

Journeys in the Italian “social factory”: on women’s work, immaterial labor, and theoretical recovery

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Abstract

This paper is about the location of women in the “social factory.” Their demand to be included in the class struggle derives from their development of this concept in the early 1970s. I provide an interpretation of their critique of the concept “immaterial labor” as developed in Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* trilogy, by examining the “social factory” as a historical category. I frame the discussion around initial formulations in Panzieri and Tronti as a useful heuristic for later depictions of the factory-society relation. In its simplest terms, these differences derive from an understanding of how “society” becomes a “factory.” This is, above all, a work of recovery by taking a journey into the workerist “social factory” in order to theoretically demonstrate the divergent paths and concerns that emerged from this group of thinkers around place of unwaged reproductive labor in “autonomous Marxism.”

It took years for the other subjects – men – to acknowledge the meaning of women’s denunciation – that is the immense feminine labor that went into reproducing them – and then for their behavior to change. Many remained deaf anyway... –Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Rustic and Ethical

Introduction

Social reproduction, reproductive labor, and the persistence of unwaged work pose specific problems for political theorists attempting to understand labor after the imposition of these categories by the “new women’s movement” some forty years ago. These theoretical concerns developed around the “Wages for Housework” movement, itself an outgrowth from the laboratory of Italy’s “hot autumn” struggles [1968-73] (Dalla Costa and James 1972; Federici 1975; Hirschmann 2008; Weeks 2011). Yet, the theoretical framework in which this movement emerged is less well known, with implications for how its concepts have been understood. To a certain extent, discussion on these matters is presented in terms of *post-workerist* thought, or, more widely as “autonomist Marxism.” In this paper I use the broader “autonomist Marxism” label, despite its limitations (Billi 1999; Borio, Pozzi, Roggero 2002; Cleaver 2000).¹ Within this framework, a second difficulty occurs in that it presents a formidable conceptual apparatus that makes historical comparisons simultaneously more elusive while adding to their contextual importance (Moulier 1989; Nunes 2007).

Over the last two decades, the Italian Marxist-Feminist position, and “autonomous Marxism” found a receptive audience in North America. The success of Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* trilogy represents the most visible and comprehensive theoretical articulation of this framework (2000; 2004; 2009). Their characterization of labor in the contemporary era as “immaterial labor,” has been the point of sustained discussion and contention.² Conceptually, some have rejected the term because it resurrects a “ghost” that “does not exist” (Caffentzis 2007, 25). Others have noted that the adjective “immaterial” tends to lose work’s “relational features” and “materiality” (Lanoix 2013). In this paper, I place emphasis on this occurrence in the process of abstraction, in the common characteristics of “abstract labor,” and how difference is flattened with the result

¹ See Steve Wright’s informed discussion of the conceptual differences between “autonomous Marxism,” *operaismo*, and (post-)workerism, (post-) *operaismo* (2008, 113-4).

² This subject has been the focus of special issues in the journals *Diacritics* vol. 39, no. 4 (2009), *Ephemera* vol. 7, no. 1 (2007), and *Substance* vol. 36, no. 1 issue 112 (2007).

that discussion of “immaterial labor” tends to “fail to grasp the productive realities of most workers” (Dowling 2007; Dyer-Witthford 2005).³ Yet, the immaterial labor thesis has as one of its principle merits the inclusion of the unwaged and the realm of social reproduction in its definition. In this paper, I am concerned with two particular consequences for this position. First, it makes a historical claim that is based on the feminist position and “women’s work,” or the “place” that women occupy in the social division of labor (Dalla Costa and James 1972; Fedirici 1975; 2012; Fortunati 1981; 2007). For purposes here, it matters less that this place might no longer be conceived as the “home,” or that the “housewife” might not be the general representation of that identity, than the position that the social division of labor is important because it reflects the organization of production (Sehgal 2005; Mies 2014). Second, the immaterial labor thesis locates labor within a central concept of autonomist Marxism, the “social factory.” Through this concept, I forge a conversation around immaterial labor and unwaged reproductive labor (Henninger 2007).

The relationship between factory and society is central to the development of autonomist Marxist theory.⁴ Its continued use speaks to its importance as a framing mechanism for explaining capitalist social relations.⁵ Yet the concept, unlike its counterpart “class composition,” has been described as being “ever-vague” and that it has “generated confusion” (Dyer-Witthford 2005; Weeks 2011). One of my purposes in this paper is to shed light on this category in the hope of offering some conceptual clarification. More specifically, I approach the “social factory” as a historic category through the question of the reproduction of labor in its unwaged characteristic. Three findings result: 1) it is misleading to identify the feminists as an “early exponent” of the “social factory” given the centrality of the concept to workerism; 2) the Panzierian formulation is important to understanding subsequent conceptualization; 3) it follows that: the basis for the theoretical discussion of social reproduction returns to the question of method which finds its framework in the dispute between Raniero Panzieri and Mario

³ For an important discussion of Paolo Virno’s “real abstraction” and its applicability to “abstract knowledge” in the “general intellect” and “immaterial labor” see Serhat Kolođlugil’s “Digitizing Karl Marx” (2015).

⁴ The first phase of *Quaderni Rossi* (1961-4) developed these issues at the level of capitalist planning and the totality of capital as a “social factory.”

