



# Theorizing Struggle in the Social Factory

Organization Theory  
Volume 1: 1–14  
© The Author(s) 2020  
Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/2631787720919440  
journals.sagepub.com/home/ott



Dennis K. Mumby<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This essay explores possibilities for expanding how critical organization scholars theorize and examine processes of struggle in the capital–labor relationship. Arguing for a more expansive conception of the typical sphere of struggle, I explore the intersections of branding, communicative capitalism, and the entrepreneurial self as a way to theorize struggle in the “social factory.” I suggest that the focus of critical scholars on the “indeterminacy of labor” at the point of production as the key to struggle in the capital–labor relationship should be expanded to encompass an exploration of the “politics of indeterminacy” within the broader cycle of value in motion in the capital accumulation process. A politics of indeterminacy attempts to capture the struggles (around meaning, value, affect, identity, etc.) that unfold throughout the sites and stages of the capital accumulation process. Moreover, conceiving of the capital accumulation process as a dialectical movement of the “unity in contradiction” between value and anti-value provides critical scholars with additional conceptual resources to explore struggle in the organizing process.

## Keywords

anti-value, branding, communicative capitalism, enterprise self, indeterminacy, social factory, value

There is a view that everything that Marxism needs is already there in *Capital*. . . Apart from anything else, it denies one of the central premises of *Capital*—that the capitalist mode of production is constantly developing, and this in

turn requires a continuous labor of theoretical development and of clarification.

(Hall, 2019, p. 143)

<sup>1</sup>Cary C. Boshamer Distinguished Professor, Department of Communication, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

## Corresponding author:

Dennis K. Mumby, Cary C. Boshamer Distinguished Professor, Department of Communication, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Bingham Hall CB 3285, NC 27599, USA.

Email: mumby@email.unc.edu



One of the few points of consensus to emerge among critical organization studies scholars over the last 30 years concerns the interdependence of workplace control and resistance processes. Whether critical studies foreground workplace resistance (e.g., Ashcraft, 2005; Collinson, 1994; Knights & McCabe, 2000; Mumby, Thomas, Martí, & Seidl, 2017; Murphy, 1998; Paulsen, 2014) or managerial control strategies (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Barker, 1993; Ezzamel & Willmott, 1998; McCabe, 2007), critical scholars recognize that it is difficult to conceptualize one without the other. Indeed, if one accepts a fundamental premise of the 1960s Italian “autonomist” school of Marxist thought, the historical evolution of managerial control strategies actually represents capital’s efforts to adapt to the self-organizing activities of workers (Hardt & Negri, 1999; Lazzarato, 2017; Tronti, 2012, 2019). Capital and labor, then, are mutually constitutive, with the struggle between them constructed around the “indeterminacy of labor” (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; P. Thompson & O’Dougherty, 2009); that is, the disjuncture between capital’s purchase of abstract labor time (the potential to labor) and its realization “at the point of production” (Gramsci, 1971) via the embodied labor of workers. This indeterminacy is the pivot point around which the dialectics of control and resistance unfold, and it highlights the degree to which the capital accumulation process has always been a site of struggle.

In this context, critical organization scholarship historically has focused on developing adequate conceptualizations of the capital–labor relationship and its dynamic struggles in everyday organizing processes. Particularly in the wake of the “linguistic turn” of the late 1970s/early 1980s (Alvesson, 1985; Deetz, 2003), critical research has explored how the structural contradictions (e.g., between privatized accumulation and socialized production) embedded in the labor process are enacted through everyday discourses and practices. Organizational stakeholders compete for control over what it means to be engaged with the labor process, and what one’s rights and responsibilities are in this engagement. Broadly

speaking, then, critical research has focused on the struggles of various interest groups’ efforts to shape the translation of economic and political (infra)structures into the everyday lived realities of work and its attendant worker identities (Burawoy, 1979; Collinson, 1992).

One of the limitations of this critical tradition, however, is that it typically fails to adequately account for and theorize the transformations in the capital–labor relationship that have occurred over the last 40 years. As a number of scholars have argued, the workplace and traditional employment relationships are no longer the only site of capital accumulation, with the workplace-based struggle over the indeterminacy of labor reframed within a broader struggle over the relationship between capital accumulation and everyday life (Bohm & Land, 2012; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Lazzarato, 2004).

In this context, the “social factory”—a term which first came to prominence via autonomist Marxist theory (Tronti, 2019)—shifts the focus of inquiry from the “hidden abode” (Marx, 1967) of capitalist industrial production to a “new hidden abode” (Bohm & Land, 2012) in which the capital accumulation process escapes the confines of the factory and is extended out into society as a whole. In this sense, capitalism is no longer content simply to extract surplus value at the point of production from purchased labor time, but increasingly captures the (free) sociality of everyday life and turns it into surplus value. For example, Uber, Lyft, Airbnb, and many similar platform-based companies capture everyday activities such as ridesharing and couch surfing in order to monetize them. What was once a social act between acquaintances has become an economic transaction mediated by a digital platform premised on creating economic value (Srnicek, 2017). In the social factory, then, the capital–labor relationship is reframed as a capital–life relationship, in which—potentially at least—all spheres of human activity are mediated by the capital accumulation process and viewed through the lens of the market (Fleming, 2014; Hardt & Negri, 1999; Lazzarato, 2004). The social factory thus thrives not so much on the production

of material goods, but on “the production of subjectivities and social relations of cooperation” (Bohm & Land, 2012, p. 225).

While traditional forms of labor are still dominant, “The social factory is . . . written all over the landscape of modern work” (Ross, 2017, p. 197). Central to its emergence has been the increased focus on the communication processes that are the warp and woof of this new hidden abode. As Lazzarato starkly (and somewhat hyperbolically) puts it, “Contemporary capitalism does not first arrive with factories; these follow, if they follow at all. It arrives with words, signs, and images” (Lazzarato, 2004, p. 190).

