the minimum to try to win the competition. Thus, this illusion must always be openly opposed in the struggles of the workers.

¹⁶ In the book *Platform Capitalism* (by Nick Srnicek) this new configuration of capitalist society is called “platform capitalism.” According to him, platforms are characterized by the extraction of data from society as raw material to profit. It classifies five different types of platform: «[...] the important element is that the capitalist class owns the platform, not necessarily that it produces a physical product. The first type is that of *advertising platforms* (e.g. Google, Facebook), which extract information on users, undertake a labour of analysis, and then use the products of that pro-

8. TRANSFUSION OF DESTRUCTIVE FORCES INTO THE PORES OF THE PHYSICAL WORLD. THE INLAYING OF PRIVATE PROPERTY IN THE “NATURE OF THINGS”: THE SUPREME UTOPIA OF CAPITAL (FORTUNATELY STILL UNREALIZABLE).

The domination of capital, first and foremost, is the artificial inlaying of scarcity in the objective nature. It is nature transformed by the alienated labor of human beings into a power separate from them, private property. The population becomes deprived of its material conditions of existence, and consequently everyone, democratically, is forced to buy, and for this, forced to sell commodities voluntarily, if one wants to survive.

In pre-capitalist societies, in servitude and in slavery, domination was personal, directly from men over other men, the personal will of some is imposed directly on others, denying it. In contrast, the most basic aspect of capitalist society is that it transforms the domination and exploitation of man by man into something that is voluntary, a manifestation of one’s free will. This is because it occurs in an objective coercive condition – deprivation of property – which imposes objectively – that is, in a “neutral” (“democratic,” “impersonal,” “reasonable,” “fair,” “natural”) way – the need to compete for submission to private property, to the capitalist class, in order to receive a wage and survive.

Since each proletarian, because he is deprived of means of production, has nothing to sell, he, if he wants to survive (socially and physically), has only the option of voluntarily selling himself, his vital capacities, in the labor market, to the owners of the means of production (the capitalist class). He has free will, as he “may” choose to starve or become a beggar rather than sell himself. Purchased by the capitalists, this commodity is consumed: the proletarian is placed to work and transform nature increasing the objective force that confronts him as a hostile power, private property. The more he works, the more deprived of property he becomes, the more powerful private property becomes, and the more it transfers human capabilities to it (fixed capital: machinery, automation; knowledge, and know-how made intellectual private property, etc.), actively creating what makes it increasingly disposable, deprived of property, proletarian.

In short, in capitalist society, domination presents itself as an imperative of objective reality, a “force of nature” (“second nature”) that was created by human labor. Scarcity – deprivation of property, private property – reproduces itself as an independent power that commands all beings (human and nonhuman), including the person of the capitalist (and also the states) who, if they fail in the competition for accumulating capital, go bankrupt, and are automatically replaced by

cess to sell ad space. The second type is that of *cloud platforms* (e.g. AWS, Salesforce), which own the hardware and software of digital-dependent businesses and are renting them out as needed. The third type is that of *industrial platforms* (e.g. GE, Siemens), which build the hardware and software necessary to transform traditional manufacturing into internet-connected processes that lower the costs of production and transform goods into services. The fourth type is that of *product platforms* (e.g. Rolls Royce, Spotify), which generate revenue by using other platforms to transform a traditional good into a service and by collecting rent or subscription fees on them. Finally, the fifth type is that of *lean platforms* (e.g. Uber, Airbnb), which attempt to reduce their ownership of assets to a minimum and to profit by reducing costs as much as possible. These analytical divisions can, and often do, run together within any one firm. Amazon, for example, is often seen as an e-commerce company, yet it rapidly broadened out into a logistics company. Today it is spreading into the on-demand market with a Home Services program in partnership with TaskRabbit, while the infamous Mechanical Turk (AMT) was in many ways a pioneer for the gig economy and, perhaps most importantly, is developing Amazon Web Services as a cloud-based service. Amazon therefore spans nearly all of the above categories.»

more “efficient” ones (that is why we use the word “capital”, for in fact it commands the society of the commodity according to an autonomous, automatic, but opaque logic, while capitalists are only agents, personifications of the power of capital, obliged to apply the dictates of its accumulation over human beings under penalty of falling into the hell becoming proletarians).