⁵ For an appreciation of the concept as it applies to social theory, see Gill and Pratt (2008).

Tronti. Antonio Negri noted several years ago, “the fundamental thesis on which all the theory of [workerism] is constructed is ... that of a successive abstraction of work that runs in parallel to its socialization” (2007, 19). The “social factory” is dependent on the expansion of capital to include the expansion of the work-form throughout society, and this process is fundamentally relational. The radical nature of the feminist position is located in this question of “successive abstraction” and its form. A particular question arises in examining a conceptual depiction of labor: to what extent, and with what substance, does the concept include the existing form of “women’s work,” encapsulated in the unpaid, “invisible threads” of social reproduction?⁶

A reconsideration of the “social factory” as a historical category helps clarify the difficulty with “immaterial labor” as it relates to unwaged reproductive labor. In the first section, I establish a framework for discussion by reconsidering between Raniero Panzieri and Mario Tronti and their respective theorization of the “social factory,” and the consequences that this had for their depiction of labor. I then utilize this difference of approach to interpret the feminist-workerist contribution to the “social factory” and their conceptualization of the working class composition. In the final section, I interpret the feminist critique of Hardt and Negri’s “immaterial labor” through the “social factory” with emphasis on the subtle unity of Dalla Costa and Fortunati in that criticism. I base this discussion in terms of the “social factory” as a matter of method that derives from Marx’s Introduction to the *Grundrisse* where he claims that, in a “rational abstraction” which “brings out and fixes the common element,” it must be ensured that their “essential difference is not forgotten.” Continuing, Marx warns that “[t]he whole profundity of those modern economists who demonstrate the eternity and harmoniousness of the existing social relations lies in this forgetting” (1973, 85). In the construction of this journey within the “social factory,” this warning serves as a useful parable to explain the feminist-Marxist position. I demonstrate that “new women’s movement” and its theoretical concerns have been making this very point for decades (Dalla Costa 2007;

⁶ In discussing the factory system and domestic industries, Marx writes: “Besides the factory worker.... Capital also sets another army in motion, by means of invisible threads”—domestic labor (1976, 591). Marx here is referring not to unwaged work, but to homework. David Staples uses the phrase, in the sense that I do here, when he writes: “[t]he supposed invisibility of “women workers” at home today is not about their invisibility to capitalists—it’s about their invisibility to those who are opposed, in one way or another, to capitalists” (2006, 5).

Federici 2012). This paper contributes to understanding the “social factory” and its diverse configurations in a broader sense to shed light on the possibilities of an open and fluid theoretical construction that was the promise of early “autonomous Marxist” theory—an act of recovery, a historical one (de Bloois, Jansen, and Korsten 2014, 164; Dyer-Witheford 2005; Turchetto 2001).

Conceptualizing the “social factory”: a historical approach

I begin the discussion by locating the concept “social factory” in its historical context. The justification for this is two-fold: its importance in explaining capital as a form of social organization and control is central to that constellation of thinkers that Harry Cleaver locates within the traditions of “autonomist Marxism” (2000, 18). Second, the particular historical moment in which the concept is theoretically appropriated and formulated has immediacy and significance for a substantive understanding of political subjectivity, or class composition. The feminist contribution in this history is pivotal, but, without locating *Lotta Femminista* or the writing of Mariarosa Dalla Costa in the laboratory of the Italian movement and the reading of Marx that informs their critique of capital, the inquiry risks underestimating their boldness, the mystification that they sought to expose, as well as the fight to find a voice within a constellation of political forces. In depicting this history, I establish the basis for the argument that current depiction of “immaterial labor” contributes to the continuity of this mystification by failing to incorporate the substance of reproductive labor and its importance for understanding the laboring subject.⁷

As a historical category, the “social factory” has been constructed as an attempt to explain the power of capital in constructing a particular social order. The concept’s origins can be identified broadly in the realm of “European Marxism,” with its concerns of totality and the cultural sphere and how production for capital established a form of social relations that had its equivalence in society. Sergio Bologna, an important figure in the history of workerism, analyzed the social factory in a historical reconstruction by

⁷ I am not concerned here with the analytical robustness of binary categories like productive and reproductive, material and immaterial, and intellectual and manual labor. For critical discussion of the “blurring” of these concepts in recent discussions of labor, see Federici (2012, 187-90) and Dalla Costa (2006, 225-7). Those who argue that these categories have been transcended, or are no longer theoretically useful, bear the responsibility in their justification for explaining the empirical continuity of unpaid labor, and its stubborn “persistence” (Gill and Pratt 2008, 9).

identifying elements of continuity from Antonio Gramsci's "Americanism and Fordism," and the "fixation of bio-physical characteristics" of what he described as the "mental revolution" of the Taylorist regime, to Mario Tronti's reduction of the factory – society relationship into one form, the "social factory" (1974, 6; 2000, 275-299). In a well-known formulation, Tronti writes: "At the highest level of capitalist development, social relations become a *moment* of the relations of production, the entire society becomes an *articulation* of production ... and the factory extends its exclusive dominion on all of society" (1962, 20). In this manner the basis for hegemony and cultural production is absorbed into the "factory." Gramsci's insights into cultural forms of consent and coercion were, in the Trontian formulation, and, by virtual default, the workerist variation, "thrown in the presses at [Fiat's] Mirafiori" (Bologna 1974, 2). Yet, this obscures elements of the process. Particularly, the fragmented and momentary location of social relations and the specific articulation of production tend to become mystified. Tronti writes, glimpsing the sacral: "[w]hen the *specifically* capitalist production has already forged the entire network of social relations, it appears as a *generic* social relation" and the "determinant relations of capitalist production ... seem to disappear" (1962, 49, *emphasis in original*). For Tronti, and for subsequent workerist theory, this formulation remained essential and is evident in Negri's entire trajectory from the "social worker" to "immaterial labor," despite sharp differences from Tronti that develop in the latter half of the 1960s (Palano 1998, 11; Turchetto 2001).