Such a shift in the capital accumulation process requires a shift in thinking toward a more communicative focus on the dynamics of struggle under capitalism. As such, in the rest of this paper I address the following question: How does struggle play out in an organizing context in which the capital accumulation process has moved outside traditional organizational boundaries to encompass “life itself” (Dardot & Laval, 2013; Fleming, 2014)? In other words, what does struggle look like in the context of “organizing beyond organization” (Mumby, 2016)?

In the rest of this essay I address this question via Jodi Dean’s (2009, 2014) concept of “communicative capitalism,” examining its possibilities for theorizing struggle in the social factory. In particular, I want to take up branding as a central institutional point of mediation (Arvidsson, 2006) in communicative capitalism, and argue that it is key to rethinking the process of struggle. In the next section I engage in a critical reading and extension of the concept of communicative capitalism, exploring how it enables critical scholars to rethink struggle as a constitutive feature of the capital accumulation process under neoliberalism.

## Communicative Capitalism

Dean (2009) defines communicative capitalism as “the materialization of ideals of inclusion and exclusion and participation in information, entertainment, and communication technologies in ways that capture resistance and intensify global

capitalism” (Dean, 2009, p. 2). For Dean, “communicative capitalism” undermines real democracy insofar as it substitutes communication for real collective political action. It limits genuine political interventions, instead “formatting them as contributions to its circuits of affect and entertainment—we feel political, involved, like contributors who matter” (Dean, 2009, p. 49, emphasis in original). According to Dean, communicative capitalism is driven by three “animating fantasies”: (1) the fantasy of abundance, whereby communication technology has enabled an explosion of opportunities to send and receive messages; (2) the fantasy of participation, in which contributing to circulating informational content is seen as participation in political activity; and (3) the fantasy of wholeness that situates everyone within a global community of information, in which the internet functions as “point zero” of this global unity—an imaginary site of action and belonging. These “animating fantasies” stand in for real political action. As a result,

we confront a multiplication of resistances and assertions so extensive that it hinders the formation of strong counterhegemonies. The proliferation, distribution, acceleration and intensification of communicative access and opportunity, far from enhancing democratic governance or resistance, results in precisely the opposite—the post-political formation of communicative capitalism. (Dean, 2005, p. 53)

People express opinions, engage in arguments, “like” social media posts, and so forth, and hence feel politically engaged. Politics, in essence, is reduced to acts of communication (via technology) among a population for whom shared realities have been replaced by mobile, fragile, and uncertain realities and identities. For Dean, then, communicative capitalism exploits the fragility and insecurity of the fragmented neoliberal self, while at the same time replacing justice or equality with freedom as the fundamental political value—freedom to participate as an enterprising subject in neoliberal capitalism.

In this sense, under communicative capitalism the market has become the principal site of democratic aspirations. Communication has

become detached from the kinds of Habermasian political ideals of Lifeworld belonging and understanding, functioning primarily as an economic medium. In other words, “communicative exchanges, rather than being fundamental to democratic politics, are the basic elements of capitalist production” (Dean, 2005, p. 56). We might therefore say that, under communicative capitalism, the exchange value of messages overtakes their use value; the market itself becomes the site of democratic aspirations as messages compete to be noticed amid the large pool of circulating data. A message becomes valuable not for its substance, but for its ability to attract eyeballs in the “attention economy” (Marwick, 2015).

While Dean’s notion of communicative capitalism provides a useful starting point for thinking about the degree to which contemporary capitalism relies on “words, signs, and images,” it is problematic in a couple of ways. First, it lacks a strong dialectical element that accounts for struggle and contradiction as it plays out in everyday social and communicative interaction. Her argument is reminiscent of a Frankfurt School-type “culture industries” analysis, in which communicative capitalism is framed in a totalizing, one-dimensional manner, destabilizing any possibilities for coherent oppositional efforts and organized political action, other than in the realm of the symbolic. Second, and related, her conception of communication lacks substance. Almost by definition, Dean’s framing of communicative capitalism reduces the communication process itself to a derivative feature of everyday struggle. For Dean, it is what is left when politics is emptied of its real, material substance. In this sense, her conception of communication is reminiscent of a transmission model (Shannon & Weaver, 1949), whereby the flow and circulation of information is conceived as coterminous with the process of communication (i.e., the struggle over meaning) itself.

I want to suggest that communicative capitalism can be reframed in a much more dialectical manner as a way to bring more robust theorizing to the process of struggle in the

social factory. If, indeed, the capital–life relationship is an increasingly central feature of the capital accumulation process under neoliberal capitalism, as argued above, then a reframing of communicative capitalism enables us to shift focus from the struggle over the indeterminacy of labor at the point of production (as in most critical studies) to struggles over the indeterminacy of meaning, affect, and value in the social factory more broadly conceived (Skeggs, 2014). In this sense, we can think of communicative capitalism as the latest iteration of a dynamic and evolving capital accumulation process, with the locus of surplus value creation more dispersed and the definition of labor expanded to include the production of subjectivity (through communicative labor) in relation to the value creation process (Brophy, 2017; Lazzarato, 1996). To be clear, however, this production of subjectivity is not simply about the (self) management of worker identities as a way to enhance consumer experience of the corporate brand. In addition, it incorporates all of the ways that the everyday construction of self is increasingly subject to processes of corporate enclosure, as the neoliberal subject of governmentality applies the market as the “grid of intelligibility” for constructing and maintaining a viable sense of being-in-the-world (Foucault, 2008).

