Rethinking Immaterial Labor
Communication, Reality, and Neo-Radicalism

Jason Del Gandio

Abstract: Working from the post-Workerist tradition, this essay re-specifies the phenomenon of immaterial labor. Immaterial labor is not simply a mode of work relevant to the information-based global economy. Instead, immaterial labor is inherent to the human condition: human beings materialize realities through the immaterial means of communication. This ontological approach to immaterial labor enables us to rethink the radical project: rather than trying to "change the world," we are now called to create alternative realities that resist the subjugation of our immaterial laboring. Since we are all immaterial laborers, we all have a stake in revolutionizing our realities. This essay provides a preliminary sketch of this political philosophy.

Revolution often seems impossible. The power structures appear too globalized, diffuse, and decentralized to assemble a starting point for radical social change. There is the State, military, mass media, capitalism, consumerism, and concentrated corporate power; ingrained racism, sexism, classism, ableism, homophobia, and heterosexism; apathy, ambivalence, cynicism, defeatism, and careerism; and the appeal of mass anonymity and promises of "liberal reform." Any of these could be starting points for revolutionary action, but no single point necessarily undermines the others. It is a multi-headed leviathan with no heart or central cortex. Such an overwhelming and amorphous configuration of power seems invincible.

But human ingenuity is a marvelous wonder. For instance, school children resist oppressive dress codes by altering their uniforms in the slightest of ways—untucked shirttails, hemlines just above the knee, ties loosened beneath the collar, and love poems inscribed on the bottom of soles. Prison inmates are continuously surrounded by armed guardsmen and cages of

concrete and steel, but manage to import illegal contraband, communicate in secret codes, fashion weapons from bare essentials, and create social systems that utterly contradict the warden's orders. Undocumented workers cross borders, climb walls, hop fences, and dig tunnels; once in the country, they labor for, and even organize against, the very politicians and corporations that seek to exclude them. Overworked and underpaid temporary workers fight their social and economic precarity by organizing campaigns for guaranteed social income. These anti-precarity campaigns include but are not limited to teachers, artists, administrative assistants, freelance web designers, telecommunicators, day laborers, custodial workers, sex workers, and stay-at-home care takers. And plenty of average, everyday people are willing and able to challenge the corruption and cruelty of current day systems: uprisings in Greece, France, Iran, South Africa, and North African Arab countries; sustained struggles in Thailand and South Korea; climate justice protests in Copenhagen and Cancun; anti-G20 protests in Toronto; student protests in California; teacher protests in Wisconsin; and new political praxes throughout Latin America.

These actions, while not always revolutionary, exemplify the human will to resist. Where there is breath, there is life; where there is a will, there is a way; where there is oppression, there is resistance. This predisposition to resistance is rooted in our communicative nature: we are communicative beings constantly interacting with one another, which enables (and even compels) us to overcome, adapt to, and transform ourselves, each other, and surrounding situations. If this is true, then I believe that a *re-specified approach to immaterial labor* (which, as we will see, is based on communication) can provide an avenue for revolutionary strategy.

At the most basic level, an immaterial laborer is one who works with communicative, emotional, psychological, informational, cultural, or knowledge-based resources and/or means.[1] Advertisers, marketers, and public relation practitioners are the clearest examples. But so, too, are computer programmers who enable us to communicate across space and time, IT call workers who adopt certain accents and memorize certain pop-cultural references, and even air flight attendants and fast food workers who greet you with a smile and treat you like a long lost friend. This push toward immateriality is exemplified by such stores as the Whole Foods supermarket and the Men's Warehouse. Their workers do not necessarily produce material goods, but instead, immaterial exchanges. The workers are trained to greet, assist, and speak with customers in highly expressive, communicative, and empathetic ways. Whole Foods may offer quality organic food, but it is the overall communicative interaction that marks the Whole Foods experience. "How are you

1. For a concise definition of immaterial labor, see the "Glossary of Concepts," in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 262.

doing today? May I help you find anything? Oh, I, too, *love* this brand of soy milk! I've been drinking it for years!" Such gesturing is even more obvious and overt at the Men's Warehouse. The material product (clothing) of the Men's Warehouse is shabby, flimsy, and highly overpriced. However, the customer service makes each and every patron feel as though he (or on occasion, she) is receiving individual, specialized attention. You are made to feel important and special; you matter; you are a rock star. That is the power of immaterial labor—the intangibility of the communicative exchange is able to turn water into wine, and people buy it. What would Starbucks be without the ironic infusion of hipster-intellectualism *and* corporate classism? What would Wal-Mart be without its narrative of community and traditional values? What would Barack Obama be without the civil rights symbolism and his rhetoric of hope and change? In each case, it is the communicative, symbolic, and/or cultural aspect that determines the overall meaning and worth of, and desire for, the product, store, or politician.