But to this day capitalist society has been impossible without a central power, which, with police and prisons, enforces respect for private property by violence, validates centrally the equivalence of means of exchange and payment (money, credit), protects and guarantees the contracts between proprietors, and represses the struggle of the proletarians against the deprivation of their living conditions (a struggle which, by definition, disrespects the private property of these conditions). Thus capitalist society has a very concentrated and visible Achilles heel, which, if attacked, instantly disarms all the gears of the private property system. Of course, the existence of this vulnerable point, the State, causes great concern to the owner class.

To this day, the only way for the owner class to justify and legitimize the state – which is simply a territorial enterprise, which, like all capital, is a dictatorship for the imposition of wage labor, subject to the same imperatives of capital accumulation like any other enterprise – was to present it in the imagination as neutral, above classes and capital. That is, “Rule of Law”, representation of subjects (the citizen) whose “autonomy” coincides with their voluntary subjection to it, and in which the citizen elects his own boss (who competes to be freely chosen at the polls), representation of the “general will of the people”. In other words: democratic ideology (or “socialist” ideology, as in countries with nationalized capital such as the USSR and Cuba).

However, this purely imaginary legitimation is never fully convincing, and many capitalists prefer to preach that the state is totally separate and alien to private property, whereas in reality, as we have seen, it has always been in fact the supreme and indispensable institution that guarantees its existence. It is simply impossible for private property to exist without police, courts, armed forces and prisons. Until today.

Blockchain technology (the so-called smart contract) is now heavily financed with the explicit goal of making private property something that no longer depends on absolutely any “central power”, becoming embedded in the automatic and decentralized behavior of things, and therefore in human relations mediated by these things.

Its purpose is to make each thing spontaneously verify, homologate and validate the presupposed condition of deprivation of property. This means instantly to authenticate the artificial scarcity of everything by the quantitative equivalence imposed by private property: the homologation of limitation of use by payment, limitation of copy by copy licenses, authentication of the command by the execution of the work, instant enforcement of respect for patents and intellectual property in all things, and even laws with cases in that it applies, etc.

With this, each object will tend to cease to be a “product” – which is bought at once, and whose use, after being bought, is independent of the company and the market – to become a “service” – in which a subscription or a license is paid continuously for its use, like a rent. This makes its short-term use seemingly much cheaper and more accessible to proletarians, but will mean that the owner class will have the power to impose directly on any and every use the dictate of continuous scarcity, “monetizing” even the most ordinary gestures (especially with the popularization of wearable technology, e.g. smart clothes, augmented reality, transhuman prostheses, biomedical sensors, etc.), such as dressing, walking, going to the bathroom, operate the flush, yawning, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, even peristalsis, blood circulation, brain synapses ... Every gesture, and even the functioning of the human organism, will incarnate the

coercion to labor. It will be need, even more so than today, to work desperately to get money to pay for simply existing.

It is a scenario where the “internet of things” will automatically take on the role of police-penal wedge that separates needs from capacities, imposing the submission to private property of the means of life and of production in absolutely all aspects of human existence.

The utopia of private property, as we have seen, has always been to convert the totality of circumstances in which human beings exist in ‘natural’, ‘objective’, ‘automatic’ and ‘voluntary’ imperatives of submission to the dictates of capital accumulation, to the maximum work. The difference this time is that with these two technologies, blockchain and internet of things, the police will be automatic, it will be in the “nature of things”. The prison could be the sofa in your house or the “smart home” itself, which suddenly locks up the “human capital”; or it may be all things (every “service” in the smart home and smart city) that suddenly stop working for him, isolating him from the society that only exists connected to them. And the “crime” judgment, a decentralized algorithm that returns to the “criminal” – who does not even need to be informed that he has been charged, tried and convicted (as is already the case today with the “bans” in social networks and “collaborative economy” companies) – the automatic execution of the penalty. “De jure” and “de facto” become indistinguishable. The ideology of the “rule of law” becomes totally unnecessary to legitimize the police-penal wedge, which becomes the “neutral” objectivity of the conditions where each atomized individual is “voluntarily forced” to “choose freely”.¹⁷