This reworking of Dean’s conception of communicative capitalism provides a useful way to reframe and expand how we typically think about the capital accumulation process and, in particular, the separation of production and consumption (the latter an area of focus that critical organization studies scholars have largely ignored). If we think about Marx’s view of capital as “value in motion” (Harvey, 2018; Postone, 1993), constantly cycling through processes of valorization (the creation of value at the point of production), realization (consumption processes that turn commodities into money for capital), and distribution (the dispersion of value to the various agents of capital), then we can move beyond the simple dichotomy of production and consumption, and instead develop a more dynamic way of theorizing capital accumulation

processes. Furthermore, if we frame the dynamics of the capital accumulation cycle as a continuous and ongoing process of struggle (including struggles over the meanings of work and labor, what can be commodified, etc.) then we can bring to the fore the degree to which the circulation of capital is subject to a number of vulnerabilities.

I want to suggest, then, that at the heart of capitalist “value in motion” is what can be termed a “politics of indeterminacy” (Lury, 2004) that mediates the capital accumulation process. By “politics of indeterminacy” I refer to the various points in the cycle of capital accumulation where communicative struggle occurs over the “unity in contradiction” between value and anti-value (Harvey, 2018). According to Marx’s (1967) analysis, value exists only in relation to anti-value; all value simultaneously contains its negation. At the point of production, for example, the politics of indeterminacy play out in the efforts of various stakeholders (in particular, capital and labor) to define the terms of the labor process (e.g., what is meant by “a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay”). Thus, labor itself is simultaneously the source of value and of anti-value in that it both produces surplus value and, as I argued earlier, is the source of its indeterminacy; that is, labor is alienated, recalcitrant, and engages in various forms of work slowdown, sabotage, refusal, and so forth (Tronti, 2019). It is, as Harvey argues, “the embodiment of anti-value” (2018, p. 77). Anti-value thus signals the potential for breakdowns in the circuit of the capital accumulation process.

In the broader context of the social factory, on the other hand, the politics of indeterminacy unfold in the struggle between capital and “life itself,” between capital and “everybody else” as Harvey (2018) puts it. Here, the politics of indeterminacy revolve around efforts of capital to define all acts of communication and sociality as subject to market mediation (e.g., Uber and Airbnb) on the one hand and, on the other hand, efforts to push back against capital’s corporate enclosure of everyday life (Fleming, 2019; Klein, 2001, 2005).

Finally, a commodity may have exchange value, but such value remains unrealized (i.e., negated) until it is sold. A public campaign against a branded commodity may leave that value frozen in the finished product, thus rendering its value unrealizable. For example, in response to consumer boycotts related to her father’s policies, many high-profile retailers stopped selling Ivanka Trump’s clothing line, resulting in the discontinuation of her clothing brand. Thus, the meanings associated with Ivanka Trump’s clothing line were open to contestation, resulting in the devaluing of the brand.

I want to suggest, then, that the “unity in contradiction” of value and anti-value and the politics of indeterminacy that shape it provide a useful inflection point for critical organization scholars to rethink struggle in the context of the capital accumulation process. That is, capital is in a constant battle against anti-value, while various struggles of waged labor and of consumers (generally the same people in different phases of the process of value in motion) are (both concretely and potentially) agents of anti-value. Both forms of struggle are contained within the overall logic of capital circulation, and thus should not simply be viewed as separate, unrelated processes. The unity in contradiction of value and anti-value is thus a site of struggle and contestation within capitalism, characterized as it is by an ongoing, never resolved indeterminacy.

Communicative capitalism has thus increased the complexities and contradictions of the value/anti-value dialectic, in that its constituent elements include the processes of communication through which the struggle over both valorization and realization of value occurs. “Value in motion” is not simply about valorization at the point of production and its realization in consumption processes, but also involves the corporate enclosure of everyday communication practices within the process of valorization. In this sense, the process of valorization is as much about the management of meaning and affect as it is about the management of labor in the creation of commodities. As Dean (2012) states, communicative capitalism “directly exploits the social relation at the heart of value” (p. 129).

For example, a recent *Guardian* article examines the emergence of “mouse whisperers”—longtime Disney fans who have become “micro-celebrities” (Marwick, 2013) through their Disney-devoted blogs, Instagram accounts, and YouTube videos. One micro-celebrity makes a living exclusively through her Disney Food Blog (catchphrase, “Food is a theme park”) where she posts photos of Disney theme park food items and blogs about Disney cuisine (Tait, 2019). By definition, such micro-influencers have a relatively small group of followers (the Disney Food Blog has about 84,000 followers) but, as Tait states, “In an age of increasing distrust towards influencers, marketers feel micro influencers who command the attention of a close-knit group will provide a better return on investment.” Such a return on investment is achieved largely through the management of social relations, of meaning and affect, via the free immaterial labor of the fan-cum-micro-celebrity, who cultivates relationships with fellow Disney fans and lives off the revenue she receives from companies who advertise on her site and want to be associated with the Disney brand.

In the rest of this essay I want to focus on the brand as a central, constitutive element of the politics of indeterminacy within contemporary capitalism. Brands, I argue, function as a principal terrain on which the struggle between value and anti-value plays out, and are a key terrain of struggle in the politics of indeterminacy. Thus, in the next section I address how we can theorize the brand as a central locus of struggle in the process of value in motion. In other words, how can we explore the politics of indeterminacy as they play out, through branding processes, in “organizing beyond organization?”

## Branding and the Enterprise Self

Why is branding central to my argument? First, brands have always been key to organizing and capital accumulation processes. Expanded production capacities in the early 20th century

required a complementary expansion of consumption practices, and hence the branding of goods became a central mechanism through which capitalism could create new markets. Edward Bernays, the founder of modern public relations (and Sigmund Freud’s nephew), was the first to systematically deploy the power of propaganda to exploit the unconscious desires of a growing consumer public. As he stated,

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. (Bernays, 1928, p. 9)

In this sense, branding, organizing, and democracy have always been intimately connected, tied closely to the construction of the modern individual as a consuming self whose needs are constantly deferred, never to be satisfied (Lears, 1983).

