



Infecting capitalism with the common: The class process, communication, and surplus*

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abstract

This paper makes two moves in considering the question of the communism of capital. First, it draws upon diverse economies scholarship to conceptualize class as the process of creating, appropriating, and distributing surplus labor. Second, the paper relies upon autonomist Marxism to conceptualize communication as an instance of the common informing immaterial labor. These two moves situate communication as an intervention into the class process, offering new avenues for the production of capitalist surplus value. In so doing, however, capital does not capture the common. Rather, communication infects capitalism with non-capitalist practices and values. To support this argument, this paper analyzes field data from a job-training program for economically dislocated workers. The analysis highlights unexpected outcomes, including varying routes to the creation of surplus value, differing notions of value, and possibilities to rethink and restructure capitalism.

The call for this special issue poses the communism of capital as a question, a matter open to investigation as well as the possibilities of the imagination. At the same time, there seems to be a belief that we have witnessed the capture of the common by capitalism (Casarino, 2008). I am sympathetic to this claim even as I believe it overstates the case. A close examination of specific instances of communism within capital, I argue, reveals moments of the common undermining capital.

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The close examination I offer focuses on the use of communication to create surplus value. This focus on communication and surplus allows me to bring together two bodies of scholarship relevant to the communism of capital yet rarely linked in conversation. Scholarship on diverse economies (e.g., Resnick and Wolff, 1987; Gibson-Graham, 2006a, 2006b) offers a decentered capitalism and a conceptualization of class as the process of creating surplus labor. Scholarship on autonomist Marxism (e.g., Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2004, 2009) provides an understanding of the common as a resource for the creation of surplus value. Communication, central to both bodies of scholarship, provides a conceptual and practical bridge between the two.

Communication may be conceptualized in many ways (e.g., Shepherd, St. John and Striphas, 2006). The broad frame for this paper is communication as representation. Thought of as representation, communication matters not for reasons of expression or information flow, but for its ability to create, to constitute. Communication about economics, then, opens up and closes off opportunities for invention and intervention (Gibson-Graham, 2006a; Ruccio, 2008). Too often, though, social observers represent capitalism as *the* economic order of the day (Walters, 1999; Spencer, 2000; Hardt and Negri, 2000). This dominant capital-centric discourse (Gibson-Graham, 2006a) hinders change. Those who wish to intervene in or offer alternatives to capitalism face a daunting task; they confront capitalism as an omniscient, omnipotent system. Such a discursive arrangement too readily consigns resistance and intervention to the margins, always already likely to fail (Gibson-Graham, 2006a). To break out of this enfeebling narrative, we must 'critique... existing conceptions of economy and capitalism... to make room for new economic representations, ones... more friendly and fostering to an innovative and transformative economic politics' (Gibson-Graham, 2006a: ix).

I take up the question of the communism of capital with Gibson-Graham's call for new economic representations squarely in mind. I draw together two bodies of scholarship that, each in its own way, offers a representation of contemporary capitalism that makes visible opportunities to critique and reconfigure economic relations. Within autonomist Marxist thought I focus, particularly, on the idea that capitalism seeks to exploit the general intellect and the common through immaterial labor. From the work of diverse economies scholars, I take a definition of class as a social process of creating surplus labor.

Using these ideas, I argue that communication exemplifies the common and intervenes in the process of creating surplus value. However, capital cannot capture the common without also sowing the seeds of problems. To state otherwise is to miss theoretical, empirical, and practical lessons that may help

provoke possibilities for future political movements and affiliations. Aspects of communism do exist within capitalism. Rather than only representing the capture of the common by capital, though, communism may also undermine capital from within.

I support this argument by drawing upon data collected through a field study of a job-training program for economically dislocated workers. I compare two job-training courses, one for manufacturing work and one for customer service work, focusing on the use of communication to create surplus. In the remainder of the paper I, first, conceptualize class as the process of creating, appropriating, and distributing surplus labor. I then place communication within the class process, as a resource for the creation of surplus labor. Following this conceptual discussion, I use these particular concerns to analyze data collected in a job-training program, foregrounding non-managerial and non-capitalist avenues for the creation, appropriation, and distribution of surplus.

Class, surplus and communication

Class as a process of surplus labor creation

The diverse economies project of non-capitalist representation and invention has generated several insights important to the analysis presented in this paper. One of the most basic insights is that diverse economies already exist, even as we believe that capitalism is the sole economic system (Gibson-Graham, 2006a). Gibson-Graham (2006a) offers another insight. Assessing capitalist-centric discourse from a post-structuralist, feminist perspective, she turns attention to the metaphor of infection. Infection suggests an entity incubating and spreading within a host body. In dominant discourse, capitalism is always seen as the invading, consuming, or infecting body. Intriguingly, even as it consumes, capitalism is itself never infected. Decentering the power of capitalism, then, offers the advantage of considering how non-capitalist practices may infect capitalism. For my purposes, capitalism may (attempt to) consume the common. Yet, as it does, the common may incubate alternative economic practices from within capitalism. I will develop this claim in later sections, but wish to provide a concrete illustration here. Capitalism seeks to incorporate robust forms of cooperation into the creation of surplus value. Cooperation carries with it a set of ethical values and relations, such as responsibility to another, which may provide a resource for questioning and critiquing existing economic relations.

Diverse economy scholars' insights often revolve around a particular perspective on 'class' (Resnick and Wolff, 1987). Rather than representing class as groups, diverse economies scholars define class as the overdetermined 'social process of

producing and appropriating surplus labor... and the associated process of surplus labor distribution' (Gibson-Graham, 2006a: 52). This conceptualization of class possesses several advantages for engaging the question of the communism of capital. First, the definition highlights economy as political economy by distinguishing the moments of surplus labor production, appropriation, and distribution and understanding these moments as ethical decisions (Gibson-Graham, 2006b). For example, who should receive distributions of surplus labor? What counts as surplus, versus necessary, labor?