However, at a deeper level, immaterial labor can be understood as a defining characteristic of the human being. Such thinkers as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (who will be discussed in detail below) describe immaterial labor as a recently developed mode of work relevant to the information-based global economy. This is an insightful but limited understanding of immaterial labor. The crux of this essay argues that immaterial labor is part and parcel of the human condition: human beings materialize their realities through the immaterial means of communication; those means include, but are not limited to, signs, symbols, languages, stories, discourses, images, what we say and how we say it. I believe that this *ontological* approach to immaterial labor enables us to rethink the radical project: rather than trying to "change the world," we are now called to create alternative realities that resist the capture and control of our immaterial laboring. And since we are all immaterial laborers, we all have a stake in revolutionizing our realities. This essay provides a preliminary sketch of this political philosophy.

The Post-Workerist Debate

Debates about immaterial labor have been popularized by the post-*Operaista* (post-Workerist) movement. Maurizio Lazzarato,[2] Paolo Virno,[3] Franco Berardi,[4] and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri[5] have all argued, in different

2. "Immaterial Labor," in *Radical Thought in Italy*, 133–47; "From Capital-Labour to Capital-Life," *ephemera* 4.3 (2004): 187–208.
3. *A Grammar of the Multitude* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004).
4. *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009).
5. *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004);

ways, that immaterial labor is the new hegemonic force of global capitalism. According to Hardt and Negri, "the qualities and characteristics of immaterial production are tending to transform the other forms of labor and indeed society as a whole."[6] In other words, immaterial labor exerts a disproportionate influence over other forms of labor within the twenty-first century.

Hardt and Negri's assessment is based on the changed nature of capitalism. Throughout much of the twentieth century, capitalism was structured around Fordist production systems. Fordism included traditional assembly lines of workers standing shoulder-to-shoulder, each operating a specialized form of labor. This production model began to change in the mid- to late 1970s when corporations began to decentralize. A corporate headquarters may be centrally located in a particular geographical location, but the company has different assembling plants throughout the world, with each plant specializing in a different manufacturing process. To use car manufacturing as an example, the motor, frame, seats, and tires may all be manufactured in different countries, and then shipped to one location for final assembly. Post-Fordism is thus characterized by dispersed networks that are laterally connected. This decentralizing process funds and is funded by advancements in transportation and computer, satellite, and communication technologies.

Post-Fordism intensified throughout the late twentieth century, particularly after the Cold War. The fall of the Soviet Union and its satellite countries enabled the rise of global capitalism. This increased the want and need for a particular form of work: immaterial labor. Within the structures of Fordism, there was a traditional hierarchy of owner, floor manager, and worker, all of whom stood (more or less) face-to-face, either giving or receiving orders. Within the structures of post-Fordism, hierarchical control is more complicated and dispersed, moving through and across various channels and geographical locations. This alters the relationship between communication and capitalist production.

Maurizio Lazzarato, perhaps the first person to coin the term "immaterial labor," articulates two relationships between communication and Post-Fordism.[7] First, communicating within and across teams, groups, networks, and decision making processes is more frequent and essential. In brief, communication oils the gears of the post-Fordist engine; remove that oil and the engine screeches to a halt. The imperative to communicate has always been present within capitalism—some level of communicative cooperation is necessary to all labor (even if it's just giving and receiving orders). But that communication is now more extensive and intensive. The communication is

Commonwealth (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

6. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 65.
7. Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor."

