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THE INDIVIDUATION OF THE COMMON

The current historical moment can be described as the predominance of the individual over the collective. The individual reigns supreme in politics, as an ethic of individual rights and freedoms displaces any project of collective liberation. In economics this is even more the case, as the utility maximising individual of neoliberal economics trumps not only any other idea of economic relations, but subsumes all social relations. Traditions and institutions have been stripped bare, revealing the calculating, self-interested individual that always lurked underneath. Individual self-interest has become the template through which all actions can be interpreted. The political and economic assertion of the individual is completed by a cultural ideal of complete and utter self-expression and independence. To deny this dominance, to assert that there might be other forces at work politically, other causes to be considered economically, and other values to aspire to ethically or culturally, is to be branded as a collectivist, to be burdened with the ghost of the past century's crimes and catastrophes. The individual has become not only the basis of political, cultural, and economic understanding, but the extent of all of our aspirations; it is simultaneously all one needs to make sense of the world and the best that one could hope from it. That we live in an "age of individualism" perhaps goes without saying. However, such a judgment raises as many questions as it answers. At what level are we to locate the individual? Is it, to borrow words from Foucault, an "illusion," an "ideological effect," or is it a real functioning element of society? In short, are people deluded into seeing themselves as individuals, or is individuation a material effect of practices? Much of the contemporary valorisation of the multitude, and with it the cooperative dimension of labor has stressed that the individuation can only be a distortion of the actually existing collective conditions of production. As Antonio Negri writes with respect to neoliberalism: "The only problem is that extreme liberalisation of the economy reveals its opposite, namely that the social and productive environment is not made up of atomised individuals...the real environment is made up of collective individuals" (Negri 1989, 209). [25]

In a related manner other theorists in the post-autonomist tradition, such as Paolo Virno, have stressed that con-temporary production, with its emphasis on intellectual labor, cooperation, and the production of social relations, has made the social individual, and not the individual, the contemporary laboring subject. Against this tendency we have post-Foucauldian critiques of neoliberalism, which argue that far from being an ideological illusion, neoliberalism is an effective production of subjectivity.

Neoliberalism functions as a set of institutional and political transformations that compels people to adopt its worldview. The parents sending their children to a charter school in place of underfunded public schools, or the college student trying to figure out the best major to go into debt to study, may not believe in the ideal of competitive individuals or market relations as the ideal model of social relations, but they are compelled to act as if they do just to survive. Neoliberal theory declares that everyone is an isolated individual, maximising self-interest, while neoliberal practice, the constitution of market based solutions for everything from education to the environment, works to actively produce this tendency, destroying the possibility and desire to act in any collective manner. There is thus a strong opposition between those who claim that the individual is nothing but the ideological representation of a society that increasingly puts to work the collective intelligence of society, and those who claim the contemporary society has destroyed any collective sense of belonging or action in favor of an increasingly isolated or individual subject. If one of these statements is true the other must be false. A passage in *The Grundrisse* offers a way out, if not a dialectical overcoming, of such an opposition. In the passage Karl Marx takes on the tendency within classical, or bourgeois, political economy to take as its starting point the isolated and independent individual. At first his critique would seem to stress the familiar theme of historicisation, arguing that what the economist takes as a “history’s point of departure” must instead be seen as a “historic result” (Marx, 1973, 83).

