

SEMIOTEXT(E) FOREIGN AGENTS SERIES

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Published by Semiotext(e)

2007 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 427, Los Angeles, CA 90057

www.semiotexte.com

Special thanks to Andrew Drabkin, John Ebert, and Jason Smith.

Cover art by Jutta Koether, *Untitled*, 2007.

Black and white photocopy, 8 1/2" X 11".

Courtesy of the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine Art, NY.

Back Cover Photography by Simonetta Candolfi

Design by Hedi El Kholti

ISBN: 978-1-58435-076-7

Distributed by The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England

Printed in the United States of America

THE SOUL AT WORK

FROM ALIENATION TO AUTONOMY

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Translated by Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia

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Introduction

“Those who maintain that the soul is incorporeal are talking nonsense, because it would not be able to act upon or be acted upon if it were of such a nature; but in actuality both these functions are clearly distinguishable in the case of the soul.”

— Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, par. 67¹

The soul I intend to discuss does not have much to do with the spirit. It is rather the vital breath that converts biological matter into an animated body.

I want to discuss the soul in a materialistic way. What the body can do, that is its soul, as Spinoza said.

In order to describe the processes of subjection arising with the formation of industrial societies, Foucault tells the story of modernity as a disciplining of the body, building the institutions and devices capable of subduing the body through the machines of social production. Industrial exploitation deals with bodies, muscles and arms. Those bodies would not have any value if they weren't animated, mobile, intelligent, reactive.

The rise of post-Fordist modes of production, which I will call Semiocapitalism, takes the mind, language and creativity as its primary tools for the production of value. In the sphere of digital

production, exploitation is exerted essentially on the semiotic flux produced by human time at work.

It is in this sense that we speak of immaterial production. Language and money are not at all metaphors, and yet they are immaterial. They are nothing, and yet can do everything: they move, displace, multiply, destroy. They are the soul of Semiocapital.

If today we want to continue the genealogical work of Michel Foucault, we have to shift the focus of theoretical attention towards the automatism of mental reactivity, language and imagination, and therefore towards the new forms of alienation and precariousness of the mental work occurring in the Net.

In this book I will examine anew the Marxist language which was dominant in the 1960s, trying to reestablish its vitality with respect to the languages of post-structuralism, schizoanalysis and cyberculture.

Despite the fact that the term “soul” is never used in the language of that historical period, I want to use it—metaphorically and even a bit ironically—in order to rethink the core of many questions referring to the issue of alienation. In the Hegelian vision this issue is defined by the relationship between human essence and activity, while in the materialist vision of Italian Workerism (*Operaiismo*), alienation is defined as the relationship between human time and capitalist value, that is to say as the reification of both body and soul. In the Hegelian-Marxist tradition of the 20th Century, the concept of “alienation” refers specifically to the relation existing between corporeality and human essence. For Hegel the word “alienation” (*Entäusserung*) refers to the self becoming other, to the historical and mundane separation existing between the Being and the existent.

In Marx, the concept of alienation signifies the split between life and labor, the split between the workers’ physical activity and their humanity, their essence as humans. Young Marx, the author of the *1844 Manuscripts* who was the main reference for the radical philosophy of the 1960s, attributes a pivotal role to the notion of alienation.

In Marx’s parlance, as in Hegel before, alienation (*Entäusserung*) and estrangement (*Entfremdung*) are two terms that define the same process from two different standpoints. The first one defines the sense of loss felt by consciousness when faced with an object in the context of capital’s domination; the second term refers to the confrontation between the consciousness and the scene of exteriority, and to the creation of an autonomous consciousness based on the refusal of its own dependence on work.

Italian Workerist thought overturned the vision of Marxism that was dominant in those years: the working class is no longer conceived as a passive object of alienation, but instead as the active subject of a refusal capable of building a community starting out from its estrangement from the interests of capitalistic society.

Alienation is then considered not as the loss of human authenticity, but as estrangement from capitalistic interest, and therefore as a necessary condition for the construction—in a space estranged from and hostile to labor relations—of an ultimately human relationship.

In the context of French Post-Structuralism, a similar overturning of the traditional vision of clinical alienation was finding its way: schizophrenia, considered by psychiatry only as the separation and loss of self-consciousness, is rethought by Félix Guattari in totally new terms. Schizophrenia is not the passive effect of a scission of consciousness, but rather a form of consciousness that is multiple, proliferating and nomadic.

In this book I want to compare the conceptual framework of the '60s based' on the Hegelian concepts of Alienation and Totalization to the conceptual framework of our present, which is based on the concepts of biopolitics and of psychopathologies of desire.

In the first part of the book I want to describe the relationship between philosophy and theories of labor in the '60s. In the wave of a Hegelian Renaissance and the constitution of Critical Theory, industrial labor was seen from the point of view of alienation, and the rebellion of industrial workers against exploitation was seen as the beginning of a process of disalienation.

In the second part of the book I will account for the progressive mentalization of working processes, and the consequent enslavement of the soul. Putting the soul to work: this is the new form of alienation. Our desiring energy is trapped in the trick of self-enterprise, our libidinal investments are regulated according to economic rules, our attention is captured in the precariousness of virtual networks: every fragment of mental activity must be transformed into capital. I will describe the channeling of Desire in the process of valorization and the psychopathological implications of the subjugation of the soul to work processes.

In the third part I will retrace the evolution of several radical theories, from the idealistic concept of Alienation to the analytical concept of psychopathology. I will also compare the philosophy of Desire (Deleuze and Guattari) with the philosophy of Simulation (Baudrillard), in order to underscore their differences but also their complementarity.

In the fourth part of the book I will try to outline the effects of the precarization of labor—especially of cognitive labor—and the effects of the biopolitical subjugation of language and affections.

In the conclusion, I will comment on the current collapse of the integrated psycho-machinic organism that is the Global Economy. The collapse of the Global Economy following the recent financial crack could be the opening of a new era of autonomy and emancipation for the soul.