Second, emphasizing class as a social process necessitates examining class in specific contexts and in relation to other processes, such as communication. Class is but one 'process among the many that constitute social life' (Resnick and Wolff, 1987: 115) and varies across time, space, and economies. With respect specifically to capitalism, the class process is one 'in which surplus labor is appropriated from wage laborers in value form' (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 54). But, a contextualized, processualized class concept illuminates surplus labor production in many sites, such as households (Fraad, Resnick and Wolff, 1994; Cameron, 2000), the family (Fraad, 2000), self-employment (Hotch, 2000), and universities (Curtis, 2001). Subsequently, the possibility of someone occupying multiple class positions becomes visible:

a worker in a capitalist enterprise may participate in an exploitative capitalist class process at work, a communal class process at home in a collectively organized household, and work on the weekend and evenings in an independent class process as a self-employed dressmaker. (Arvidson, 2000: 170)

Diverse economies scholars' examination of choices and processes at more concrete meso and micro levels responds to autonomists' tendency to emphasize an abstract and macro level of investigation, particularly Hardt and Negri (Gilbert, 2008). Wolff (2010), for instance, has argued for a micro socialism, a firm-specific intervention in which the members who produce surplus labor also control its appropriation and distribution. His example is of a start-up in which members intentionally incorporate time and energy into their weekly work to decide what to do with their surplus. The Mondragón cooperatives represent a much larger instance of micro socialism, one in which the cooperators intentionally produce, appropriate, and distribute surplus labor for the benefit of a community economy (Gibson-Graham, 2006b). Meso- and micro- analyses and interventions such as these reveal the class differences and contradictions missing from analyses of empire, particularly, the relations of place-bound surplus value creation to place-less surplus value appropriation (Resnick and Wolff, 2001).

Theorizing these approaches, Gibson-Graham (2004: 27) identifies two avenues for ‘transformative action’, ‘the politics of empire’ and ‘the politics of place’. The politics of empire call for revolution to replace the totality of capitalism. In the politics of place, ‘places always fail to be fully capitalist, and herein lies their potential to become something other’ (Gibson-Graham, 2004: 33). Though these avenues overlap and inform one another, it is the latter avenue, the politics of place, which offers unique insight into the question of the relations between communism and capitalism.

The politics of place and conceptualizing class as a process enlarge the possibilities before us.

Projects of class transformation are therefore always possible and do not necessarily involve social upheaval and hegemonic transition. Class struggles do not necessarily take place between groups of people whose identities are constituted by the objective reality and subjective consciousness of a particular location in a social structure. Rather, they take place whenever there is an attempt to change the way in which surplus labor is produced, appropriated, or distributed. (Gibson-Graham, 2006a: 59)

Thinking of class struggle as occurring whenever and wherever surplus labor production, creation, or distribution shifts informs my understanding of what transpires when capital attempts to capture the common. Ultimately, separating class from ‘structural or hegemonic conceptions of capitalist society’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006a: 58) makes room for engaging already existing, and imagining future, struggle and change (Cameron and Gibson-Graham, 2003). A stakeholder model of organization (Deetz, 1995), a Benefit Corporation, collaborative software development (Adler, 2006), and even entrepreneurship (Jones and Murtola, 2012), become sites of struggle, not only sites of capital ever improving itself.

Of course, there are limitations to the diverse economies approach. One risk is that in decentering capitalism, capitalism becomes just another option among others for organizing the creation, appropriation, and distribution of surplus labor. Second, and related, perhaps as we see capitalism as one option among others, we risk a belief that since it is just one option, capitalism will wither away. A third risk is that in opening up the range of economic possibilities, capitalist and otherwise, we lose site of the material, cultural, libidinal, and so on, enablements and constraints that make some possibilities more or less likely than others (Grossberg, 2010).

Still, being alert to already existing alternative representations and practices of organizational and economic processes suggests we should be more hopeful than many critics of capitalism allow. With this hopefulness in mind I turn to

autonomist Marxist thought for an additional account of contemporary capitalism that enlarges our organizational and economic imagination. As I have suggested, I am sympathetic to autonomist Marxists' claims that capital has captured the common even as I believe they overstate the situation.

Communication and the creation of surplus value

Conceptualizing class as an overdetermined social process makes room for considering its relation to other social processes, such as communication. This possibility is particularly timely; the process of communication has assumed a more central role in the capitalist class process of producing surplus value (Lazzarato, 1996; Hardt and Negri, 2000). The development of brands (Arvidsson, 2006; Thrift, 2006), creation and maintenance of social networks (Currid, 2007), provision of relational mutuality in customer service (Carlone, 2008), creativity (Bilton and Leary, 2002), and collaborative community (Heckscher and Adler, 2006) all illustrate the participation of the socio-cultural terrain of communication in the production of surplus value.

Autonomists have been at the forefront in theorizing the use of communication to produce intangible effects or commodities, such as subjectivity, affect, or image. Lazzarato captures this development with the concept of immaterial labor, 'labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity' (Lazzarato, 1996: 133). Immaterial labor draws upon 'the general intellect', the storehouse of knowledge of a culture and society, as 'a direct force of production' (Marx, 1973: 706). In other words, immaterial labor relies upon the knowledge, attitudes, and skills acquired by workers outside of work, through their participation in society (Virno, 1996a, 1996b, 2001). Knowing something about cooperation or image management, for instance, may be useful, and valuable, when one goes to work.

The general intellect is part of the common, the broader 'shared resources and capacities' (Jones and Murtola, 2012: 640) that provides sources of value. Hardt identifies two forms of the common. Air, land, and water form the natural commons. The artificial commons 'results [from] human labor and creativity such as ideas, language, affects, and so forth' (Hardt, 2010: 350). In both natural and artificial forms, the common exists apart from capitalism, autonomous on its own terms.

Furthermore, as capitalism relies on the common (and particularly the artificial common), forms of working together, such as collaboration, become more important. Basically, if good ideas exist between people, and must be puzzled over and fit together by groups of people, capitalism must incorporate

collaboration to produce surplus value. These practices provide ‘the tools for overthrowing the capitalist mode of production’ and constitute ‘the bases for an alternative society and mode of production, a communism of the common’ (Hardt, 2010: 352).

To come to this hopeful conclusion Hardt carefully contrasts qualitative changes to capitalism in terms of forms of property, arguing for a banishment of private and collective property in favor of the common. Currently, the autonomy of the common shifts the nature of property to one that capitalists have, at best, difficulty controlling. As a result, there is movement from revenue as profit to revenue as rent, illustrated by quests for and controversies surrounding patents and copyrights. Patents and similar objectifications raise the possibility that capitalism may expropriate the common without controlling its production. This raises a question. Might forms of communication be similarly transformed, weakening their non-capitalist potential¹?