Second, while commodification appears natural in a capitalist system, the process of commodification itself has always involved a process of struggle—what is a commodity and what is part of the commons and a public good (Sherman, 2017)? Thus, the commodification of labor involved a long and intense process of struggle; the enclosure of common land for privatized wealth accumulation was key to the creation of an expropriated working class and the subsequent struggle over the nature of the capitalist labor process (E. P. Thompson, 1966). Similarly, branding has become a key focus of struggle in contemporary capitalism in its efforts to engage in the corporate enclosure of a communication commons that involves the capture of social actors’ sociality. Brand management strategies attempt to disguise the brand’s status as a commodity, reframing it and naturalizing it as a medium of sociality and communicative connection.

Third, brands are key to understanding how the politics of indeterminacy play out at the level of meaning and affect in contemporary capitalism. Brands are a focal point of struggle within

communicative capitalism precisely because the management of meaning and affect is key to the capital accumulation process. Brands (and their attendant value) rely on the monetizing of everyday communicative acts; brands command a premium price insofar as they are “a rent on an enclosed parcel of our collective attention” (Sherman, 2017, p. 603). The value form of a brand is thus to a large extent fictitious; it is not rooted in socially necessary labor time (which, as Marx argued, determined the value of the “regular” commodity), but in the brand’s ability to construct a universe of meanings and affects in which social actors are immersed. But to the degree that this universe of meanings and affects is contested or undermined, the value of the brand itself becomes vulnerable.

Finally, the restructuring of capital accumulation processes under neoliberalism has elevated the brand to a central role in reshaping the character of organizing itself, capturing the attention of critical organization scholars (e.g., Arvidsson, 2006; Ashcraft, Muhr, Rennstam, & Sullivan, 2012; Brannan, Parsons, & Priola, 2011; Endrissat, Karreman, & Noppeny, 2017; Gabriel, Korczynski, & Rieder, 2015; Kornberger, 2010; Land & Taylor, 2010; Mumby, 2016, 2018; Willmott, 2010). As Weil (2014) convincingly argues, companies figured out that the actual production of commodities could be viewed as an externalizable, relatively peripheral feature of the capital accumulation process. As he states, the post-Fordist, neoliberal corporate mantra of the last 30 years has been “Find your distinctive niche and stick to it. Then shed everything else” (p. 50). In a very real sense, then, the very concept of the corporation has been rethought and restructured, with the brand at the epicenter of this process. Indeed, as Kornberger (2010) has suggested, rather than the organization structuring the brand, under neoliberalism the brand structures the organization. An extreme (and ironic) example of this is Ford Motor Company’s decision to shift its focus away from the production of vehicles in order to concentrate on “design, branding, marketing, sales and service operations” (Olins, 2000, p. 51). Ford thus became post-Fordist.

Such a shift signaled the financialization of global capitalism and an increase in shareholder activism, but it also reflected capital’s response to the workers’ movement of the late 1960s and 1970s and its demand for greater autonomy (Tronti, 2019). As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) have argued, this “new spirit” of capitalism rejected the Keynesian “mixed economy” model of the previous 30 years rooted in a “WATT” (We’re All in This Together) system of social democracy, and in its place constructed a system that did, indeed, provide workers with greater autonomy, but within a broader political-economic system characterized by insecurity and precarity. Lorey (2015) argues that such insecurity is endemic to the neoliberal system of governmentality, which she characterizes as “governmental precarization.” In such a system, precarity is democratized as the new normal, and not simply a condition of marginality. Worker autonomy is thus framed in terms of the ability to successfully construct an enterprise self. This self, Dardot and Laval (2013) argue, is a “response to new rules of the game that radically change the work contract, to the point of abolishing it as a wage relation. Individual responsibility for enhancing the value of one’s labor in a market has become the absolute principle” (p. 266). The social/work contract between employees and companies is thus replaced with a (non)contractual relationship between brands and enterprising selves (e.g., between Uber and its drivers).

As I suggested earlier, capital as “value in motion” involves an ongoing dynamic of continuous expansion. Capital as “self-valorizing value, as the self-moving substance that is subject” (Postone, 1993, p. 269) thus has the attribute of agency, exerting an abstract compulsion on people. The production of value, then, is without limit; it is “a means to a goal that is itself a means, rather than an end” (Postone, 1993, p. 269). Similarly, each enterprise self’s activity becomes a continuous process of self-valorization, (re)locating the point of production from the factory floor to the individuals themselves. This new point of production, like the old one, requires the continuous accumulation of value.

Just as capital is value in motion, so the enterprise self must be in continuous motion, “manufacturing a high-performance ego, which always demands more of the self” (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 274). The self’s measure of effectiveness thus lies within the self and is no longer derived from any external set of criteria for adjudication. As such, there is no arrival point for the self, no end of the working day, no task ever fully completed, because the self is an ongoing project whose full formation is constantly deferred; the “achieved self” (Collinson, 2003) is always beyond reach, but a constant presence toward which to strive. As value in motion, the self’s goal is to generate value as a means toward a means, rather than an end.

The peculiarity, then, of the capital–self relationship under neoliberal governmentality is that “we do not deem ourselves subjugated *subjects*, but rather *projects*: always refashioning and reinventing ourselves” (Han, 2017, p. 1). In this sense, the politics of indeterminacy is endemic to the capital–self relationship. We are free of externally imposed limitations, but subject ourselves to internal self-constraints that take the form of obsessive achievement. As Han (2017) has stated, “The auto-exploiting subject carries around its own labor camp” (p. 61). Freedom thus produces coercion and compulsion, as the discourse of the enterprise self “does not so much tell people what they are; rather, it tells them what they have to become” (Bröckling, 2016, p. 21). In the capital–life relationship, then, we are witness to the “managerialization of personal identity” (Gordon, 1991, p. 44) with branding as the principal (self)-managerial mechanism in this process.