extensive because it reaches across every corner of the globe. It is *intensive* because it reaches into the very depths of the worker. In the past, workers followed orders while rarely being asked to think about or discuss the assigned tasks. But now workers are commonly asked and even commanded to communicate in team decision-making processes; the average worker is now part of the "communications team." Car manufactures, law firms, pharmaceutical companies, investment banks, colleges, hospitals, research facilities, federal agencies, and other such bureaucratic institutions involve human resource offices, brainstorming and information gathering sessions, organizational surveys, annual meetings, internal memos, holiday luncheons, weekend retreats, counseling services, and anonymous comment boxes. These institutionalized channels of communication solicit and externalize workers' private thoughts, attitudes, and feelings—the inner life is drawn out into the public. Such extraction has little to do with the well-being of each person; instead, it is intended to facilitate better management of bureaucratic operations.

For Lazzarato, this imperative to communicate blurs if not obliterates the old dichotomies between mental and manual labor.[8] This collapse between the material and immaterial is not the liberation of work, but rather, a different and perhaps more insidious form of repression.[9] Workers' internal monologues are now turned outward, subsumed into the operation of the company. At this point there is no internal thought or emotional place to freely hide until the five o'clock whistle. Workers are forced to externalize their private selves and to be publicly present at all times. Both the body *and* mind are now absorbed into and used by the capitalist enterprise. As Franco Berardi states, "Cognitive labor is essentially a labor of communication, that is to say communication put to work. From a certain a point of view, this could be seen as an enrichment of experience. But it is also (and this is the general rule) an impoverishment, since communication loses its character of gratuitous, pleasurable and erotic contact, becoming an economic necessity, a joyless fiction."[10] This assessment is further supported by Paolo Virno when he states that "nobody is as poor as those who see their own . . . communicative faculty . . . reduced to wage labor"; "life lies at the center of politics when the prize to be won is immaterial . . . labor-power."[11] In other words, the "invitation" or "request" to actively shape a company's operations is not about freedom, autonomy, or creativity; instead, it's about controlling the human impulse to communicate.

Lazzarato's second point about the relationship between communication and post-Fordism is not articulated as clearly as the first. However, it can be gleaned by some common sense observations of contemporary life.

8. Ibid., 134.
9. Ibid., 135–36.
10. *The Soul at Work*, 86–87.
11. *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 63, 83.

For instance, the old industrial economy has in many ways satisfied the basic needs of the bourgeois consuming classes—food, clothes, shelter, and transportation are no longer scarce for the middle and upper classes. The post-industrial economy must therefore entice these classes to consume commodities they don't need but rather want and desire. Advertisers, marketers, publicists, and public relations practitioners thus communicate more frequently and intensely in order to fix the cultural and/or symbolic value of the product. The ruling classes are not concerned about being hungry or homeless; instead, they want to look and feel certain ways. Immaterial labor caters to and produces such aesthetic sensibilities. For Lazzarato, this points to the fact that immaterial labor produces first and foremost social relationships—it creates values, morals, emotions, artistic tastes, and ways of seeing and thinking. Immaterial labor thus reveals what material production had often concealed, namely, that labor produces not only commodities, but also, and more fundamentally, the capitalist way of being-in-the-world.[12] He writes:

> We are, in other words, faced with a form of capitalist accumulation that is no longer only based on the exploitation of labour in the industrial sense, but also on that of knowledge, life, health, leisure, culture, etc. What organizations produce and sell not only includes material or immaterial goods, but also forms of communication, standards of socialisation, perception, education, housing, transportation, etc. The explosion of services is directly linked to this evolution; and this does not only involve industrial services but also the mechanisms that organize and control ways of life. The globalization that we are currently living is not only extensive (delocalization, global market) but also intensive: it involves cognitive, cultural, affective and communicative resources (the life of individuals) as much as territories, genetic heritage (plants, animals, and humans), the resources necessary to the survival of the species and the planet (water, air, etc.). *It is about putting life to work*. (emphasis added)[13]

This post-Workerist emphasis on immaterial labor has been challenged by other social theorists. For example, Steve Wright argues that the focus on immaterial labor ignores the empirical fact that the majority of the world's workers still toil with their hands and bodies rather than minds and information.[14] Nick Dyer-Witheford argues that the concept of immaterial labor is too reductive, conflating very different forms of work—e.g., the café barista, restaurant server, sex-worker, and computer programmer do not execute the same kinds of labor.[15] Kristin Carls and Emma Dowling both argue in similar

12. Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," 138.
13. "From Capital-Labour to Capital-Life," 205.
14. "Reality Check: Are We Living in an Immaterial World?," *Mute* (November 23, 2005), http://www.metamute.org/en/node/5594 (accessed January 24, 2011).
15. "Cyber-Negri: General Intellect and Immaterial Labor," in *The Philosophy of Antonio Negri: Resistance in Practice*, ed. T. S. Murphy and A. K. Mustapha

ways that immaterial labor, while more creative and autonomous than manual labor or assembly line work, provides no inherent access to subversion or rebellion.[16] Rodrigo Nunes questions the emancipatory potential and hegemonic status of immaterial labor.[17] And George Caffentzis argues that material labor still determines the value of commodities because immaterial labor does not actually exist—there is no such thing as immaterial labor.[18]

I am sympathetic to many of these criticisms and I do not believe that immaterial labor—or any other single labor, practice, or idea—is *the way* toward revolution. Such narrow thinking is out of touch with the world's diversity and complexity. But I also argue that many of these criticisms are missing the point.

First, I agree that traditional material/manual labor is still the common mode of work. That will probably never change given the human dependency upon material infrastructures like housing, clothing, food and farming, roads, transportation, etc. But it is the immaterial aspect that drives the enterprise of contemporary global capitalism. Although billions of people physically manufacture products, it is the immaterial labor that determines the value of those products. There have been many complex arguments over this point in the pages cited above. But here is the simplest formulation that I can think of: there is the physical product itself that is materialized through physical labor; then there is the immaterial labor that literally shapes our understanding and perception of, and desire for, that product. That understanding, perception, and desire determines the context-specific value of the product. For instance, certain coffee beans are seen as "rare and exotic" because they are made in "faraway lands" by "interesting looking people" who live "differently than us." These coffee beans are then sold for a price higher than other beans that are made "down the street" by "average people like us." But given the extensive infrastructure of the international economy, "down the street" is not that different from across the ocean. Thus, the time, materials, transportation, and labor costs are not the only guiding principles that establish a product's value (i.e., price and consumer demand). Instead, consumers' perceptions

(London: Pluto Press, 2005), 136–62; "For a Compositional Analysis of the Multitude," in *Subverting the Present, Imagining the Future: Class, Struggle, Commons*, ed. Werner Bonefeld (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2009), 247–66.

16. "Affective Labour in Milanese Large Scale Retailing: Labour Control and Employees' Coping Strategies," *ephemera* 7.1 (2007): 46–59; "Producing the Dining Experience: Measure, Subjectivity and the Affective Worker," *ephemera* 7.1 (2007): 117–32.
17. "'Forward How? Forward Where?' I: (Post-)*Operaismo* Beyond the Immaterial Labour Thesis," *ephemera* 7.1 (2007): 178–202.
18. "Crystals and Analytic Engines: Historical and Conceptual Preliminaries to a New Theory of Machines," *ephemera* 7.1 (2007): 24–45.

determine the worth of and desire for the product. It is this *immaterially-constructed value* that drives the buying and selling of products; if we subtract that immaterial value then contemporary capitalism—in the form of global consumerism—collapses.

The marketing technique of branding may be the best example of immaterially-constructed value. Branding arranges signs and symbols in order to evoke a particular experience of a product. There is the physical product itself; then there is the communicative pattern that is placed over that product. The communicative pattern filters the consumer's perception; people literally see, understand, and experience the product through the communicative pattern. Changing the pattern changes the experience of and desire for the product. Compare, for instance, Wrangler and Baby Phat jeans. Both jeans are nothing but denim material cuts into slacks. But yet each jean is radically different. Wranglers are tough, rugged, masculine, and rural, while Baby Phats are urban, hip-hop, sleek, and feminine. People buy these jeans for the symbolic value rather than the pragmatic purpose of covering one's body. Consumers want to be certain kinds of people and want to feel certain kinds of ways. Those goals are accomplished by surrounding oneself with certain brands. The examples are endless: Starbucks versus Dunkin' Donuts, Nike versus Adidas, Coca Cola versus Pepsi, Fiji versus Deer Park, Wal-Mart versus Target, Whole Foods versus Trader Joe's. While physical differences exist between these products, it is the symbolism that determines the overall value. It is also important to realize that branding is not reducible to a few products or corporations. Instead, branding is a dominant aspect of contemporary life. Musicians, athletes, celebrities, politicians, schools, churches, and even entire nation-states now brand themselves; which is to say, we live in a world of top-down immaterially-constructed value.