I am concerned with the cardinal error that emerged from this formulation of workerist thought, the construction of a new idol. Tronti had identified the social factory as the extension of the relations of production and that particular "moment" in which society is an "*articulation* of production." If the "factory" became the dominant form of society, the lesson for political action resided in generating antagonism internal to that form. Hence, the primacy and centrality of the waged worker as the working class subject constitutive of capitalist social relations. It was premised on the recognition that the working class was a particular of capital, and as a particular needed to become its antagonist, to impose itself politically as the working class. Within the tendency of capitalist planning, Tronti continued, "the real process of the increasing proletarian

character is present as the formal process of the increasing tertiary character” (Ibid, 21).⁸ The pivotal moment is Tronti’s “Copernican Revolution” and his famous inversion. He writes:

Capitalist society has its laws of development that the economists have invented, governments have applied, and to which the workers have been subjected. But who has written the laws of development of the working class, who will discover them? ... Who will write the history of the working class? ... We too have worked with a concept that puts capitalist development first, and workers second. This is an error.

And now we have to turn the problem on its head, reverse the polarity, and start again from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class.

At the level of socially developed capital, capitalist development becomes subordinated to working class struggles; it follows behind them, and they set the pace to which the political mechanisms of capital's own reproduction must be tuned (1964, 1 emphasis added).

Autonomous workerist thought begins by identifying the independent variable in living labor as a component of capitalist relations. Its Trontian variation, in its most radical expression, removes the working class from that relation. That is, workers as “labor” are identified as an *a priori* category and are privileged as the only actors capable of progress and initiative; capital merely responds to the autonomist initiative and action of labor, and importantly, it also forges the coercive mechanisms of reproduction. The disagreements surrounding this formulation are the proper starting point for a historical understanding of the “social factory” and for the position that workerist theory attributed to the role of the working class in that totality. In short, two consequences of this conceptualization are noteworthy: an abandonment of empirical verification of the class’s behavior in favor of an exclusive focus on the objective formation of collective capital as working class antagonism is immanent to the processes of its development. That is, against a political reading of the class, a philosophic reading of Marx is reintroduced. Second, to what extent did the Trontian formulation introduce a philosophic idealism, in direct opposition to the intellectual currents that produced the early forms of autonomous Marxism in the journal *Quaderni Rossi*? I intend the latter as a rhetorical question that is useful to redirect the location of working class antagonism in the transformative aspects of its circuits of political and technical composition and recomposition—its class composition. A brief excursus into the Panzieri-Tronti split is in order (e.g., Dowling 2007; Henninger 2007, 160).

⁸ The phrases “increasing proletarian character” and “increasing tertiary character” have been translated from the original *proletarianizzazione* and *terziarizzazione*.

The purpose of revisiting this affair is that it provides an alternative configuration of the “social factory” to that given by Tronti, including the shadow that his work cast over the trajectory of “autonomist Marxism.”⁹ The difficulty is that the dominant discourse in the Anglophone countries on the “social factory” occurs in this shadow, in so far as it is Negri’s.¹⁰ Panzieri’s configuration is much less known. Yet, his depiction differs fundamentally from Tronti’s in the nature of how the factory extends [*proiettare*] through society—that is, they differ over the process and depiction of the relation between collective capital and labor. For Panzieri, the basis of the process of capitalist expansion resided in the capacity for centers of concentrated capital to “plan” the accumulation of capital from the direct point of production in the factory through institutions of capitalist society. “Industry reintegrates in itself as finance capital” Panzieri writes, “and projects [*proiettare*] toward the social level the specific form that assumes the extortion of surplus value: as the neutral development of the productive forces, as rationality, as planning” (1964, 286). Going against the “anarchy” of society, Panzieri argued that capital’s “despotism of the factory” extended into social institutions through the “planning function of capital” as an “alien rationality” found in the “laws of concentration and centralization” (Ibid). Harry Cleaver, correctly, emphasizes this as a “reformulation of the ... ‘cultural sphere’ by the Critical Theorists” (2000, 70). In fact, Panzieri was working through the problem of the “totalitarian capitalist system,” as developed, *inter alia*, through his readings of Theodor Adorno and Friedrich Pollock (Marramao 1973; Meriggi 1978, 93).