Fortunately, all this is still just the dream of capital. And there is no doubt that the slightest attempt to implement it in a society which is a blind mechanism whose behavior the capitalists and their technocrats are inherently the least able to understand (for their praxis – and therefore their thought – is totally clouded by commodity fetishism), will certainly lead to uncontrollable effects that threaten to disrupt and undermine the overall functioning of capital itself. (For example, look at what happened recently with the little experience of the cryptocurrency Bitcoin – from which the very idea of blockchain originated – which was created on the basis of the unshakable fetishist faith in the invisible hand acting through auto-moving technology, dead labor).

It is much more likely that, in the end, blockchain technology will be used primarily by states to keep their records instantly up-to-date and to make surveillance, judgment, punishment and policing schemes automatically unified and immediate to the utmost. Or else, what in fact makes no difference, by enterprises that in the division of labor will play the unifying role (“interoperability”) necessary for the continuity of capitalist society (which, without it, collapses torn by competition, the war of all against all that moves it), charging a bill for access to the blockchain that is its private property (e.g. blockchain implementations such as Ethereum are thus). It is a pri-

¹⁷ Felix Guattari, Eric Alliez and Maurizio Lazzarato use the concepts of *social subjection* and *machinic enslavement* to describe this modification of domination. According to this hypothesis, the trend in recent decades is that capitalist society ceases to legitimize itself by an affirmation of the freedom of the subject that voluntarily crosses several compartments of capitalist society to subject himself to them (social subjection). This freedom for subjectivity to cross compartments (such as working time and rest time, imprisonment and freedom, school and time outside of school) culminated in autonomy as a voluntary citizen subjection to the rule of law, and hence the legitimacy of capitalist society through democratic rights and freedoms, the welfare state, and so on, considered as free and external to the machinic domination of capital. After the 1980s, capitalist society tend to transmute itself overthrowing all of these compartments in which the subjectivity that went through them was presented as free from domination, to present itself immediately as machinic enslavement, which is exactly what we described in this chapter on the supreme utopia of capital.

vate property that will be the indispensable unifying infrastructure for all transactions and things produced in capitalist society. In practice, this bill will be the same as a taxation, just as these enterprises will be the same as a state. The latter will only cease to adorn itself with the democratic ideological façade (“republic”, “constitutional monarchy”, “socialism”) to become directly an absolutist corporate monarchy (in fact, as it always was, in one way or another: dictatorship of capital).

As for artificial intelligence, and the illusions about it, unemployment and universal basic income, we will not speak here, because we have already addressed it previously in the article: Artificial intelligence, unemployment and universal basic income: another panacea of the owner class.

9. CONCLUSION: FORGET HOPE

As we saw earlier, the self-constitution of the proletariat as an autonomous class against capital – the class struggle – can never take place on an empty or funereal background that would be confronted by the free will of the hopeful exploited, who would break the isolation through a community of suffering, pain and guilt.

In concrete reality, it is exactly the opposite: human capacities and needs – the productive forces – are both ends in themselves and the means of the struggle of the proletariat against capital, and only depends on them the rupture of isolation and atomization, the fraternization, their irruption as a world-historical class, as well as their victory or defeat. As long as the other is found in practice as a cause of incapacity, denial of desires and necessities, impediment to survival in the competition of all against all for submission to the private property of the means of life, there is no possibility of breaking atomization and isolation. And attempts to break it by “willpower,” “correct ideas,” or activism only reproduce the same circumstance, at the most creating an even more unbearable moralistic competition, introducing at an even more extreme level in human subjectivity the “doing for sake of doing”, “production for sake of production”, ie the real subsumption to capital.