As Hardt himself acknowledges, his analysis highlights qualitative changes not yet dominant in quantitative terms. I find the cautionary note here important. First, forms of immaterial property likely need to be delineated in our analyses. Seeking a patent for how a plant may possess medicinal properties seems different from claiming possession of a form of talk for its social support and stress reduction (Goldsmith, 2004). Because the latter is ubiquitous, its novelty, a necessary quality for a patent, for instance, seems limited. In other words, it seems very difficult to extract rent from forms of talk that are not scarce. Second, we must be careful not to cover over the contradictions or ‘class differences’ that stem from class processes (Resnick and Wolff, 2001: 69). A focus on rent may occlude the class process, as defined by Resnick and Wolff (1987), since a class process requires the creation of surplus labor.

Recalling the metaphor of infection (Gibson-Graham, 2006a) we would do well to consider how the common, brought within capitalism, infects or modifies capitalism. The common suggests knowledge shared with others because we have come to experience and make sense of experience together. ‘The production of the common always involves a surplus that cannot be expropriated by capital’ (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 212). Casarino (2008) goes further in arguing that there is only one surplus, only part of which capital is ever able to subsume.

The qualitative difference between capital and the common consists in positing surplus in different ways, in engaging surplus to different ends. Surplus value is living surplus as separation. Surplus common is living surplus as incorporation. (Casarino, 2008: 23)

1 I am thankful to the anonymous reviewers for pointing me toward this possibility.

Or, as Gibson-Graham (2006b) prefers, the common provides an intentionally shared basis for community. The common may refer to a description of knowledge and skill that arise spontaneously out of human interaction, and may refer to a prescription for that knowledge and skill to guide human interaction. Perhaps, living surplus as incorporation will transform our understanding and practice of the incorporation.

Communication knowledge, attitude and skill, part of the common, inform immaterial labor. Indeed, Greene extends the power of immaterial labor with his concept of 'communicative labor'. Echoing the sense of change and process central to the study of diverse economies and autonomist Marxism, communicative labor brings into relief 'changes in the sphere of production and the role that [communication] plays as a practice, process, and product of economic, political, ideological, and cultural value' (Greene, 2004: 202). Communication, considered as a multiply valued practice, process, and product, points toward how communication commonplaces may produce surplus value as well as surplus common.

At least within the US context, culture provides a rich resource for thinking and talking about communication (Carey, 1989; Craig, 1999). Underwriting everyday discussions of how people do and should communicate, whether in civil society or romantic relationships, are appeals to 'honesty', 'clarity', 'understanding', and so on. Such appeals rely upon commonplace beliefs (Taylor, 1992; Craig, 1999) about what communication is, does, and requires. In the language of the autonomists, these commonplaces are part of the spontaneous, human-created common.

In addition to animating everyday discourse, communication commonplaces authorize many industries, organizations, and jobs. For example, interactive service work, as in sales or customer service, relies upon communication commonplaces, such as authenticity or empathy, often translating them into practice in innovative, even contradictory, ways (Korczynski, 2005; Korczynski and Ott, 2004). Here, commonplaces become prescriptions for performing certain kinds of work.

Mutuality and participation represent two communication commonplaces important to this paper. Each commonplace, in its own way, aids the creation of surplus value. Yet, each also remains autonomous, as does the common more generally (Hardt, 2010). I add, through a return to diverse economies, that as they create surplus value, each commonplace also infects capitalism (Gibson-Graham, 2006a). Communication implicates interactants in an ethical relationship. In other words, communication, performed, enacts the common as

relational doing (Pearce, 2007). The communication features of the work analyzed below infect capitalism because they call into being ethical relationships that we perform with others and to which we hold them and ourselves accountable.

Ongoing faith in mutuality indexes the power of communication to allow people to share experience, come together, and craft an interdependent future (Williams, 1985; Morley, 2005). As with any commonplace, mutuality not only describes human interaction, it also prescribes interaction; mutuality provides a standard for good communication. Communication, figured as mutuality, requires symmetrical, non-manipulative, and tight relationships (Depew and Peters, 2001) and 'that good and just relations among people require a knowledge of and care for souls' (Peters, 1999: 47). Even when people experience disagreement or conflict in their relations, they expect that their conversational partner(s) will afford them respect, honesty, and some sense that 'we are in this together'.

Related to mutuality is the commonplace of participation. At its most basic, participation draws attention to communication as an interactive process of joint decision-making and our desire to make our world together (Deetz, 1992; Pearce, 2007). Participation requires that we freely and openly form ideas and interests during conversation and decision making processes. Participative communication, then, should be a dialogic and collaborative construction of self, other, and world (Deetz, 1995; Gadamer, 2004).

Importantly for the analysis presented below, mutuality and participation illustrate a socialization of production that exists uneasily with the pursuit of surplus value (Adler, 2006). Participation as a basis for collaborative community in knowledge intensive firms (Heckscher and Adler, 2006) retains its power as a foundation for democratic society. Thus, changes in the nature of economic competition may help drive organizing toward more democratic and community-oriented practices. To the extent that economic practices capitalize on communication commonplaces, particular standards of goodness are introduced to the class process. As will be seen in the analysis, as capitalism captures mutuality and participation in the effort to produce surplus value, it introduces a set of practices and outcomes that may undermine the exploitative dimension of the class process. In other words, it is precisely because communication

represented as mutuality and participation focuses on a particular normative base for engaging in society that communication may infect capitalism².

Bringing the insights of diverse economies scholars to the work of autonomist Marxists pays off in at least two ways. First, to reiterate, too often the relation of communication to the production of surplus value is represented in terms of colonization (e.g., Deetz, 1992; Habermas, 1987; Sayer, 1999; Sproule, 1990; Tompkins, 2005) or consumption (Casarino, 2008; Hardt and Negri, 2000; Virno, 1996a). Alternatively, this paper asks how communication might 'infect' (Gibson-Graham, 2006a: 141) capitalism. Second, the insights move us from abstract concerns with 'empire' (Hardt and Negri, 2000) and 'the multitude' (Hardt and Negri, 2004) to a level where we may observe 'production today [as] production from the common, in common, of the common' (Jones and Murtola, 2012: 641). Finally, combining the concepts of class as process and the common hold significant potential for timely intervention into contemporary economic practices³. Perhaps we might aid the communicative infection of capitalism.