It is therefore perhaps no accident that a discourse of positivity has become a constitutive feature of the neoliberal enterprise self, as the self-management of subjectivity requires the creation of individual “micro-structures” (McRobbie, 2016) that serve to buttress the self (if only psychologically and emotionally) against the compulsions of insecurity and precarity (Ahmed, 2010). Discourses of self-help, self-care, mindfulness, and so forth are all founded in a positive conception of communication aimed at providing

the self with a sense of coherence, but one that is framed as self-sustaining rather than located in institutional forms such as class, community, or political movements. For example, Sullivan and Delaney’s (2017) study of a direct selling “pyramid” company, Arbonne International, effectively illustrates how this discourse of positivity is deployed to provide feminized entrepreneurial selves with a positive discursive micro-structure rooted in evangelicalism and neoliberal post-feminism. The precarity of such micro-structures is indicated by the fact that only 10% of Arbonne consultants are active (i.e., have sold products in the previous 12 months), with the average annual income of consultants being \$515.

Perhaps most significant for my purposes here, however, is that in the context of communicative capitalism and the system of “governmental precarization,” the enterprise self’s efforts to accumulate capital and hence generate—if only temporarily—a sense of ontological security places a much greater emphasis on communication and branding. Self-mastery and the concomitant accumulation of human capital are less about the ongoing enhancement of technical skills within a particular career arc, and more about the continuous development of communication skills that increase one’s ability to grow relationships with others in multiple and often discontinuous contexts and projects (Carlone, 2008). For example, the enterprise self behind the Disney Food Blog may need technical social media skills, but more important is her ability to cultivate and maintain positive relationships with her followers that produces an affective ecosystem. In this sense, the creation of surplus value is connected to the ability to produce surplus community among strangers (Arvidsson, 2005, p. 241; Arvidsson & Peitersen, 2013).

There is some truth, then, to cultural critic Jia Tolentino’s claim that “selfhood has become capitalism’s last natural resource . . . Everything is being cannibalized—not just goods and labor, but personality and relationships and attention” (Tolentino, 2019, pp. 15, 34). But Tolentino is only partly correct. Certainly, the self and its relationships have become grist for the



capitalist (tread)mill, but it is by no means a natural resource. Indeed, it is precisely the construction of particular forms of subjectivity—a kind of ongoing, never-ending Toyotism or Kaizening of the self—that has become a central feature of capitalist accumulation processes. In this sense, there is a strong performative aspect to neoliberalism, in which the capital–life relationship involves the reframing of everyday relationships as communicative labor (Carlone, 2008). In the struggle between capital and life in the social factory, human relationships take on a very particular tenor through their social mediation by capital and the commodity form (Postone, 1993). As Han (2017) argues, “As the entrepreneur of its own self, the neoliberal subject has no capacity for relationships with others that might be free of purpose” (p. 2). Our students enact this strategic relational orientation on a regular basis—an orientation that was brought home to me quite viscerally recently when I had to cancel a class because I was sick with the flu. Within minutes of sending out notice of the cancellation, I received an email from a student that read, “Hi Professor Mumby. Get better soon. Will you still be holding office hours today?”

How, then, does capitalism as “a system of abstract, impersonal domination” (Postone, 1993, p. 125) mediate social life via the commodity form? In other words, what is the point of articulation between the self and capital under neoliberalism? Consistent with Arvidsson’s work, I argue that the brand is the principal institutional form through which the abstract domination of capital performs its processes of social mediation (Arvidsson, 2006, 2009). This process of social mediation is clearly understood by brand strategists themselves, as the following quotation from the 2015 annual report of the brand strategy company, Interbrand, makes explicit. Here, Interbrand’s CEO provides a definition of the branding term, “mecosystem” (i.e., a branded personal ecosystem):

[A] select set of brands that create customized experiences around a single individual, where

every brand in consideration slots in seamlessly, and where the most valuable micro moments are curated, connected, and choreographed. As people shape their mecosystems—as they explore and, just as importantly, edit—they are constantly being redefined, meaning that brands need to earn the right to stay in this set every minute of every day. (Jez Frampton, Global CEO of Interbrand)

This quotation provides considerable insight into the mind of the contemporary brand strategist (appearing, as it does, in a carefully constructed—and branded—Interbrand annual report). While it might be hyperbolic, it nevertheless is suggestive of the brand strategist’s utopian goal of a completely brand-mediated experiential universe. Indeed, it speaks to the degree to which marketing strategists recognize that the capital–life relationship has become the key point of articulation for the capital accumulation process. Moreover, it captures the idea that capital accumulation is about movement (“value in motion”) and “the relentless capture and control of time and experience” (Crary, 2013, p. 40). To the degree that Marx attributed agency to capital value in motion, then the brand has become the (not-so-secret) agent of capitalism.

## Conclusion

[Capitalism involves] a continual struggle to release new forms of representation that can capture how the world is, new forms of subject that can populate the world, new forms of commodity that can hold the world in their grip, and new forms of surface that can define how space and time should turn up in that world. (Thrift, 2005, p. 13)

Sociologist Bev Skeggs notes that “The logic of capital is to make capital, whenever, wherever, for whomever” (Skeggs, 2014, p. 2). In this essay I have attempted to expand the typical focus of critical organization studies beyond how that logic plays out “at the point of production” (Gramsci, 1971) by exploring the idea of “value in motion” in the context of branding and communicative capitalism. Through his labor

theory of value, Marx (1967) argued that commodified, expropriated labor was the sole source of all value; the means by which capital accumulation occurred was through the intensification of the labor process and the extension of labor time beyond that necessary to reproduce labor itself. For critical organization studies, examining the struggles that are endemic to this means of capital accumulation has been its default condition.

The last 40 years of neoliberal capitalism, however, have revealed how the logic of capital has expanded the meaning of “wherever, whenever, for whomever” to include “life itself.” Value in motion is not only about ongoing cycles of production, realization, and distribution, but also about the expanded possibilities for the corporate capture of “life itself” into this cycle. Capital accumulation is no longer simply about extracting surplus value from labor at the point of production, but in addition involves the enclosure of communication and sociality in the cycle of value creation. As such, I have tried to make the case for a focus on “organizing beyond organization” (Mumby, 2016) as a way to expand conceptions of struggle in the dialectics among capital, labor, and representational processes (as embedded in communicative capitalism and branding).