To freedom, which consists in the practical affirmation of the productive forces of the human species, capital opposes the fictitious freedom of free will or free choice. This imaginary freedom is the way in which it submits and adapts human subjectivity to the separation of capacities from needs, which are violently separated by the deprivation of their means (private property). This pseudo-freedom serves to turn them against themselves, converting them from productive forces into destructive forces, accumulation of dead labor, active servants of the imperative to choose among the innumerable options of submission and exploitation that capital presents in order to reproduce itself indefinitely.

Human faculties and needs are created, produced, and developed in the material conditions of existence that they are transforming, that is, in praxis. In this, they produce themselves, bringing out in this transformation untold faculties, potentialities, desires and needs, the discovery of unimaginable and impossible potentials under the previous conditions. There is no free choice. Choosing, by definition, is to pick out from among the things already known, already existing – the components of the status quo itself. In genuine freedom, on the contrary, nothing is chosen, none possible is selected, but rather, by transforming the conditions in their totality, it emerges what was always seen as rigorously impossible.

This implies that it makes no sense to try to make communist theory to compete with others to be chosen by the exploited, popularized, “go viral”. This is because, as we have seen, it is not from the free choice of the proletarians that arises and develops their struggle, their freedom, their autonomy, but rather from the materialistic increase of their capacities to act (to affirm their desires in practice, to satisfy their needs, etc. associating as class without borders against the dictatorship of capital), which are indistinguishable from the increase of their capacity to think autonomously. It is only as an expression of this that communist theory may be appropriate on its own terms, rather than being reduced to one more advertising in the society of the spectacle. In other words, it is from the communist praxis that the need arises to appropriate the present and past theories that have dealt precisely with this praxis. At the same time, theories are criticized, ridding them of the mistaken aspects of the past, to develop the theory of their concrete praxis, the knowledge of what is objectively necessary to do to destroy capitalist society and clear the way for the process of irruption of impossible go to the end.

This also implies that in the long periods of practical incapacity as today (profound defeat of the proletariat), the tiny minority that (thanks to existential accidents) takes part of communism develops theories whose only importance is to compose a radical analysis of capitalist society, the mutations of domination and exploitation, and especially of the situation of human needs and faculties. It is these latter that sooner or later burst forth as wild productive forces, since capital is bound to periodically invoke them to expand the material conditions of the intensification of accumulation, inadvertently unlocking these forces. But as every transformation of the conditions of existence creates the irruption of the impossible, of the unexpected and unpredictable, capital is forced to strive violently to domesticate these forces, to make them turn against themselves, otherwise they threaten to overflow it, abolish it, defeat it.

From the analysis of the contradictions and potentialities that unfold in capitalist society, the theory updates the communist program, which is nothing more than an outline of synthesis (always incomplete as long as capital and the state are not abolished) of the practical necessities objectively indispensable to overcome class society today (all strictly impossible, as we saw earlier).

For example, in the face of the fact that strikes, protests, and occupations have become domesticated and channeled by the various factions of the ruling class competing to direct wage labor, capital and the state (from the left and right bureaucrats to every the countless legal and illegal factions of national and international capital, including industrial, financial, and commercial capitalists), it is today an illusion to suppose that these tactics press for gradual capitalist reforms in favor of the workers (eg toward a “welfare state”). Against this illusion, the communists (or at least us) stand affirming the objective necessity to overcome these old tactics, substituting the strike with the tactic of free production that immediately abolishes the enterprise and employment by rapidly diffusing exponentially throughout the world, uncontainably. This rapidity in exponential diffusion is necessary to abolish the division of labor – i.e., the conditions of existence of the commodity, the state and capital – before capital gets the time to study and implement the reaction, and before the stocks run out, forcing us to trade – buy / sell – for products manufactured in the other part of the world from which we are still deprived (this would compel us to compete with it so that the products are traded advantageously, reproducing necessarily the exploitation and the class society). It is a question of suppressing the private property of universally interconnected conditions of existence (world supply chains, the means of production and distribution) with the aim of abolishing any system of rewards and punishments, liberating the

productive forces as expressions of human desires, needs and capacities, as ends in themselves – the world human community.

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