Studying class, surplus and communication

This analysis stems from an ongoing study of the cultural foundations for and implications of the replacement of US manufacturing jobs with service and knowledge-intensive work. The site for this ongoing study, New Skill, is a locally designed and implemented job-training program in a Southeastern US metropolitan area experiencing a deep and rapid economic transformation. Since 2000 tens of thousands of people have lost manufacturing and related jobs.⁴ Median household incomes and wages in the metropolitan area have remained stagnant and declined, respectively. Between 1999 and 2005 poverty rates increased in the metropolitan statistical area, center city and suburbs (Berube and Kneebone, 2006). In late 2003, sparked by persistent layoffs in the region's

2 Certainly, other communication commonplaces exist, many also with great historical and cultural purchase (see, for example, Carey, 1989). I do not claim that mutuality or participation are or should be the standards for judging communication. To be sure, there are good reasons not to treat these as the norm (Peters, 2006). Still, mutuality and participation possess great resonance in US culture and often appear in new economy work.

3 This is not to deny the need for interventions at other levels. Still, a focus on more micro scales affords us some room to maneuver within existing conditions, and begin to see what meso and macro level changes we might need and pursue.

4 Between 2000 and 2010, the region lost approximately 85,000 manufacturing and related jobs. Average unemployment rose to more than 8.0 percent at the end of 2004 (Bureau of Labor Statistics U-3 data). As of March 2010, the rate stood at 11.6 percent, at 10.0 percent as of December 2011, and at 9.1 percent as of October 2012.

manufacturing sector, a coalition of public and non-profit agency leaders announced their intention to help the community and individuals respond to the changing economy. Assistance took the form of New Skill, a community college-based job-training program⁵.

Four features distinguish New Skill. First, it is designed specifically for those who have lost manufacturing jobs and who must quickly re-enter the workforce, presumably in a new industry. Second, the program retrains participants in no more than 90 days. Third, the training is for jobs in growing industries in the local economy. Finally, New Skill staff members develop courses by monitoring local economic and industry trends to identify employment opportunities and working with industry representatives to create curriculum. In their curriculum development, New Skill staff members ask industry representatives two questions: 1) What must your employees know to be successful? and 2) What skills, attitudes, and experiences will give a job candidate an advantage in your hiring process? Course content and instruction, then, should prepare learners to meet employer expectations in occupations with stability and opportunity.

New Skill has come to be seen as a model for re-training dislocated workers in the contemporary economy. Numerous other community and community college leaders from around the country have turned to New Skill staff for guidance with their own programs. Also, the regional commitment to job training programs often is cited as a model for other US communities.

As a site for various transitions New Skill thus offers an important opportunity to: 1) examine economic representations and imaginaries surrounding economic transitions (Ruccio, 2008; Jessop, 2004), 2) respond to the need to situate analyses of contemporary economic relations in more or less localized contexts (Gleadle, Cornelius and Pezet, 2008), and 3) inquire into the situated, contingent meanings, practices and implications of the class process (Carlone and Larson, 2006). A goal of this analysis is to show the possibilities that exist within, against, and alongside political, cultural, and economic restructuring (May and Morrison, 2003; McGee, 2005).

In addition, this analysis attends to the New Skill curricula for how it seizes upon common notions of what counts as good communication so that these may be cultivated, enhanced and directed toward the creation of surplus value. New Skill is a technology for the creation/enhancement of communicative laborers. Examining New Skill, then,

5 To maintain confidentiality, I use pseudonyms throughout.

reveals how power works productively by augmenting the human capacity for speech/communication. [T]he productive power of cultural governance resides in the generation of subjects who come to understand themselves as speaking subjects willing to regulate and transform their political, economic, cultural and affective relationships. (Greene and Hicks, 2005: 101)

In the cases analyzed below, I focus on how the communication component of the courses provided 'specific techniques that beings use to understand themselves' (Greene and Hicks, 2005: 101) and how these techniques simultaneously enhanced and undermined the production of surplus value.

Mutuality and participation highlight certain features of communication. Lay and academic theorists and practitioners of communication may develop specific practices or technologies (Foucault, 1988; Greene and Hicks, 2005) of communication that embody mutuality and participation. For instance, active listening may help comprise technologies of dialogue or collaboration. Such communication technologies, many hope, will result in certain outcomes, such as cooperation, understanding or community. For example, to perform customer service work the mutuality commonplace must be foregrounded, cultivated through practice and directed toward the customer. Hence, job-training programs intervene in the class process by channeling the common toward the production of economic value.

New Skill offers a customer service representative course (CSR) and a certified manufacturing technician (CMT) course, among others. Data collected for this paper came from these two courses through a total of 140 hours of observation and 28 interviews. Approximately 60 hours over 12 weeks were spent observing the naturally occurring practices of two offerings of the CSR course. Seven people enrolled in the first course, ten in the second. CSR instruction included lectures, discussions of actual, tape recorded customer service phone calls, mock phone calls, visits by potential employers and various in-class exercises. Though the course covered general customer service, the specific focus became the financial services/credit card industry due to local hiring patterns and course instructor qualifications. Observations in the CMT course took place over approximately 80 hours. Nineteen people completed this course, which included lectures, video lessons, exams, discussions and exercises.

CSR interviews included the course instructor and 14 of the 17 learners. CMT interviews included the course instructor and 13 of the 19 learners. When possible, formal respondent interviews provided depth. Typically, though, I relied upon ethnographic interviews that responded to the naturally occurring flow of conversations, activities and breaks of the classroom setting (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). This strategy better responded to course participants' lives, severely

impacted due to their un- and under-employment⁶. I analyzed data from observations, ethnographic interviews and course documents.

Using especially the concepts of class, mutuality and participation, I worked through data via open, or exploratory, categorizing (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). As I read through field notes, interview transcripts and notes, and course materials I looked for those places where communication, as participation or mutuality, and surplus value creation arose. This reading brought forth, in each course, how communication aids firm success by creating surplus value. These early categories informed subsequent periods of data collection and analysis.