The difference with Tronti’s formulation is crucial: whereas Panzieri relied on “planning” and the expansionary capacities of concentrated capital, Tronti located the “social factory” in the increasing factory character of society and as the proletarian character of society became the dominant fact of social relations. These differences came to a head in the summer of 1963 and concerned the nature of labor as an autonomous category in relation to capital, that is, the material components, or substance, of the

⁹ Tronti’s *Operai e capitale* (Workers’ and capital) [1966] was widely influential and has been characterized by Claudio Greppi as the “bible” of the extra-parliamentary group *Potere Operaio* (Workers’ Power) [2000, 8].

¹⁰ In Anglophone countries the exceptions, of course, are the work of those in the Midnight Notes Collective (1992) and Zero Work, and the work of Harry Cleaver, Steve Wright, and Patrick Cuninghame (2008).

“form” of the social factory. While the rupture partly concerned the reading of the recent class struggles (Piazza Statuto, July 1962), the theoretical split concerned an address that Tronti had given in Milan to the “Marxist League.” In what later became identified as his “Copernican revolution,” Tronti claimed the primacy of the working class as the leading, dynamic subject of capitalist development, from which one could then construct the historical growth and development of the class. Against the focus on the “laws of capitalist development,” Tronti sought to comprehend the “laws of development of the working class” (1963, 292-3). Panzieri’s response was sharp and concise:

...[i]t is for me a fascinating resurrection of a complete series of errors that in this moment the workers’ left could commit. It is fascinating because it is very Hegelian, in the original sense, as a new way of resurrecting a philosophy of history. But it is exactly a philosophy of history, a philosophy of the working class (1975, 302).

As an advocate of autonomous workers’ culture and the use of workers’ inquiry, Panzieri argued for a period of sustained, constructive engagement with factory workers who were constructing Italy’s new mass-produced consumer goods “miracle” society (e.g., Rieser 1982).

Others made similar criticism of Tronti’s formulation: Davide Bigalli and Sandro Mancini, for instance, charged that the working class remained an “ontological category,” with a “logical and historic precedence on capital” (1967; 1975). Rafaele Sbardella attacked Tronti’s work as an attempt at the “incarnation of Subjectivity” (1980). Later, in his book-length reflection, Franco “Bifo” Berardi, put the matter thus:

It is the subject that brings into being the contradiction. It is the working class that even brings into being its contrary, capital. And it is still this Subject that overcomes the contradiction finding its identity with itself inside the contradiction and beyond it (1998, 37).

In the Trontian version, the working class becomes identified as the universal Subject. From this perspective, class struggle appears as a self-inflicted sadistic inculcation (discipline) of an enemy rationality—“labor” needed to create “capital” in order to suffer. But it is ever increasing to a new being, it is appropriate in this manner to identify labor as always “becoming.”¹¹ In the Trontian version, we can no longer identify the body of “collective capital” as in the Panzierian fashion—that concentrated center of “planning.” Even if the working class subjectivity is included in capital as “dead labor” (technology),

¹¹ See Nunes’ excellent discussion of this teleological argument in both Tronti and Negri, as well as its philosophical significance for (post-) *Operaismo* (2007, 181-2).

there remains the “despotism” of capitalist rationality in its “planning function.” While much of workerist thought followed the Trontian inversion, student groups and women’s groups developed their own theoretical approaches to explain their relation to capital, and, in doing so, produced their own imprint of the “social factory.”

Lotta Femminista: the social factory as social reproduction

A remarkable aspect of autonomous Marxist thought was that in the midst of their recovery of Marx, they began to present a new picture of the working class by developing theoretical tools capable of generalizing the working class to integrate the spheres of production and reproduction. The basis for the integration lay in their focus on Marx’s 1857 “Introduction” of his *Grundrisse* (1973). This theoretical development in the early 1960s found expression in the “laboratory” of the “hot autumn” and subsequent decade of political struggles (1968-78). The rise of the “new women’s movement” and its expression in *Lotta Femminista* (Feminist Struggle) produced a theoretical explanation of the “social factory” in terms that brought the unwaged into class struggles. This formulation retains its importance for explaining the cycle of capital accumulation by demonstrating how “housewives” contribute to surplus value as expressed in commodity production. While the subject and the historical context have changed, the importance of their contribution persists in the inclusion of the unwaged in the commodity, considered by some as a “common legacy” (Dalla Costa quoted in Cuninghame 2008, 6). It is in this sense that feminists rightly claim to have been the “true promoters of the discourse on immaterial labor” (Fortunati 2007). This is the subject of the next section. Here I am concerned with their depiction of the “social factory,” its theoretical characteristics and implications for working class composition.

As a historical category, Dalla Costa used the “social factory” as a theoretical tool in order to find a place for women as antagonists within the class movement. If capitalist social relations were a direct, naked relation between class and capital, the feminists investigated women’s position within class, and from that relation to the general characteristic of women, given the historically determinant social division of labor, as “housewife” (Dalla Costa 1972, 19). The housewife signified the “common element” of the place that women occupied in capitalist social relations. In order to explain the

general division of labor, Dalla Costa located the “home” as a corollary to the “factory,” identifying their unity in the form of “organization” (Ibid, 20).