And second, even the critics recognize how the spatial and temporal nature of globalization calls us toward communication/immateriality. The Internet, emails, blogs, texts, tweets, Skype, cell phones applications, Facebook, MySpace, message boards, YouTube, flash drives, iPods, and satellite technologies increase the communicative channels among human beings, fundamentally altering our shared social world. Critics might argue that these changes are concentrated at the top of the global hierarchy; that the wealthy elite amass their technological tools and toys while the majority of humans live without. I agree. Other critics might also argue that these communication technologies are not inherently revolutionary. I wholeheartedly agree once again. Such communication technologies actually enable the continuation and advancement of modern day warfare, imperialism, exploitation, banking, trading, human trafficking, propaganda, the subversion of democratic governments, and subjugation of the world's workers. However, these very technologies are also used for resistance and rebellion. Online activism, virtual sit-ins, meme warfare, flash mobs, smart mobs, text bombs, viral messaging

campaigns, World Social Forums, WikiLeaks, and everyday organizing involve forms and durations of communication unthinkable just a few decades earlier. Twenty-first-century revolution necessarily involves the appropriation and creative application of communication—i.e., immaterial labor.

But there is still another, more fundamental point that cuts to the heart of this essay. The post-Workerists argue that immaterial labor is a contingent, historically situated form of labor. But I argue that immaterial labor is an ontological feature of the human condition. Contemporary radical political theory flirts with this idea, but never approaches it head on. Hardt and Negri, for instance, borrow extensively from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who were influenced by Baruch Spinoza, the seventeenth-century philosopher. This allows them to talk about bodies and affects—that human beings live in relation to one another, perpetually affecting and being affected by one another's material bodies. Hardt and Negri's more recent work relies more heavily on Michel Foucault, particularly his distinction between biopolitics and biopower. The first describes how our ongoing embodied communicative interactions generate our shared social world while the second describes how those embodied interactions are configured through mechanisms of domination. Biopolitics is the raw process by which we collectively create; biopower is the top-down regulation of that process. There has also been a revived discussion about the radical imagination.[19] This conversation approaches the imagination as a collective capacity for understanding the current world and envisioning an alternative world; it is through the imagination that we are able to understand our freedom from oppression and our freedom to create something new. And of course there is much discussion about the aforementioned use of communication technologies that enable new modes of activism and organizing.[20] But none of these examples approach immaterial labor as a *primordial communication process* that actually enables affectivity, imagination, or technological innovation.

From Immateriality to Communication

Rhetorical theorist Ronald Greene approaches the post-Workerist debate through the lens of communication and rhetoric. This allows him to re-specify

19. See, for instance, Alex Khasnabish, *Zapatismo Beyond Borders: New Imaginations of Political Possibility* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); and Stevphen Shukaitis, *Imaginal Machines: Autonomy & Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Life* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2009).
20. See, for instance, Nick Dyer-Witherford, *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High Technology Capitalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); and Geert Lovink and Trebor Scholz, *The Art of Free Cooperation* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2007).

immaterial labor as communicative labor.[21] Greene argues that basic, everyday communication is by its very nature a laborious process—it takes a lot of work, effort, and exertion. A simple conversation between two friends involves listening, processing, responding, paraphrasing, rephrasing, misinterpretations, nonverbal cues and adjustments, empathy, and emotional support. But Greene also argues that communication is a form of, and might even be the basis of, *living labor* (in the basic Marxian sense). Human beings are communicative beings, and without that communication no labor exists—i.e., labor *is* communication. Greene uses this framework to reconceptualize the nature of rhetorical agency. The political rhetor is often understood as intervening into social affairs by means of persuasion, argumentation, deliberation, advocacy, or even sit-ins, strikes, boycotts, and violence. But the political rhetor—as a communicative laborer—does not simply intervene, negotiate, mediate, or express; instead, the political rhetor creates and communicatively calls into existence new ideas, words, perceptions, emotions, feelings, and imaginary terrains. The rhetorical laborer does not simply disseminate but actually creates value.