I then worked through the data with the concept of infection in mind, reading for signs of critique, disagreement or confusion on the part of course members. On this reading I noted how participation and mutuality provided resources to push back against surplus value creation and appropriation. For example, I noted robust discussion of who should control labor, work and surplus value.

As I developed these categories around the common within the class process I recognized similarities between and differences across the CMT and CSR courses. For example, I noted in both courses the displacement of traditional managers, offering greater authority to labor. I also noted an ongoing focus on capitalist surplus value in the CMT course, in contrast to surplus social value in the CSR course. For this paper, I selected the categories and data excerpts that best represented the use of communication commonplaces to create surplus value and that also depicted the use of these commonplaces to push back against or infect the quest for surplus.

Communist infections of capitalism

Viewed through a capitalism-as-dominant lens, the following data could be seen as more of the same, as capital finding new ways of conditioning labor for and incorporating it into the production of surplus value. To restate the argument for this paper, however, diverse representations of economy de-center capitalism and its presumed dominance. Beginning with the premise that diverse economies exist, I argue that as a capitalist class process draws the common into the creation of surplus value, capitalism is infected with aspects of communism.

⁶ Contrary to popular depictions of the unemployed as possessing much free time, this population had little actual control over their use of time due to a constant scramble to find/retain work, obtain financial resources to pay bills, retrain, secure transportation and so on. It quickly became obvious that formal, out of class interviews posed significant challenges to the participants.

Specifically, the autonomous communication commonplaces of participation and mutuality infect capitalism with socio-cultural demands that capitalism cannot meet. The following analysis has two sections, one assessing the use of participation in the Certified Manufacturing Technician (CMT) course and one assessing the use of mutuality in the Customer Service Representative (CSR) course.

Participation within the manufacturing class process

The Certified Manufacturing Technician course certifies learners in the skills and techniques required of knowledge-based manufacturing. This purpose resulted in a course that engaged the class process by depicting individual and collective labor as responsible, creative and knowledgeable. Capitalizing on these attributes required labor to participate extensively in the manufacturing process. Participation, as discussed earlier, invokes specific ideals and practices that situate labor as autonomous, co-creators of manufacturing futures.

CMT taught advanced manufacturing techniques through eight units: manufacturing concepts, math for measurement, communication and teamwork, problem solving, statistical process control, blueprint reading, the business of manufacturing, and computer use in manufacturing. A theme connected course units: US manufacturers' success lies in producing high-quality products for their customers; attaining customer-driven quality requires the creativity, intelligence and cooperation of those who actually produce products—manufacturing technicians. Cultivating intelligent, creative and collaborative technicians enhanced the production of surplus value.

As CMT instructor, Mike drew upon a long career in manufacturing operations management to stress that manufacturing success lay in 'quality people', not machinery, organizational structures, or even management. On the first morning of class he linked the personal to manufacturing, 'Too often, in our personal and professional lives, we put Band Aids on symptoms. What we really need is quality in whatever we do. Our job, in whatever we do, is to provide quality and add value'. 'Our current and future employers', he continued, 'need our ideas, experiences and abilities to be successful'.

'Quality people' works to describe and prescribe the need to put 'to work human faculties, competencies, knowledges, and affects' (Hardt, 2010: 353) developed inside and outside of work. Invoking quality people suggests the putting to work of the best of the common. Diverse economies scholars (e.g., Gibson-Graham, 2006b) and autonomists (e.g., Hardt and Negri, 2009) agree on the ongoing (re-)creation of subjects through economic activity. This CMT job-training course

seeks to recreate labor as autonomous, intelligent and collaborative. For example, in one class session learners engaged in a lengthy problem solving exercise to diagnose a decline in quality. In the more successful groups, participants learned through role-playing that customer and technician cooperation led to the discovery of vital information. Supervisors had little knowledge pertinent to the problem at hand.

Lessons about the need for and consequences of quality people, those who practiced creativity and responsibility, resonated with learners and had unexpected consequences for the creation of surplus value. For instance, personal responsibility explicitly required technicians to labor for and identify with others. Through cooperation learners often came to identify with other subjects, such as the customer, broadening those with a stake in manufacturing and shifting manufacturing from a private, enclosed endeavor to one more public and open. Learners saw themselves, for instance, as technicians *and* customers, with overlapping needs and concerns, some of which contradicted narrow interests of capitalists. Boundaries of the class process expanded to include a range of subjects, interests and values. Learners discovered that they had much in common with various other subjects.

Serving and identifying with customers raised questions of authority over the manufacturing process. Other aspects of the course raised additional authority questions. Mike's stories had a recurring moral: Management too often gets in the way of quality people finding good solutions to problems. One tale recounted the history of Lincoln Electric, an Ohio-based welding products company. Lincoln Electric, according to Mike, was one of the first US companies to provide employee health plans, vacation benefits and stock ownership; has relied upon an employee advisory board since the early 1900s; and has never laid off employees. Especially given their own work experiences, this story awed learners. One shouted, 'Are they coming here?'. Mike foregrounded the lesson he wished to impart:

Talk about progressive. You know, it's the people that do this. Your attitude is more important than the culture of the company. This is not management. This is the people. This is about attitudes, and how we take care of our time and talents. That is how we will be judged.

Understood from the perspective of participation as aiding the creation, appropriation and distribution of surplus value, the Lincoln Electric story presents several lessons. First, the story emphasizes, again, the role of personal responsibility, creativity and autonomy to firm success. Management recedes in importance. Second, attitudes, time and talents remain distinct from firm culture and management. This may be seen as illustrating claims that immaterial and

communicative labor draw upon knowledge and capacities learned outside of work. Advice that ‘we’ must care for our ‘time and talents’ is suggestive of the commons and commonwealth. Third, I find Mike’s use of ‘the people’ intriguing. On the one hand, Hardt and Negri (2000) have been quite critical of the concept of ‘the people’ for its close connection to nationalism, among other problems. At the same time, the story here is at the firm level, not the nation-state, perhaps sidestepping problems of national pride, racial purity and so on. (Other parts of the course pointed toward an embrace of diversity within participation.) What I find interesting in this case is that the phrase ‘the people’ began to suggest ‘self-rule’ and the invention of ‘lasting democratic forms of social organization’ (Hardt and Negri, 2009: viii). ‘The people’ placed a possible cooperative subjectivity before learners. Indeed, throughout the course I noted numerous examples of spontaneous cooperation: study groups, learners tutoring other learners and learner presentations promoting the course and co-learners rather than the presenter.