Dalla Costa’s argument began with the process of separation¹² as the principle factor of the invisibility and blindness that is characteristic of the exclusionary privileges of the wage in capitalist society which had up to this point, *inter alia*, taught generations of the working class that the unwaged were “presumed incapable of being the subjects of social revolt” (Ibid, 25). The “original sin”¹³ of capitalism resides not in the social division of labor but rather the actual separation that is the basis of its social relations, and the expression of that power in the form of the wage with the attendant coronation of the “waged laborer” as “free labor” and the construction of the “unwaged” in the figures of women, children, unemployed, the elderly, and so forth. This dualism—waged and unwaged—is presented by Dalla Costa as a historic process, where the wage, in terms of its “power,” and in its use as that particular weapon of capitalist rule, establishes the organization of the exploitation of the non-wage laborer; that is, to establish a hierarchy within the laboring body (Ibid 21-2, 26). The principle expression of this dualism resides in the waged worker’s regimentation that is “fixed” in time and space, whereas the “housewife” transcends these categories, and represents a “maternal cradle” that provides boundless “social services” in the reproduction of labor power (Ibid, 32). Thus, the “social factory,” for Dalla Costa, is, in a narrow sense, understood as the “organization of the reproduction of labor power” (Ibid, 20).

The conception of the “social factory” developed by Dalla Costa was generated in order to provide a theoretical conception of the working class that explained the political struggles occurring throughout the communities in acts of consumption, distribution, and exchange. The protagonists of these struggles were primarily women, students, and the unemployed—the unwaged. They were engaged in struggles far from, but intimately connected to, the “factory” in the form of the self-reduction of prices, “*autoriduzione*”¹⁴, the question of housing, nurseries, public canteens, sex work or prostitution, and

¹² For the importance of “separation” in primitive accumulation and capitalist accumulation, see De Angelis (2008).

¹³ Michael Perelman establishes Marx’s point that the idea of primitive accumulation and original sin both serve to direct our attention to a mythical past as a form of “ahistorical historicism” (Etienne Balibar) obscuring the present consequences of this “separation”; hence, Marx’s use of the pejorative “so-called” in part 8 of *Capital* (2000, 25-6).

¹⁴ For a historical account of these actions, see Bruno Ramirez (1976).

violence. The high point of this was in the Wages for Housework campaign that demanded wages as a tactic within the overall strategy of the “refusal of work” (Cunningham 2008, 3-6; Weeks 2011, 118-136). Yet, historically, *Lotta Femminista* confronted a two-fold marginalization: within the feminist movement as economically reductive and from their former comrades in *Potere Operaio* the attitude ranged from “fundamentally incomprehensible” to subsuming it into the form of waged labor (Lumley 1990, 319; Bianchi 2007, 18).¹⁵ Their marginalization and absence, in what Cunningham, in his discussion of the 1970s social movement *Autonomia*, refers to as the “relative lack of a ‘female memory,’”¹⁶ can be seen in the “mapping” of the Italian movements, which almost completely neglect women’s groups.¹⁷ Yet, they do belong to “a common theoretical matrix,” of which the “social factory” is one component (Borio, Pozzi, Roggero 2002, 34-5). The feminist interpretation shifted the capital-class relation by integrating Panzieri’s emphasis on the power of capital’s planning function while expanding on the definition of labor in order to integrate it into class composition, to shatter the dreams of the workerist’s “mass worker.” They read Marx, and used him “without deference” (Fortunati 2013) in order to develop and expand the concrete determinations of the reproduction of labor power. In that sense, they imposed reproductive labor in order to be seen, to be accounted for as equals in the struggle for liberation, and the basis for a new identity was located in the need to uproot the “planning function” of capital in all of its mediated richness: culturally, institutionally, and psychologically. In doing so, they gave a proper *addio al Gasparazzo!* And, well before their male comrades, who were still ensconced by the “party of Mirafiori” (Negri 1974). In that sense, the feminist contribution to autonomous Marxism is central and unique.

¹⁵ For a snapshot of their reception, see the preface to the first edition of their journal, *L’Offensiva* (1972, 11-21).

¹⁶ The corollary to this two-fold marginalization, as it concerns “memory,” has its representations in academic literature on Italian feminism as well. The absence of names such as Dalla Costa, Del Re, or Fortunati in Miguel Malagrecá’s “Lottiamo Ancora” is remarkable (2006).

¹⁷ Steve Wright reproduces a map that originally was drawn up by Primo Moroni (2008, 118). Lumley offers two maps. His reproduction of “The genealogy of revolt” is the only map to include feminism, and its represented there as separate, indicative of the movement’s emphasis on *difference* (Lumley 1990, 154-5). The response by former comrades to this *difference* and claims of separatism were violent (e.g., the attack of December 1975 in Rome on a women’s only abortion march by the *servizio d’ordine* of the extra-parliamentary group *Lotta Continua*).