The isolated individual of the Robinsonades is, like the novel that it takes its name from, a product of the historical dissolution of feudalism in the eighteenth century. To take the individual as a product rather than the origin of history does not mean simply dismissing it as a fiction, but comprehending it as a condition and effect of history. As Marx writes:

Only in the eighteenth century, in ‘civil society’, do the various forms of social connectedness confront the individual as a mere means towards his private purposes, [26] as external necessity. But the epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is also precisely that of the hitherto most developed social (from this standpoint, general) relations. The human being is in the most literal sense a ‘political animal’ not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society. Production by an isolated individual outside of society...is as much of an absurdity as is the development of language without individuals living together and talking to each other (Marx 1973, 84)

This passage adds several elements to the argument regarding the historical conditions of the individual. First, it situates these conditions within a

contradiction: the individual is a historical product not because society has become more fragmented and isolated, individuals more independent, but precisely because of any increase and development of social relations. The more that society is connected, related, the more that relation appears as isolation. This contradiction perhaps sounds more like a paradox: how can development lead to isolation, connection to fragmentation? Second, Marx supplements his historical argument with something that, depending on how one wanted to read it, could be considered a philosophical anthropology or ontology. Drawing from Aristotle's famous definition of man as a political animal, Marx turns not to the polis as a necessary condition of human existence, but to the fact that individuation can only take place in the midst of society. Politics, or society, is not only a necessary condition for individual existence, securing and protecting humanity from dangers it is not prepared to face as a collection of individuals, but for individuation as well. It is only through politics, through society, that anything like individuation is possible. Marx underscores this fact through his reference to language, which is the collective condition for individual expression and articulation. Individuation is not opposed to society, but only develops through it. One does not need a desert island to become an individual, but, on the contrary, an entire city.¹

The word that suggests itself in describing this concept of an individuation that passes through social relations, rather than in opposition to them, is transindividual. The term transindividual is drawn from the work of Gilbert Simondon, and can be briefly defined as resting on two postulates. The first is that individuation is a process not []a principle. Rather than seeing everything as always already individuated, individuation has to be understood as a process. The building blocks of this process are not individuals, some basic building blocks or atoms of reality, but relations that exist in a metastable state. The things that individuate us, our ways of speaking, habits, comportments, are made up not so much of individual things, but of differential relations. This brings us to the second presupposition: the relation between individuation and the collective is less a zero sum game, in which individuation is always at the expense of collectivity and collective cohesion can only be a suppression of individuation, rather than a relation of mutual individuation—a transindividual relation. As much as Simondon's philosophy can be read as the ontological articulation, the ontogenesis, of Marx's formulation of an individual

¹ Marx's idea of the individuation through social relations has an odd precursor in Descartes. In the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes reflects on his urban social conditions as a combination of individuation and socialization. As Descartes writes, 'I have been able to live as solitary and as retired a life as I could in the remotest deserts— but without lacking any of the amenities that are to be found in the most populous cities.' (Descartes 1988. p. 18.)

individuated in and through society, his ontology lacks the second component, that of the paradoxical isolation through relation that defines capitalist individuation for Marx. Marx's assertion of the production of individuation is not just limited to one assertion in a text posthumously published. It is a problem that runs through Marx's writings, not just in the famous critiques of bourgeois self-interest that characterizes the early political writings, or the assertion of the ontology of species being that characterize the early texts on capital. Throughout Marx's mature writing it is possible to grasp not just a continuation of the critique of the individual or bourgeois society, or a development of an ontology of species being, but an articulation of their intersection. Marx critiques capital as both a constitution of an isolated individual of "freedom, equality, and Bentham" through the sphere of exchange, as well as a mode of production that increasingly relies on the combined powers of the species through the organization of cooperative production. The spheres of exchange and production are different "relations of individuation"; in the former individuals confront each other as isolated individuals on the market, confronting the labor of others only in and through the fetishised commodities, while in the latter individuals have their collective capacities put to work by capital.² [27]

Neither of these can be considered according to a moral spectrum of good or bad. It is not a matter of opposing a good collectivism to a bad individualism. As much as capital puts to work collective powers, it does so not only for capital, exploiting the maximum of products, but under the rule of capital. As Marx reminds us, the collective power of workers increasingly appears to be the work of capital itself, as the productive power of cooperation disappears in the captivating image of capital producing capital. Capitalist cooperation cannot be understood to be a prefiguration of a communist future. It is too rigidly defined by discipline and caught in a constitutive misrecognition, where its collective energy appears to be the energy of capital. Conversely, the bourgeois individual is not simply to be obliterated in some kind of collective belonging. Or rather, what has to be obliterated is precisely its bourgeois character, the isolation that confines it to "freedom, equality, and Bentham." Rather than