I have suggested that a fruitful way to think about struggle in this expanded context is through the idea of a “politics of indeterminacy,” exploring how processes of representation are open to contestation and struggle throughout the cycle of value in motion. While the “indeterminacy of labor” identifies the locus of struggle at the point of production, and the “indeterminacy of meaning” focuses on the interpretive struggles associated with brand management and engagement, a politics of indeterminacy draws attention to the political struggles that are endemic to the entire cycle of value in motion. Put simply, a politics of indeterminacy focuses on the dialectics of the relationship between value and anti-value within the logic of capital; if value and anti-value represent a “unity in contradiction” (Harvey, 2018), then the politics of indeterminacy

explore how this unity in contradiction plays out at various points in the cycle of capital accumulation.

How, then, can we think about communicative capitalism and branding specifically from the standpoint of a politics of indeterminacy? One way might be to explore the indeterminacies that inflect the very notion of value itself (Skeggs, 2014; Willmott, 2010). Capitalism is extremely adept at framing every value (care, collaboration, connection, nurturance, etc.) within its logic. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) indicate, even the “hippy” critique of the 1960s that helped foment a crisis of capitalism was eventually incorporated into the logic of capital as a new mode of economic value creation, with a focus on meaningful work. Thus, the question becomes how it might be possible to effectively engage with and critique the apparently seamless logic of capital.

The reality, of course, is that the dynamics of capital are uneven and subject to rupture, as the dialectic between value and anti-value suggests. The politics of indeterminacy is therefore at least in part about how the struggle between value and anti-value plays out in the course of “life itself.” In this context, Nikolas Rose has coined the term “ethopolitics” to describe “the politics of life and how it should be lived” (2001, p. 18). As he states:

In ethopolitics, life itself, as it is lived in its everyday manifestations, is the object of adjudication. If discipline individualizes and normalizes, and biopower collectivizes and socializes, ethopolitics concerns itself with the self-techniques by which human beings should judge themselves and act upon themselves to make themselves better than they are. While ethopolitical concerns range from those of lifestyle to those of community, they coalesce around a kind of vitalism: disputes over the value to be accorded to life itself. (Rose, 2001, p. 18)

One can argue, I think, that at the intersection of branding and communicative capitalism there is an endemic politics of “life itself.” Brands attempt to build an ethical-moral universe, creating systems of meaning and affect that aim to

shape social actors' relationships to self and others. In a very real sense, brands enter into the struggle around what should and should not be valued. As Foucault might suggest, they are a part of the process of governance that involves the structuring of the field of possible action for agentic social actors (Foucault, 1982, p. 221). Brands have a degree of indeterminacy, an openness that enables a degree of interpretive freedom but, as Lury (2004) argues, limited interpretive possibilities are designed into the brands; there is an "objectification of a manageable flexibility, of indeterminacy within limits" (p. 151).

A brief, concluding example will perhaps illustrate how the politics of indeterminacy plays out at the intersection of branding and "life itself" in a way that attempts to construct a moral universe regarding what should and should not be valued. A couple of years ago the online company Fiverr (a digital marketplace for freelance services, marketing itself as a service to the "lean entrepreneur"; that is, workers with few resources) ran a branding campaign titled, "In Doers We Trust." The campaign consisted of a series of headshot photographs of young gig workers clearly fitting the Fiverr ethos of being "doers." Captions to the headshots included: "You eat a coffee for lunch. You follow through on your follow through. Sleep deprivation is your drug of choice. You might be a doer"; and "Nothing like a safe, reliable paycheck. To crush your soul."

The campaign's celebration of insecurity and precarity coupled with frenzied, unceasing activity perfectly captures the shift from the capital-labor to the capital-life relationship as the preferred mechanism of capital accumulation. Workers are no longer employees; they are "venture labor" (Neff, 2012) prepared to risk it all for the freedom from the "soul-crushing" experience of safe, permanent employment. The campaign captures Bröckling's (2016) ironic motto of entrepreneurship (a caricature of Kant's Enlightenment injunction, "Sapere Aude"—"have courage to use your own reason"): "Have the courage to self-mobilize! Have the courage to use your own

capital!" (p. 75). The ad campaign deliberately collapses the distinctions between work and life, production and consumption; everyone viewing a Fiverr ad is both a potential consumer of their brand and a worker utilizing the Fiverr platform, doing "gigs" for as little as \$5 (hence the name, Fiverr).

But the politics of indeterminacy is never far away. The ad campaign received considerable backlash, including a scathing critique by cultural critic Gia Tolentino in a *New Yorker* article titled, "The Gig Economy Celebrates Working Yourself to Death" (Tolentino, 2017). A Fiverr ad in the New York City subway ("Nothing like a safe, reliable paycheck. To crush your soul") was defaced with the following riposte: "That's why Fiverr only wants to pay freelancers five dollars per task! 'Low wages for all', says Fiverr. Fuck that. Join a union, fight together for higher pay." In the politics of indeterminacy and the struggle over what values count, the graffitist reasserts the values of community, solidarity, and collective struggle over the effort to privilege endless work for poverty-level pay (disguised as a celebration of autonomy in the "gig" economy).

Zuboff (2019) has recently argued that "*Capitalism should not be eaten raw*. Capitalism, like sausage, is meant to be cooked by a democratic society and its institutions because raw capitalism is anti-social" (p. 43, emphasis in original). There is a real sense in which brand processes have replaced democratic institutions as the mediating mechanism through which capitalism is metabolized. It has become the "secret agent" of capitalist value in motion, hidden in plain sight. What appears to be social is, in fact, deeply anti-social (companies like Fiverr or Uber rely on the loneliness of the gig economy and abhor sociality and collective struggle), mediating relationships through the abstract, impersonal domination of the commodity form, clothed in the arbitrary meaning and affect of the brand. Attention to the full circuit of value in motion enables critical organization scholars to develop more textured analyses of the labor-capital relationship in the regime of communicative capitalism.

## Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## References

- Ackroyd, S., & Thompson, P. (1999). *Organizational misbehaviour*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Alvesson, M. (1985). A critical framework for organizational analysis. *Organization Studies*, 6, 117–138.
- Alvesson, M., & Willmott, H. (2002). Identity regulation as organizational control: Producing the appropriate individual. *Journal of Management Studies*, 39, 619–644.
- Arvidsson, A. (2005). Brands: A critical perspective. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 5, 235–258.
- Arvidsson, A. (2006). *Brands: Meaning and value in media culture*. London: Routledge.
- Arvidsson, A. (2009). The ethical economy: Towards a post-capitalist theory of value. *Capital and Class*, 97, 13–29.
- Arvidsson, A., & Peitersen, N. (2013). *The ethical economy: Rebuilding value after the crisis*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ashcraft, K. L. (2005). Resistance through consent? Occupational identity, organizational form, and the maintenance of masculinity among commercial airline pilots. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 19, 67–90.
- Ashcraft, K. L., Muhr, S. L., Rennstam, J., & Sullivan, K. (2012). Professionalization as a branding activity: Occupational identity and the dialectic of inclusivity-exclusivity. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 19, 467–488.
- Barker, J. R. (1993). Tightening the iron cage: Concertive control in self-managing teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 38, 408–437.
- Bernays, E. (1928). *Propaganda*. New York: Routledge.
- Bohm, S., & Land, C. (2012). The new “hidden abode”: Reflections on value and labour in the new economy. *Sociological Review*, 60, 217–240.
- Boltanski, L., & Chiapello, E. (2005). *The new spirit of capitalism* (G. Elliott, Trans.). London: Verso.
- Brannan, M. J., Parsons, E., & Priola, V. (Eds.) (2011). *Branded lives: The production and consumption of meaning at work*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Bröckling, U. (2016). *The entrepreneurial self: Fabricating a new type of subject* (S. Black, Trans.). London: SAGE Publications.
- Brophy, E. (2017). *Language put to work: The making of the global call centre work force*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Burawoy, M. (1979). *Manufacturing consent: Changes in the labor process under monopoly capitalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Carlone, D. (2008). The contradictions of communicative labor in service work. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 5, 158–179.
- Collinson, D. (1992). *Managing the shop floor: Subjectivity, masculinity, and workplace culture*. New York: De Gruyter.
- Collinson, D. (1994). Strategies of resistance: Power, knowledge and resistance in the workplace. In J. M. Jermier, D. Knights, & W. R. Nord (Eds.), *Resistance and power in organizations* (pp. 25–68). London: Routledge.
- Collinson, D. (2003). Identities and insecurities: Selves at work. *Organization*, 10, 527–547.
- Crary, J. (2013). *24/7: Late capitalism and the ends of sleep*. London: Verso.
- Dardot, P., & Laval, C. (2013). *The new way of the world: On neoliberal society*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso.
- Dean, J. (2005). Communicative capitalism: Circulation and the foreclosure of politics. *Cultural Politics*, 1(1), 51–74.
- Dean, J. (2009). *Democracy and other neoliberal fantasies: Communicative capitalism and left politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Dean, J. (2012). *The communist horizon*. London: Verso.
- Dean, J. (2014). Communicative capitalism: This is what democracy looks like. In J. S. Hanan & M. Hayward (Eds.), *Communication and the economy: History, value, and agency* (pp. 147–164). New York: Peter Lang.
- Deetz, S. (2003). Reclaiming the legacy of the linguistic turn. *Organization*, 10, 421–429.
- Endrissat, N., Karreman, D., & Noppeny, C. (2017). Incorporating the creative subject: Branding outside-in through identity incentives. *Human Relations*, 70, 488–515.
- Ezzamel, M., & Willmott, H. (1998). Accounting for teamwork: A critical study of group-based systems of organizational control. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 43, 358–396.
- Fleming, P. (2014). When ‘life itself’ goes to work: Reviewing shifts in organizational life through