Dalla Costa's argument for the "social factory" indicated not only the inclusion of the sphere of unwaged labor as reproductive labor, but in order to do so drew on components that were akin to Panzieri's understanding. Yet these aspects remain hidden, it seems, in the shadow cast by Tronti.¹⁸ The argument relied on the principle of organization, as a factor of planning through the establishment of hierarchical divisions within the laboring body. It followed from this that Dalla Costa's direct target was the relation of power embedded within the plan of capital. Here it suffices to point out that strategies to resist that power centered on the wage. But the purpose, that is, the target of attack, was the differentiation of time and space that the capitalist plan had crystallized in the separation between the factory and society. This problem could not be formulated within Tronti's understanding of the universalization of the proletarian subject. Yet, for Dalla Costa, much like Panzieri, the solution resided in the class's capacity to rebuild its own relations. Hence, the destruction of capitalist organization of time and space—and with it the form of its organization that united the factory-society relation in the feminist position; this represented a two-pronged strategy of antagonism on the "factory" and the "home" through the tactic of the refusal of work. The most important passage is where she depicts broad qualitative cultural transformations as practical measures for struggle:

To "have time" means to work less. To have time to be with children, the old and the sick does not mean running to pay a quick visit to the garages where you park children or old people or invalids. It means that we, the first to be excluded, are taking the initiative in this struggle so that all those other excluded people, the children, the old and the ill, can re-appropriate the social wealth; to be re-integrated with us and all of us with men, not as dependents but autonomously, as we women want for ourselves; since their exclusion, like ours, from the directly productive social process, from social existence, has been created by capitalist organization (1972, 38).

This emphasis on transformation finds its substance in culture, in a similar manner that Panzieri, in the line of Western Marxism, had focused on the power of collective capital in its capacity to "plan" its reproduction.¹⁹ However, for Panzieri, the struggle was centered in the factory proper, though his conception of culture, and the relationship between ideas and action, had allowed for the inclusion of mediation (i.e., education,

¹⁸ It is interesting in this sense to note Matteo Pasquinelli's recent comments in a footnote on Panzieri: "[i]t is precisely because of the "ambiguity" of Panzieri's position, however, that Tronti is taken here as the first proper beginning of operaismo" (2014, 181). It is my position that this represents a misreading of Panzieri's influence on early workerism in Quaderni Rossi.

¹⁹ The use of "reproduction" here is conceptually different as its reference is to the reproduction of capital, which is analytically distinct from my use of the term in regards to "women's work."

literature, psychology) and reciprocal relations through practices such as workers' inquiry.

The argument advanced in *Lotta Femminista* shifted the focus of “reproduction” to include their unwaged labor as part of the reproduction of labor-power, that particular commodity for capital. This approach broadened the frame of potential antagonism to capital. It's based the distinction in Marx's formulation where he posits re-integration of the whole as the “rich totality of many determination and relations” within the “entire social act of production” in a manner that recognizes their “essential difference” while producing a “unity of the diverse” (1973, 100-1). Within political economy, Marx writes, “the concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations” (Ibid). Yet the argument, for Dalla Costa and company, had to expand beyond Marx. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx argues that production “predominates” in its relation with distribution, exchange, and consumption, “not only over itself ... but over the other moments as well” (1973, 99). Within “autonomist Marxism,” Tronti had most fully articulated this point, encapsulated in his image of the social factory as the universal commodity form—where society is subsumed by capital and every relation takes on the appearance of a transaction. Yet, in practice, autonomous Marxist militants had assumed that the empirical factory, the direct point of production, predominated. That is, until the feminist conceptualization of the “social factory” (for the Trontian version, this meant that the factory became “diffuse” as part of capital's response to the “hot autumn”) [Negri 1976, 28]. In this sense, the importance of their position is captured in Weeks' claim that “it was the feminist insistence on expanding the concept of labor beyond its waged forms that helped open the door to a new conceptualization of the structure of capitalist social production” (2011, 122-3).

Immaterial labor: subsumption of unwaged labor by waged labor?

In this section, I utilize the conceptualization of the “social factory” as the basis for interpreting “immaterial labor” and its depiction of “women's work” as developed principally in the *Empire trilogy*.²⁰ I am building on an aspect of Dyer-Witheford's “encounter” with “compositionists” in their critique of immaterial labor, by incorporating

²⁰ I restrict the focus to *Empire* and *Multitude* as the third installment, *Commonwealth*, moves more completely toward bio-political production (2009, 133-7).

the feminist-Marxist position in Silvia Federici, Leopoldina Fortunati, and Dalla Costa. My concern here is with trying to understand the laboring subject and how the conceptualization of the “social factory” provides a means of identifying the characteristics of labor, and of the position of unwaged labor in this concept.

In forging this encounter, I am assuming a form of historical continuity that needs clarification. The feminist critique can be put into conversation with the conceptualization of “immaterial labor” precisely because of the shattering of the laboring subject with the process of restructuring in the post-hot autumn response by capital. The eclipse of the “mass worker” and the crisis of “class composition” mark an important theoretical moment. It is here that Antonio Negri begins theorizing a new social subject, based on “the modifications imposed and provoked—or in the process of being brought about—by restructuring,” where “the body of the working class expands and articulates itself into the body of the social class, into the proletariat” (2005, 126). The connection to Tronti in the phenomenon of *terziarizzazione* has been noted, but the Negrian version of the “social factory” contains an important paradox: in his early discussions of Marx’s “general intellect” the progressive liberating force of technology is resurrected with its development constrained by workers’ struggles and general resistance located in the “practices of reproduction of labor-power,” in spheres outside the “factory” (Turchetto 2001, 9).²¹ Or, what Negri identified as the foundations of the “social factory,” and is the basis of all his subsequent formulations, in the real capitalist subsumption of society where the law of value is no longer applicable and capital is seen in terms of command.²² In short, the “social factory” is political, rich with antagonism and

²¹ Sergio Bologna’s comments of Negri’s project in its relation to this historical moment are important here: “...while I agree that this is the tendency under way in the movement ... there are other things which are going in another direction. How many workers, how many factories ... how many battles ... [based on plant closings] have been fought over the choice between defense of income ... factory closure or acceptance of reconversion and restructuring. The revolutionary left in these cases has proved unable to offer alternatives ... the best the revolutionary left could manage was to say that the destruction of the factory worker as labor power was a good thing.... *as long as it lacks the courage to make a realistic assessment of the political composition of the factory after two years of crisis, all talk of programs ... mass programs ... will remain useless—as useless as this discourse of Negri’s*” (1976, 27 emphasis added).