Che Guevara, for example, was a superb rhetor, well rehearsed in writing and oratorical skills, capable of adapting messages to audiences and inspiring various populations across the world. Che not only represented but helped evoke the ethos of the 1960s international radicalism. To borrow the title of his own essay, he was "the new man" who embodied the values of socialism.[22] Che's iconic appeal was not reducible to his participation in the Cuban revolution or the brute conflicts of guerilla fighting. He also led, coordinated, organized, and rhetorically manifested a socialist vision that inspired armed rebellion. In other words, he was a communicative laborer who threatened the institution of capitalism. But Che's communicative labor eventually became part of the capitalist machine. His image is now used to sell (and thus pacify) ideas of resistance and revolution. Che's once living and inspiring communicative labor is now subsumed into a larger system of domination.

We can also look at the communicative labor of Malcolm X. Born Malcolm Little, he underwent a psychic/political transformation and thus adopted the name "X." This rhetorical move marked a break with the symbology of the entire power structure: "X" designates both the unknown historical lineages

21. "Rhetoric and Capitalism: Rhetorical Agency as Communicative Labor," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 37.3 (2004): 188–206; "Communist Orator," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 39.1 (2006): 85–95; and "Rhetorical Capital: Communicative Labor, Money/Speech, and Neo-Liberal Governance," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 4.3 (2007): 327–31.
22. "Socialism and Man in Cuba," Marxist Internet Archive, http://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1965/03/man-socialism.htm (accessed January 24, 2011).

of African-Americans and a point of departure (i.e., *now* is the time for a Black revolution). Malcolm's rhetorical labor is best characterized by "insurrectional immediacy." As rhetorical scholar Robert E. Terrill argues, "for Malcolm, public address *was* social change; his words are his deeds. It is through his public discourse that members of his audiences are made to see the limits imposed upon them by the dominant white culture and are shown attitudes and strategies that invite them to transgress against those limits."[23] According to Terrill, Malcolm's rhetoric and politics cannot be separated; each helps to inform and constitute the other. Malcolm's speeches did not lead to liberation, but instead, were liberation. His rhetorical labors evoked and manifested the reality of Black defiance and resistance; his rhetoric *was* the insurrection.

Very few people are as historically impactful as Che and Malcolm; they are famous political rhetors for good reason. But it is imperative to recognize that each of us—famous or otherwise—is a communicative laborer. We may not be as articulate and passionate as Che and Malcolm; our orations may occur on interpersonal rather than public stages; and our everyday communication may sustain rather than overturn systems of domination. But each of us *does* communicatively labor the world into existence.

Given this insight, I believe that this concept of communicative labor advances an understanding not only of value, but also, and perhaps more profoundly, of reality. Discussions about the creation of value are part and parcel of the Marxist tradition. But Marxists—as well as other radical traditions—rarely talk about the creation of reality. Such discussions can be found in various philosophical traditions (like phenomenology, existentialism, pragmatism, the philosophy of language, rhetorical theory, etc.), but are often absent from radical traditions. I find this to be problematic and argue that sustained discussion about immateriality, communication, and the creation of reality can elevate radical praxis—it can put into play new ideas about political movements, social change, and even revolutionary strategy.

Communication and Reality

We are communicative beings that labor reality into existence. Reality does not fall from the sky or exist beneath a rock. Instead, we create reality through language, signs, symbols, stories, narratives, discourses, what we say and how we say it. These means of communication are immaterial. For example, a symbol may be materially manifested by written discourse—it physically appears on a page, computer screen, billboard, brick or even cave wall. But the communicative effect of that symbol is immaterial; it does not exist in the same way as a brute, material object. The meanings, associations, and implications of symbols do not exist physically, but instead, exist in our capacity for

23. *Malcolm X: Inventing Radical Judgment* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2004), 6.

collective understanding. That understanding is an immaterial phenomenon. For example, a capitalized, encircled letter A with a horizontal line running through its middle symbolizes anarchy. That symbol may suddenly appear on the side of a Nike or Capital One bank building during a mass demonstration. People then yell, cheer, and pump their fists in the air. The symbol itself is materially manifested. But its communicative effects—which include psychological, emotional, historical, and of course political significations—live in the collective capacity for shared understanding amongst the protesters.