Finally, the Lincoln Electric story places surplus value in relation to ethical decision making and to labor occupying multiple class positions. As related in the story, portions of the surplus appropriated from Lincoln Electric laborers are distributed back to them in the form of health and vacation benefits. As owners of Lincoln Electric stock, laborers also occupy a position whereby they have some voice in the distribution of the surplus that is appropriated from them, some of which may return to them in the form of dividend payments. Finally, portions of appropriated surplus value may be directed toward the maintenance of employment levels, rather than toward profit. Though these lessons remained inchoate, Lincoln Electric drew attention to ethical questions and decisions that arise when participation contributes to the class process.

As Mike’s sketch of Lincoln Electric suggests, creating surplus value through participation invoked the ideal of a common future created with others and provided a counterpoint to traditional meanings of management. For example, the Communication and Teamwork unit considered McGregor’s (1960) Theories X and Y. Unit materials clearly preferred Theory Y, emphasizing labor as self-directed, responsible, creative and imaginative, and filled with inherent potential. Mike leveraged this material with numerous stories of US manufacturers placed in jeopardy because managers ‘got in the way of their people’. Employee, firm and societal wellbeing hinged upon labor performing their ‘natural’ abilities, without managerial oversight; success lay in labor autonomy.

The confluence of lessons about ‘in the way’-managers, stories of firms offering long-term employment and mechanisms for employee voice, learners’ own (under-) employment experiences, and the call for responsible action on the part

of manufacturing technicians foregrounded labor authority as central to the class process of creating, appropriating and distributing surplus value. Subsequently, labor authority and values of cooperation, self-direction and responsibility replaced traditional management. As Gibson-Graham (2006a) argued, changes in the class process equate to class struggle. In this instance of New Skill, class struggle was made quite apparent, in part because participation was chosen as the best avenue for surplus value creation. Mike could have easily taught creative labor as subservient to management. Instead, he stressed creative labor in place of management. We should see this not as a personal preference, but as a preference arising from the common, inserting communism into capitalism.

Labor emerged as the central, creative figure in manufacturing. In fact, course activities asked learners to assume various class process subject positions; learners created and ran their own businesses, calculated cash flow, managed growth, planned future projects, considered open book management and allocated resources. Lessons on how to calculate costs and profits proved particularly interesting. With the abatement of managers and management, calculating and assessing costs and profit fell within the purview of manufacturing technicians. Moreover, learner questions about the definition and calculation of costs and profits suggested that producers might directly appropriate the surplus value they create, as in Wolff's (2010) micro socialism.

In one accounting exercise participants calculated labor variance, comparing actual results of labor to 'standard amounts'. Standard labor efficiency should have led to a profit of \$60.90. However, a negative variance in labor efficiency led to a profit of \$48.30. In a second version of the exercise, a variance in price, rather than labor, raised profit to \$72.90. Not surprisingly, each variance exercise emphasized the need to account for costs and revenues. Simultaneously, however, costs, revenues and profits were represented as outcomes of human, ethical decisions, not naturally given features (Gibson-Graham, 2006b) of (capitalist) economic practice. Multiple representations of variance illuminated various definitions of and paths toward 'profit'. As Marx wrote, 'In all states of society, the labour-time that it costs to produce the means of subsistence, must necessarily be an object of interest to mankind' (Marx, 1967: 71). Profit and cost definitions and calculations became general economic practices, not strictly managerial or capitalist ones. More important, profit and cost came to be the ethical decisions of labor. Inserting participation into the capitalist class process reconfigured that process so that the appropriation of surplus value by non-producers became less tenable.

Learners invoked several existing and imagined pathways to profit. For instance, course materials defined manufacturing technicians as 'direct labor' and indirect

labor as ‘manufacturing labor costs that are difficult to trace to specific products’. One learner astutely asked Mike if variance analysis could be applied to ‘indirect costs’, such as indirect labor. Mike’s reply of ‘absolutely’, prompted smiles, laughter, and conversation among learners about the meaning of supervisors and managers. Within the capitalist class process, managers represent unproductive labor since they do not produce surplus value. Rather, they receive a distribution of the surplus value produced by labor. This distribution covers the ‘managerial supervision of productive laborers... [which] provides a political condition’ for the production of surplus value (Resnick and Wolff, 1987: 129). But, as labor participation enhanced surplus value creation, it also diminished the political necessity of, and surplus distribution to, managers.

Ultimately, the CMT course reliance upon participation directed learners toward cooperative management of manufacturing and collective creation, appropriation, and distribution of surplus value.

Mutuality within the customer service class process

In contrast to manufacturing, the result of customer service is not a tangible product, but an intangible relationship between the customer service representative and the customer. To be of value to the firm employing the customer service representative, this relationship should rest upon a foundation of mutuality, a communication commonplace that enacts the common as a site for obligation and ethical reciprocity. For several reasons, though, this foundation presents problems for the capture of the common by capitalism. Mutuality precedes the customer-customer service representative relationship, establishing at least part of the context for this relationship. Second, once invoked, mutuality becomes the primary resource for practicing customer service and creating surplus value. Finally, mutuality also exists as an outcome of good customer service. At each ‘stage’ of customer service, mutuality conditions the capitalist production of surplus value and infects this production with the social value of the common good⁷. For these reasons I disagree with claims that capital has captured the common (Casarino, 2008). With respect to customer service work, the common does appear at the beginning, middle, and end of capitalist production (Hardt and Negri, 2004). CSR learners remain keen to the distinction between ‘living and producing’ (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 148), however, using the values of living to assess the values of producing.

7 As a contrast, we might imagine customer service premised on a belief in communication as information. In such a scenario, a good customer service representative would only provide factual responses to customer inquiries, perhaps reducing the ethical obligation to another. Such customer service does exist, though it was not present in this job-training course.

The CSR course stressed the centrality of the customer service representative to firm success. The principal lesson was this: surplus value often derives less from a product and more from the service attached to that product. Hence, customer service representatives have direct, economically value-able contact with customers. Good customer service representatives, participants learned, draw the customer into a personal relationship. In turn, this personal relationship creates a relation with the firm and retains the customer.