²² The lineage from Gramsci, Lukacs, Pollock, Panzieri, Tronti, Dalla Costa through Negri should be noted here insofar as the latter’s notion of command coincides with a planning function in the state-form. This planning function, alas, is absent in the depiction of *Empire*. For a discussion of Negri on the matter of his “constitutive” ontology, see part three of volume two of *the philosophy of Antonio Negri* (2007a).

potentiality, and it's located in the realm of reproduction where the unwaged have been subsumed by the body of waged labor (Negri [1984] 1991, 114).

The conceptualization of immaterial labor in *Empire* is notable for two characteristics: the absence of external command or planning functions with regard to labor, or the network as a “kind of spontaneous and elementary communism,” and the incorporation of the cultural realm as “*affective labor* of human contact and interaction” (2000, 292-4). Here, I am interested in the latter component, and how it includes the feminist position of reproductive labor and unwaged work. Hardt and Negri, following the process of *tertiarization*, first from agriculture to industry and then from industry to services, identifying three types of “immaterial labor,” all rationalized around the characteristics of “knowledge, information, affect, and communication”: 1) manufacturing as service; 2) analytical and symbolic tasks; 3) production and manipulation of affect—the only labor that “requires” the “bodily mode” (293).

Critics have pointed out that this formulation constitutes a “theoretical sleight of hand” with the “tendency” still dominated by the “cyborg,” that poses numerous problems not only in terms of method—in locating the particular differences in the overall abstraction based on the common elements of this network model—but also on the merits of the concept (Dyer-Witheford 2005; 2008; Caffentzis 2007). What is striking is how it divides the laboring body into a mind/body dualism, and the problems this presents (i.e., the “complete blurring of boundaries” used to demarcate activity that concepts like production/reproduction attempt to explain) in terms of *abstract labor* as the universal subject, that is “self-valorizing” in the sense that in its activity it produces its own subjectivity (Nunes 2007, 184-192).²³ Moreover, as a matter for history, this concept, as noted above, is an inheritance from feminist discourse. As others have duly noted, it is suspect to find “women’s work” presented in the “bodily mode.”²⁴ Moreover,

²³ The breakdown of the law of value has received extensive discussion (see for reference, Trott 2007; Henninger 2007; DeAngelis 2007; Cleaver 2005). The “ontological shift” in this position is not discussed here. Equally, the encounter with French thought or Hardt’s influence is not my concern. Without the influence of the latter, these positions were already present in Negri’s theoretical framework in his *Proletari e stato* (1976).

²⁴ I leave out another criticism that also was made in earlier formulations: its Eurocentrism, in a certain “Leninism” is retained from the metropolitan formulation in *Futur Antérieur* to the globalization form presented here (Caffentzis 1999; Nunes 2007, 192).

the banality of equivalence between the term “affective” and “woman,” as Nunes points out, should be cause for alarm (Ibid).

Leopoldina Fortunati has advanced the most comprehensive critique of immaterial labor. Her position is based on the central contribution from *Lotta Femminista*, that the entire capitalist process begins with reproductive labor (2007, 141). It sets the whole process of capitalist circulation in motion. She situates Hardt and Negri in the context of a long debate on immaterial labor that, *inter alia*, “completely ignored the material labor of the domestic sphere ... and, above all, ignored the labor done in order to produce individuals” (Ibid, 144). She depicts post-modern capital as derivative from the primacy of the domestic sphere, as it is consistent with her claim from *The arcane of reproduction*, but inverts the process. She writes: “immaterial labor has become productive for capital in a way that signals a wider phenomenon which is the exporting of the logic and structure of the domestic sphere to the world of goods, which always ends up resembling and being assimilated to the reproductive world” (1981, 10). That is, the organization and rationality of reproductive labor become embedded within information and communication—a process she describes as “machinization” (2007). For Fortunati, the difficulty with the presentation of immaterial labor in *Empire* is precisely that they do not identify this process and its origins in the domestic sphere of reproductive labor. The proper locus of the dispute is in the nature by which the socialization of labor occurs. If, for Negri and others, the society-factory is the subsumption of the former by the latter, in Fortunati this process is reversed: the norms, behaviors, and relations governing the “home,” as the center of “society” in Fordism, has in this post-Fordist era been “exported” to the factory; a particular form of has been termed the “feminization of labor.”²⁵

Fortunati’s second critique is partly an outcome of the first, and it focuses on the seeming “incoherence” in the mind/body duality. On the one hand, Hardt and Negri argue that the tendency is for “all” labor to be based on the “model of information and communication technologies” (2000, 291). A technologically determinant factor of class composition, where primacy is attributed to “pinnacle of contemporary production,” identifies a process determined by the “brain.” For Fortunati, “the overall consequence of

²⁵ For a useful and brief discussion, see (Casas-Cortés 2014, 219-20).

their discourse is that women again risk being reduced to the body” (2007, 147). In order to make this connection to method, I conclude by demonstrating this claim, by connecting it to the act of forgetting that Marx had warned against.