This insight is supported by many thinkers and intellectual traditions of the last one hundred years. The phenomenological tradition of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty is based on the co-constitutive nature of the subject-object relationship. There are the things themselves and then there are the subjective biases of the observer. Together, these two poles of experience constitute "the world." Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that all language is inherently social; no private language is possible. We are communal beings that borrow from, adapt to, and shape one another's use, application, and understanding of language. Kenneth Burke's notion of "terministic screens" describes the process by which one's rhetoric (i.e., sign-usage) filters the audience's perception and understanding. If each person's sign-usage is different, then so, too, is each person's filter. John Searle developed the notion of "speech acts" and argued that language is neither a neutral or passive transmitter of ideas; instead, language actually performs particular actions. Subtracting our use of language erases the possibility of such everyday actions as greeting, apologizing, proposing, warning, soliciting, etc. Postmodern and poststructuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Judith Butler advance this theoretical discussion to the level of "discourse," arguing that language is a wholly social, and in many ways impersonal, process; rather than locating the individual subject as the arbitrator of language, language itself becomes the arbitrator of the subject. This idea is summarized most aptly (and controversially) by Jacques Derrida's statement that "there is nothing outside the text": no matter how hard we try, we can never escape, transcend, or burrow beneath the language/discourse that uses us; every search reveals another layer of language, *ad infinitum*.

These various theories do not coalesce into a coherent, unified philosophy. But it is from this theoretical background that I argue the following points: (1) communication sits at the center of the human condition, (2) our propensity toward communicative labor enables us to be reality-creating beings, and (3) this ongoing, ever-present labor can be developed into a politically radical project that places the creation of reality at the center of its agenda.

First, our communicative interactions with one another *enable* us to speak, think, imagine, and collectively coordinate our actions. Subtracting all communication erases the very possibility of symbolism, thereby erasing the *human* form of life. Even if there was no language, we would still rely upon

nonverbal communication for daily operations; those nonverbals are intelligible only through symbolism—e.g., different gestures signify different things like fear, aggression, care, courtship, warning, etc. Within this philosophical paradigm, communicative labor is not simply an isolated, individualized act; instead, our labors are inherently interconnected, reflexive, and mutually influential. Each individual simultaneously emerges from and contributes to the world's communicative laboring. This recursive, ongoing labor is the primordial basis of the human form of life.[24]

Second, our communicative labors shape our individual-and-collective interpretations and orientations. There is the "thing itself" and then there is the communication that filters our perception, understanding, and experience of that thing. Although we can and do change communicative filters, we are never without a filter. Only God and rocks can exist without this type of filtering process. Human beings, however, *are* filtering creatures; and that filtration *is* the creation of reality. Even something as seemingly simple as a "tree" is not a self-constituted reality onto itself. Instead, it only becomes a "tree" through our communication about it. In some ways, a tree *does* exist in and of itself. I can walk over and touch the tree, thus verifying that it stands *over there* as I stand *over here*. I can even cut it down without harming myself. I can then watch it fall down, decompose, and eventually fertilize the surrounding ground. It is obvious that I and it exist independently.[25] However, the *reality* of this tree is constituted by my interpretation of and relationship to it. That interpretation and relationship are created by my shared and socially oriented communicative labor. Is a "tree" something that sits in the forest and is available for my pragmatic use, like building houses, boats, furniture, or using it for firewood? Is a tree a mere object that *should* be cut down and manufactured into objects to be bought and sold for profit? Is a tree a woody plant that exists within nature, needing sunlight and rain and producing oxygen that allows me

24. This insight is supported by the phenomenological notion of the pre-reflective lifeworld, which is a plane of interaction that precedes conscious cognition and actually enables human life to persist. See Edmund Husserl, *Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970). This line of thought is strengthened by the work of Eugene T. Gendlin, "Primacy of the Body, Not Primacy of Perception," *Man and World* 25 (1992): 341–53. Theoretical traces of the lifeworld are also noticeable within Hardt and Negri's analysis of "biopolitics" in *Commonwealth*, 22–38.
25. Radical environmentalists may object to this depiction, arguing that the human and natural worlds are inextricably interwoven. They may argue that cutting down trees may not produce direct and immediate harm, but indirect and long term harm. I agree. But that is not the point of this example. Everything is communicatively created, including environmentalism (which I fully support).