² Marx suggests a connection between the commodity, as an object, and a particular mode of subjectification in the famous section in *Capital* on commodification, when he writes: "The religious world is but the reflex of the real world. And for a society based upon the production of commodities, in which the producers in general enter into social relations with one another by treating their products as commodities and values, whereby they reduce their individual private labour to the standard of homogeneous human labour - for such a society, Christianity with its cultus of abstract man, more especially in its bourgeois developments, Protestantism, Deism, etc., is the most fitting form of religion: (Marx 1977, 172)

simply affirm cooperation in its capitalist form, or destroy individuality in its bourgeois form, both must be overcome, even sublated in order to constitute the social individual, an individuation that is produced in and through its relations. The social individual could in some sense be understood as the goal. Meanwhile in the present, the question remains as how to think the articulation of the two different, and contradictory individuations, that of consumption which reproduces mankind as isolated and fragmentary, and that of production, which increasingly draws on collective relations and potentials. With respect to the former, it is necessary to think through the production of the individual in the relations and products of contemporary capitalism. The first of these, as Marx noted, is the commodity form itself. The commodity appears to us not as the product of social labor, but as an isolated thing, which possesses value as its intrinsic property. The act of market exchange reproduces the independence and isolation of not only the commodity, but also the individuals that exchange them. Just as the commodity appears as a thing, the value of which is an intrinsic property rather than a product of the relations of production, the individual, the bourgeois individual, appears as something that exists apart from, and prior to, its existing relations (Stiegler 2006, 327). The capitalist mode of production not only fetishises commodities, but also produces the individual as a fetish. While Marx's theory of commodity form demonstrates how a particular social form produces a particular mode of individuation, it remains at the level of form, failing to take into consideration the technological, cultural, and political transformations of contemporary capitalism. Bernard Stiegler has offered an update of the problem of individuation of contemporary [] capitalism by turning to the way in which the commodities of the culture industry, films, music, and television, reshape and structure individuation. The fundamental difference between Marx and Stiegler on this point is that Marx primarily considers the object and subject formally based on the social relations, connecting the form of the commodity, the fetish, with the form of an abstract individuality; Stiegler, on the other hand, considers the object in question not just in terms of its formal characteristics or general relations, but its mode of engaging with memory understood as the fundamental basis of individuation. Stiegler charts a fundamental transformation of the conditions of individuation from the tool or even the book, which is defined by the material capacity for individuating oneself differently, and the cultural commodities of films and music. This distinction is predicated on a fundamental revision of Simondon's idea of the preindividual. For Stiegler the preindividual, the basis of individuation is primarily inherited in the form of objects, which are the basis of memory and individuation. The preindividual is not just made up of language, habits, and perceptions that exist

as a kind of natural backdrop of the formation of subjectivity, rather these things are themselves the product of a determinate process of transindividuation, a form of culture that in turn is inseparable from its materialization (Stiegler 2009, 48).

We individuate ourselves, or are individuated through the way in which we inherit particular artifacts, particular materialisations of memory. The cultural industry fundamentally transforms the terms of this inheritance. Initially, the inheritance of a tool or even a book is inseparable from learning how to use it, just as reading is inseparable from writing. The commodities of the culture industry fundamentally transform this, they constitute the basis of our memory, displacing the memories that we accumulate while living, but they do not transmit any competence, any capacity to individuate oneself differently, there is only the passive consumption. At the extreme point of this process is nothing less than the destruction of individuation itself. As Stiegler writes:

To say we live in an individualistic society is a patent lie, an extraordinary false delusion, and, moreover, extraordinary because no one seems conscious of it, as if the efficacy of the lie was proportional to its enormity, and as if the lie was nobody's responsibility. We live in a herd-society, as comprehended and anticipated by Nietzsche. Some think this society individualistic because, at the very highest levels of public and private responsibility, but also in the smallest details of those processes of adoption stamped by marketing and the [28] organization of consumption, egotism has been elevated to the pinnacle of life. But individualism has no relation to this egotism. Individualism wants the flourishing of the individual, the being always and indissociably a we and I, an I in a we or a we composed of Is, incarnated by Is. To oppose the individual and the collective is to transform individuation into social atomisation, producing a herd (Stiegler 2009, 48).

For Stiegler there is no individuation without transindividuation, the individual is constituted in relation to collectively inherited traditions and knowledge. It is precisely this, which the contemporary culture industry destroys, reducing the individual to a series of marketable tastes and drives and the collective, the we into a "they" which is at best a statistical totality and at worse a hostile enemy. The sphere of circulation has shifted from "freedom, equality, and Bentham" to "competition, envy, and Bernays."

In sharp contrast to Stiegler, Paolo Virno has argued that the contemporary production process is one that has put to work the transindividual dimension of subjectivity. As with Stiegler, this can be seen as a radicalisation of Marx's assertion that capitalist production puts to work not just the individual capacity to labor but also the collective labor of the species. What Virno stresses, and what justifies the use of the term transindividual, is that the contemporary

labor process does not just put to work the combined efforts of different individuals, their cooperative powers, but their very capacity to relate and individuate. As Virno writes, borrowing Marx's phrase, social individual, "social" should be translated as preindividual, and 'individual' should be seen as the ultimate result of the process of individuation" (Virno 2004, 80).

This is Virno's understanding of the rise of cooperative and intellectual dimension of post-fordist production. Work that involves communication, language, and affects is work that simultaneously exploits and produces the very conditions for individuation, reproduction and transforming collective and individual existence. Following Stiegler and Virno's use of Simondon's terminology, we could argue that what defines the present stage of capitalism is the commodification of the preindividual and the exploitation of the transindividual. While the division is rough, it does highlight a particular observation underlying Stiegler and Virno's analysis, that much of what we read, listen to, and watch, the basis of our sensibility, comes to us in commodity form, while our labor is increasingly social, involving not only cooperation with others, but the capacity to relate to others. This assertion repeats and deepens Marx's analysis of the sphere [] of exchange and the hidden abode of production as two different individuations, two different productions of subjectivity. It is possible to understand Stiegler and Virno as deepening this analysis: now the sphere of exchange, the sphere of consumption, is no longer that of egotistical individuals, but of the destruction of the very conditions for individuation; and the hidden abode of production is no longer simply the place that puts to work mankind's cooperative powers, but the very conditions of collective and individual life. The division is deepened, and passes not between two classes, those that buy and sell on the market and those who have only their labor power to sell, but at the heart of transindividual individuation, subjectivity itself. While it may be difficult to reconcile these two different perspectives, which together could be considered an intensification of the "schizophrenic" tendency of capitalism, collective at work but disindividuated in consumption, taken together they paint a picture of contemporary capitalism, which can perhaps only be united by what they exclude. Between the commodification of the preindividual and the exploitation of the transindividual there is the destruction of the kind of individuations which have defined contemporary politics, those of the citizen or even the worker, which defined themselves in relation to a stable collective and individual identity. This is not to say that any future politics must only address individuals and collectives as consumers or entrepreneurs, adopting the machinations of marketing or the dismal prospects of libertarianism. However, it does mean that any future politics cannot simply presuppose forms

of transindividuation which have been radically transformed, such as citizenship. Instead, any future politics must work in and on the terrain of individuation itself, mobilizing the collective powers of labor against the fragmenting anxieties of consumerism, transforming our collective anxiety and impotence into power.

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