I want to emphasize that it seems Hardt and Negri are attentive to this forgetting in their later discussion of “biopolitical labor” and “immaterial labor” (2004, 109). Yet they are not capable of overcoming it, leading only to further confusion. Hence, they identify “women’s work” under the previous form of industrial hegemony as “affective labor” as part of “biopolitical *production*” in that it directly produces social relationships and forms of life” (Ibid, 110). But “biopolitics” leads into “numerous additional conceptual complexities” (Ibid). In this formation, it becomes even more difficult to locate the actual “bodily mode of labor” in a coherent concept. Confusion increases when they claim that “immaterial *production*” remains “material—it involves our bodies and brains as all labor does.” What matters is the product. Yet, immaterial labor is “hegemonic in qualitative terms” (Ibid). If the particular “labor” that determines the commonality of an abstraction is that of the “brain,” then the productive process is necessarily the body, that is, material. And, if only the brain is located in the product, where is the body identifiable? By accepting this duality, and by previously allocating women to the bodily mode, they can be forgotten.²⁶ This forgetting, however, is bound up with the “communicative act” where the “brain” as “male” either did not or could not hear; or heard, but did not listen—“many remained deaf,” as Dalla Costa proclaims (2007, 109-10).

Given the paucity of explanatory power in the concept “immaterial labor” with regards to the “blindness” that historically Marxist analysis had towards women’s unpaid reproductive work, one consideration would be to recognize the actual, concrete “difference” in the determinations that make up the totality of labor.²⁷ It is in these areas that the “essential difference” seems to allude Hardt and Negri, particularly in claims that technologically determine the political dimension of the class: “many singular instances of labor processes ... lived experiences coexist with a “becoming common” ... which

²⁶ Caffentzis rejects this duality, and offers a different theory of the machine as a plausible way forward (2007). Fortunati also points to different analysis of the machine as an alternative (2007, 140).

²⁷ Similarly, Roberto Battaglia, in *Primo Maggio*, criticized Negri’s construction of the “social worker” in the mid-1970s as lacking the connection between the material conditions and the political behaviors of the class (1980-1, 74-5).

tends to reduce the qualitative divisions within labor” (2004, 114). Nunes attributes a “conic perspective” to the authors of *Empire*, which prioritizes proximal space (2007) as the basis for commonality. His analogy is useful in considering the process of “forgetting.” Consider this passage from Marx: “...the elements which are not general and common, must be separated out from the determinations valid for production as such, so that in their unity ... their essential difference is not forgotten” (1973, 85). Separation and difference have been integral to the process of capitalist development. The response by the feminist Marxist critique smashed through the exclusivity of the male hegemonic conception of the working class to include unpaid reproductive labor. The development of the “social factory” by Dalla Costa pointed to that difference with respect to capital. Yet, in the subsequent years and transformations of capital, one of the principle attempts to grapple with new forms of labor from a theoretical level seems incapable of explaining certain empirical continuities. To an extent, there is division over the nature of not only technological composition, but also the implications this has for political composition. It is in this latter sphere that Federici’s concerns resonate: “the divisions that capitalist development produces in the working class” (2012, 93; Staples 2006, 5). Consistent with Marx’s method, if it is not possible to verify the abstract in the concrete, then something is wrong methodologically. Two options result: dispense with science,²⁸ or return to the particular determinations and look more closely for any “common element.”

Concluding remarks

I close this paper with a short reminder on method not because it is difficult to identify commonalities in the sense that Negri and Hardt want to, but that, as Caffentzis and others have noted, “the kind of commonalities that they find are not useful to understanding the class struggle at this period in history” (2007, 44; Dowling 2007; Dyer-Witford 2005). In order to explain this, I centered the discussion on their particular configurations of the “social factory.” It is in understanding that elastic and fruitful concept that we can appreciate the difficulties in determining the composition of the class within “autonomous Marxism.” By introducing the “social factory” as a historic category, I tried to clarify its different formulations leading up to and following the feminist

²⁸ I have in mind Ed Emery’s plea for a scientific approach: “...it had a brief and glorious resurgence in the Italian revolutionary left, as *scienza operaia* (“working-class science”), but the prevailing anti-scientism of the post-1968 Left any any notion that the class struggle could be approached scientifically” (1995).

understanding. It is here that Panzieri's approach to the "social factory" is important. Panzieri points back to an understanding of the worker's particular, specific determinations. As such, it provides the basis for a corrective to the immaterial labor thesis that, much like the effect of Tronti's method, tends to flatten all individuation. This recovery leads towards Fortunati's claim and Dalla Costa's lament: the immaterial thesis appropriated the feminist concept only to render "women in the bodily mode" as unseen, unheard, and, most damningly, incapable of speech.

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