As the central lesson illustrates, the CSR course mixed the common with capitalism. Mutuality helped to produce surplus value. For example, one course text characterized the CSR as the ‘primary contact’ and ‘voice of the organization’ for customers. Customer service representatives ‘project the company’s image’ and cultivate relationships with customers. Providing customers with ‘a wonderful experience’ maintains the relationships. Another text, *The Customer*, taught that being a good customer service representative rests on ‘the deep conviction [that we should recognize] the Customer [sic] as a human being and a Valued Asset [sic] to our business’. To be successful, customer service representatives must ‘quickly tune into people and [be] sensitive to their needs’. Finally, for Ann, the course instructor and a financial services call center trainer, the customer ‘needs to feel important and appreciated, needs the approval of others to support his/her self-approval, and fundamentally welcomes contact’.

To fulfill this mission, CSR communicative performances required authenticity and commitment in their communication, a ‘genuine smile in the voice’. As one text put it, ‘treat every problem with respect, keep calm, cool and pleasant while avoiding all arguments, agree as often as possible, avoid placing blame, use reflective responses, exchange mutual feedback, agree on a solution that will build trust and loyalty, and recognize different communication styles’. Achieving all of this ‘provides a moment of truth’ for each customer.

Creating authentic relations and providing moments of truth recruit and retain customers and create surplus value. Ann underscored the value of CSRs with examples drawn from her experiences in the financial services industry. One story assessed the loss of a customer who annually charged \$100,000 on her credit card. ‘At [Ann’s employer,] we need to get 68 new customers to replace that one lost customer’. To avoid that situation, ‘Your job is to make the customer feel that your company is the best’.

As these examples show, the course drew attention to the role of the customer as well as the customer service representative in quality customer service. Customers have a role to play, even if that role is somewhat guided by the customer service representative; customers should express themselves, and,

ideally, come to have certain feelings and responses with and toward the CSR. Creating authentic relations and moments of truth require the work of customer service representatives *and* customers. Mutuality calls forth reciprocity, whether the context is one of the common or a capitalist class process. People may jointly create authentic relations in both contexts. More to the point, authentic relations require joint creation.

Customer service work resembles the creative labor of artists and authors, those for whom the value of a work depends heavily on audience judgment. CSR labor must be performed for and with others and with certain effects to create surplus value. Indeed, the centrality of customers in assessing performances may be witnessed 'in the emergence of calculations of economic value' for things such as 'customer loyalty and customer satisfaction' (Adkins, 2005: 123). However, authentic relations may aid firm profitability, but there is an additional creation that exceeds calculations of profit. Customers and customer service representatives *together* create surplus as surplus value and surplus common.

Joint production of surplus value and surplus common helps explain why mixing the common and capitalism does not lead to the capture of the former by the latter. Rather, recalling that many processes constitute social life (Resnick and Wolff, 1987), the communication process of mutuality retains its autonomy. Jointly performed labor of mutual communication does not only lead to surplus economic value, but a surplus social value, as well. Authentic communicative connections with others are often seen as goods in and of themselves, exceeding the boundaries of capitalist valuation (Hardt and Negri, 2000). In the CSR class process, the social practice and cultural value of authentic, mutual communication helped create surplus economic value, even as authentic, mutual communication infected this creation with surplus common. As a sign of infection, customer service interactions may breed solidarity against corporate power and mistreatment. As customers and customer service representatives identify with one another they may align themselves against other interests and parties, such as managers who place time restrictions on interactions in the name of efficiency and profit.

As discussed, customer service provision rested upon a strongly ethical understanding of the customer as a fellow human and customer service interactions as mutual. However, course instruction also advocated selling oneself, which, for learners, represented a contradictory resource for creating surplus economic value. Learners drew upon the resources of mutuality to obstruct surplus economic value creation and the commodification of themselves and their relationships.

All New Skill courses included career services instruction in ‘selling oneself’: conducting a job search, writing cover letters and résumés, and presenting oneself in an interview. Though participants were, on the whole, familiar with job search devices and strategies, collating them under the label of ‘selling oneself’ confounded and offended many CSR participants, in part because the dictum violated other principles, especially authenticity.

Ann arranged class visits by local customer service center representatives to extend classroom learning and provide opportunities to practice job-seeking skills. During one visit by a human resources professional from a regional bank, learners’ concerns focused heavily on the nature of the work, benefits packages and the hiring process. When Ann playfully prodded participants to tell the HR rep about their course, ‘Come on guys, sell yourselves a little!’ they remained silent. It fell to Ann to tell the recruiter about the course. Ann expressed her frustration after the visit. ‘You all had an opportunity here to sell yourselves! Why didn’t you tell them what you can do? What you can offer? What you’ve learned?’ Fieldnotes indicate similar wonder. Learners had ample time with an appreciative audience, one interested in hiring personnel for a call center. Yet, they remained surprisingly silent. Participants looked blankly at Ann until one broke the silence: ‘What do you mean?’

A second visitor worked for a marketing company specializing in identity branding. The company sold an electronic communications package to help sales people maintain close, though largely automated, contact with their (prospective) customers. His presentation blended product information with instruction in how to sell oneself: ‘Our product sets you apart so that you stand out from the crowd. You’ve got to answer the question for your customer, “Why should I choose you?”’

After the recruiter left a learner turned to his peers and wondered, ‘What’s identity branding?’ ‘It’s a computer tool to customize what you want to say’, came one reply. Another added, ‘You stay in touch with your customers’. These answers failed to curb the learner’s bewilderment. ‘OK. But what is it? What’s the actual product? What are they selling? What’s identity branding?’

Finally, one learner voiced his concerns about selling himself in customer service work in an interview:

I don’t see [customer service] so much as being honest work, because what you are representing to your customer is just not necessarily your personality. It’s a front. You are putting on a mask to present to the customers. And I believe when you’re working honestly, you’re working as yourself. Is it me that’s making the money or just this person I’m pretending to be?