- the lens of biopower. *Human Relations*, 67, 875–901.
- Fleming, P. (2019). *The worst is yet to come: A post-capitalist survival guide*. London: Repeater Books.
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. In H. F. Dreyfus & P. Rabinow (Eds.), *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics* (pp. 202–226). Brighton, UK: Harvester.
- Foucault, M. (2008). *The birth of biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979* (G. Burchell, Trans.). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gabriel, Y., Korczynski, M., & Rieder, K. (2015). Organizations and their consumers: Bridging work and consumption. *Organization*, 22, 629–643.
- Gill, R., & Pratt, A. (2008). In the social factory? Immaterial labour, precariousness and cultural work. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25(7–8), 1–30.
- Gordon, C. (1991). Governmental rationality: An introduction. In G. Burchill, C. Gordon, & P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality* (pp. 1–51). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks* (Q. Hoare & G. N. Smith, Trans.). New York: International Publishers.
- Hall, S. (2019). Rethinking the base and superstructure metaphor. In D. Morley (Ed.), *Essential essays Vol. 1: Foundations of cultural studies* (pp. 143–171). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Han, B.-C. (2017). *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and new technologies of power*. London: Verso.
- Hardt, M., & Negri, A. (1999). *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Harvey, D. (2018). *Marx, capital, and the madness of economic reason*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Klein, N. (2001). *No logo*. London: Flamingo Press.
- Klein, N. (2005). Culture jamming. In L. Amoore (Ed.), *The global resistance reader* (pp. 437–444). London: Routledge.
- Knights, D., & McCabe, D. (2000). ‘Ain’t misbehavin’? Opportunities for resistance under new forms of “quality” management. *Sociology*, 34, 412–436.
- Kornberger, M. (2010). *Brand society: How brands transform management and lifestyle*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Land, C., & Taylor, S. (2010). Surf’s up: Work, life, balance and brand in a new age capitalist organization. *Sociology*, 44, 395–413.
- Lazzarato, M. (1996). Immaterial labour. In P. Virno & M. Hardt (Eds.), *Radical thought in Italy: A potential politics* (pp. 133–147). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lazzarato, M. (2004). From capital–labour to capital–life. *Ephemera*, 4(3), 187–208.
- Lazzarato, M. (2017). *Experimental politics: Work, welfare, and creativity in the neoliberal age* (A. Bove, J. Gilbert, A. Goffey, M. Hayward, J. Read, & A. Toscano, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Lears, T. J. (1983). From salvation to self-realization: Advertising and the therapeutic roots of the consumer culture, 1880–1930. In R. W. Fox & T. J. J. Lears (Eds.), *The culture of consumption: Critical essays in American history, 1880–1980* (pp. 1–38). New York: Pantheon.
- Lorey, I. (2015). *State of insecurity: Government of the precarious* (A. Derieg, Trans.). London: Verso.
- Lury, C. (2004). *Brands: The logos of the global economy*. London: Routledge.
- Marwick, A. (2013). *Status update: Celebrity, publicity and attention in the social media age*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Marwick, A. (2015). Instafame: Luxury selfies in the attention economy. *Public Culture*, 27, 137–160.
- Marx, K. (1967). *Capital* (S. Moore & E. Aveling, Trans.). New York: International Publishers.
- McCabe, D. (2007). *Power at work: How employees reproduce the corporate machine*. London: Routledge.
- McRobbie, A. (2016). *Be creative: Making a living in the new culture industries*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Mumby, D. K. (2016). Organizing beyond organization: Branding, discourse, and communicative capitalism. *Organization*, 23, 884–907.
- Mumby, D. K. (2018). Targeting Alex: Brand as agent in communicative capitalism. In B. H. J. M. Brummans (Ed.), *The agency of organizing: Perspectives and case studies* (pp. 98–122). New York: Routledge.
- Mumby, D. K., Thomas, R., Martí, I., & Seidl, D. (2017). Resistance redux. *Organization Studies*, 38, 1157–1183.
- Murphy, A. G. (1998). Hidden transcripts of flight attendant resistance. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 11, 499–535.
- Neff, G. (2012). *Venture labor: Work and the burden of risk in innovative industries*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- Olins, W. (2000). How brands are taking over the corporation. In M. Schultz, M. J. Hatch, & M. H. Larsen (Eds.), *The expressive organization: Linking identity, reputation, and the corporate brand* (pp. 51–65). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Paulsen, R. (2014). *Empty labor: Idleness and workplace resistance*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Postone, M. (1993). *Time, labor, and social domination: A reinterpretation of Marx's critical theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rose, N. (2001). The politics of life itself. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 18(6), 1–30.
- Ross, A. (2017). Working for nothing. The latest high-growth sector? In E. Armano, A. Bove, & A. Murgia (Eds.), *Mapping precariousness, labour insecurity and uncertain livelihoods: Subjectivities and resistance* (pp. 189–198). London: Routledge.
- Shannon, C. E., & Weaver, W. (1949). *The mathematical theory of communication*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Sherman, Z. (2017). Opening value theory to the brand. *Rethinking Marxism*, 29, 592–609.
- Skeggs, B. (2014). Values beyond value? Is anything beyond the logic of capital? *British Journal of Sociology*, 65, 1–20.
- Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform capitalism*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Sullivan, K., & Delaney, H. (2017). A femininity that 'giveth and taketh away': The prosperity gospel and postfeminism in the neoliberal economy. *Human Relations*, 70, 836–859.
- Tait, A. (2019, October 16). Mouse whisperers: Meet the Disney influencers making a living at the Magic Kingdom. *The Guardian*. [https://www.theguardian.com/global/2019/oct/13/mouse-whisperers-meet-the-disney-influencers-making-a-living-at-the-magic-kingdom?CMP=share\\_btn\\_link#comment-134245610](https://www.theguardian.com/global/2019/oct/13/mouse-whisperers-meet-the-disney-influencers-making-a-living-at-the-magic-kingdom?CMP=share_btn_link#comment-134245610)
- Thompson, E. P. (1966). *The making of the English working class*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Thompson, P., & O'Dougherty, D. P. (2009). Perspectives on labour process theory. In M. Alvesson, T. Bridgman, & H. Willmott (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of critical management studies* (pp. 99–121). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Thrift, N. J. (2005). *Knowing capitalism*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Tolentino, G. (2017, March 17). The gig economy celebrates working yourself to death. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/jia-tolentino/the-gig-economy-celebrates-working-yourself-to-death>
- Tolentino, G. (2019). *Trick mirror: Essays in self-delusion*. New York: Random House.
- Tronti, M. (2012). Our Operaismo. *New Left Review*, 73, 119–139.
- Tronti, M. (2019). *Workers and capital* (D. Broder, Trans.). London: Verso.
- Weil, D. (2014). *The fissured workplace*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Willmott, H. (2010). Creating value beyond the point of production: Branding, financialization, and market capitalization. *Organization*, 17, 517–542.
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. New York: Public Affairs.

### Author biography

Dennis K. Mumby is the Cary C. Boshamer Distinguished Professor of Communication at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA. His research focuses on the dynamics of organizational control and resistance under neoliberalism. He is a Fellow of the International Communication Association, and a National Communication Association Distinguished Scholar. He has authored or edited 8 books and over 70 articles in the area of critical organization studies, and his work has appeared in journals such as *Academy of Management Review*, *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Organization Studies*, *Organization*, and *Human Relations*.