Learners' reactions to selling oneself relied upon mutuality and authenticity as a source of critique. This use of the common to create surplus allowed learners to assert the primacy of human relationships and undermine the ability of capitalist commodities to hide their constitutive social relations to 'appear as independent beings endowed with life' (Marx, 1967: 72). Rather than representing the capture of the common, communicative labor made visible a social relation as process and product. Customer service interactions informed by messages of responsibility, authenticity and commitment function as commodities only with great difficulty (Carlone, 2008; Korczynski, 2005; Korczynski and Ott, 2004). Authentic and mutual communication requires direct contact between humans, a contact that exceeds narrow roles of 'customer' and 'customer service representative'. The communicative labor required of the conversational partners infects customer service work with the social norm of responsibility to another. Though a capitalist dream may be to subsume mutuality, the common expresses itself where and when 'conversation takes place' (Casarino, 2008: 1).

Ultimately, customer service interactions represent social and moral investments that overrun the calculations of capitalist valuation. Ann poignantly illustrated these investments with stories of 'elderly callers' who call simply to talk to someone, regardless of whether they carry the credit card serviced by the call center. Such calls illustrate the conflict between social and capitalist value in customer service. On the one hand, CSRs should move such callers off the phone due to the slim, if any, surplus value created. On the other hand, talking with such callers fulfills the social need for and moral obligation in communication. In sum, CSR learners recognized that mutual communication met ethical obligations to self and other, and placed these obligations ahead of capitalist surplus value creation.

Conclusion

In this paper I examined how communication commonplaces inform job training for economically dislocated workers. Rather than relying upon a framework emphasizing capitalist reproduction or control of workplace subjects – a framework in which capitalism acquires discursive, if not practical, dominance – I situated capitalism as but one currently existing version of economy, one that exists alongside alternative and non-capitalist relations and processes. I conceptualized job training in terms of the capitalist class process of creating, appropriating and distributing surplus value. Communication commonplaces, exemplifying the common, infect capitalism even as they aid the pursuit of surplus value.

I intentionally focused on how the commonplaces of mutuality and participation infect capitalism, rather than on how capitalism consumes such socio-cultural values and practices. I do not want to claim that analyses showing the capitalist capture of the common are wrong. Nor do I want to overstate the emancipatory potential demonstrated here of communism within capitalism. I do want, however, to decenter capitalism, create space for alternative representations and draw attention to already existing non-capitalist possibilities. Seen through this lens, emphasis on the vitality of job-training participants' communication knowledge and ability to the creation of capitalist surplus value revealed unexpected work meanings, practices and subjectivities. Such unexpected variation aids recognition of multiple forms of surplus creation, appropriation and distribution, and raises questions about how surplus should be created, appropriated and distributed (Walters, 1999).

The analysis illuminates paths toward the autonomy of labor over surplus value, and of social value, or surplus common, over capitalist surplus value. In the CMT course, the participation of quality people placed labor autonomy and creativity front and center in the class process and diminished the role of managers/management. Cost accounting, for instance, denaturalized 'costs', transforming the economics of firm operation into the political economics of firm operation. In the context of customer service, reliance upon mutuality to produce surplus value led to the privileging of the social value of authentic, mutual relationships over and against capitalist surplus production and valuation. Mutuality and obligation lent themselves to a social, or non-economic, form of surplus labor, a life-affirming labor (Greene, 2004) as surplus common (Casarino, 2008).

Examining the subjectivities, practices, and meanings informing, embedded within, and stemming from the class process enhances understandings of the communism of capital. Emphasis on communicative labor in terms of participation and mutuality within the class process displaced managers and capitalist surplus value. This displacement signals the ability of the common to resist capture by capital, and even to infect capital during attempted capture.

Rather than representing the capture of the common by capital, communication commonplaces became a resource for questioning naturalized capitalist relations. Drawing upon the common to promote mutuality, for instance, inserted capacities and values into the capitalist class process that proved difficult to control. Norms of social obligation present in the common possess authority and autonomy on their own; these norms came to prescribe cooperation and proscribe exploitation. As evidenced in the CSR course, the social value of a good relationship may be a source of capitalist value. But, identifications forged

between CSRs and customers may work against capitalist desires to convert customer service communicative labor into surplus value. The socio-cultural value of the communicative labor of mutuality counters any straightforward capture of economic surplus and creates, as well, surplus common. Extracting rent, too, in the face of such socio-cultural value would likely encounter similar difficulties.

I believe it important to return, briefly, to the matter of representation. A representation of diverse economies decenters capitalism, revealing a variety of possibilities, many already in existence. This insight seems useful for (re-) considering some of the popular representations of the contemporary economy. For example, management guru Charles Handy celebrates the discontinuity between the 'old' and the 'new' economy. "The 'age of personal sovereignty' [Handy] argues is marked by 'the switch from a life that is largely organized for us, once we have opted into it, to a world in which we are all forced to be in charge of our own destiny'" (cited in Hancock and Tyler, 2004: 630). From one view, Handy's embrace of 'our own destiny' may signal dissolution of societal structures and supports and a transfer of those functions, and risk, to the individual. However, from another view, being in charge of one's destiny might also focus attention on current and possible future configurations of the creation, appropriation and distribution of surplus value and surplus common. Handy's assessment might be understood as signaling an infection of capitalism by self-rule (Hardt and Negri, 2009). What is important, then, is the ability to re-read, against the grain, existing texts, practices and debates.

With these insights in mind, several questions come to mind. How might we distinguish between opportunities and problems of the common in the production of capitalist surplus value? How might the common within capitalism provide pathways to alternative or non-capitalist relations, perhaps around the cooperative creation, appropriation and distribution of surplus value or labor? Such questions alert us to the mutual overdetermination of class, political, natural, and cultural processes.

Clearly, much work remains to achieve the possibilities posed by the relations among this job-training context, the common in communication and the class process. Still, inchoate though they may be, socializing production, as evidenced here with the use of communicative labor, provides new meanings of and practices for the moment and position of exploited labor. Crucially, these new meanings and practices are important to the ongoing and imagined ordering of society. Stories of cooperation might be built upon to demonstrate the possibility for communal production, appropriation and distribution of surplus labor or value. Importantly, these possibilities already exist, at times more fully formed,

within, against, and alongside capitalism. Indeed, calls for a ‘new’ (capitalist) economy in response to a changing context insert difference and possible transformation within capitalism itself. *New Skill* illuminates new economy work not as the outcome of structural imperatives, but as a space of ethical discussion and decision (Gibson-Graham, 2006b). Ultimately, alternative representations of the common within capitalism make visible the practice of and need for imagination and invention.

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