to breathe? Is a tree the face of the supernatural, thus deserving of reverence and worship? Or is a tree the site of childhood memories, involving a swing set, a tree house, a broken arm, bruised knee, shady spots on warm summer days, my first kiss, the home of blue jays and robins, and more than thirty years of companionship? These are not simply different "descriptions," but rather, differently constituted realities. We experience and understand the tree through our communication (the signs, symbols, words, languages, stories, and narrative structures). Change the communication, and you change the reality.

And third, this philosophical paradigm raises issues of agency and power. Who actually creates our realities? Are we the agents of our realities, or do predatory forces create our realities for us, thereby alienating us from our impulses-to-communicate? Returning to the issue of branding helps clarify the point. In many ways branding simply mimics the reality-creating process—branding arranges signs and symbols in order to evoke a particular experience, perception, and understanding of a product. But due to the instruments of power (like capitalism, corporations, mass media, billion dollar operations, political marketing by Democrats and Republicans) branding colonizes the reality-creating process. Rather than each of us creating our own realities, we now buy branded realities from a small handful of power brokers. This helps explain why many people are unable to imagine a world that is beyond capitalism, corporate control, the two-party system, and "reality television": Our immaterial labor is not our own; it is subsumed into a wider system of control and domination.

Political Antecedents

Traces of this agenda can be found within various radical movements. For instance, the 1960s counter-culturalist Abbie Hoffman often talked about communication and the creation of reality. During his testimony at the Chicago 7 trial, Abbie argued that hippies constituted a unique culture held hostage within American society. Hippies did not necessarily constitute a physical or geographical boundary with national standing and binding legislations. Instead, hippies constituted a way of life that existed within their minds, hearts, and bodies. When asked for his place of residence, Abbie told the court, "Woodstock Nation." He was then asked to explain.

> It is a nation of alienated young people. We carry it around with us as a state of mind in the same way the Sioux Indians carried the Sioux nation around with them. It is a nation dedicated to cooperation versus competition, to the idea that people should have better means of exchange than property or money, that there should be some other basis for human interaction. It is a *nation*. (emphasis added)[26]

26. Mark L. Levin, George C. McNamee, and Daniel Greenberg, eds., *The Tales of Hoffman* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), 140–41.

Abbie is basically arguing that the communicative labors of his fellow counter-culturalists gave rise to an alternative "hippie reality." That reality is as real and legitimate as any other reality, including that of "America."

The Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico have also evoked an alternative reality, one that is unapologetically anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian. They have done so by organizing international conferences, assemblies, and delegations, and releasing press packets, communiqués, photographs, stories, poems, books, manifestos, and websites of black-masked indigenous revolutionaries declaring, "All for everyone, nothing for ourselves." Although imagistic and captivating, they are not a shallow, one-dimensional spectacle. Instead, the Zapatistas have created a unique reality that is tangible to themselves and others. In the words of Subcomandante Marcos:

> Zapatismo is not an ideology, it is not a bought and paid for doctrine. It is . . . an intuition. Something so open and flexible that it really occurs in all places. Zapatismo poses the question: 'What is it that has excluded me?' 'What is it that has isolated me?' . . . In each place the response is different. Zapatismo simply states the question and stipulates that the response is plural, that the response is inclusive.[27]

Zapatismo, then, is a set of values, outlooks, understandings, orientations, and beginning points. It is *a way of seeing and living*. Zapatismo is not reducible to an ideology or a ten-point program. It lives within us as we live it, and is passed on through our languages, utterances, and actions. It is manifested and carried on by our communicative labors. Zapatismo is the participatory creation of a twenty-first-century revolutionary reality.

Similar issues are also alluded to by such traditions as culture jamming, the Situationist International, and lifestyle anarchism. These traditions not only critique contemporary society and the alienation that it produces, but also recognize the possibility for human beings to reconstruct a better, more liberatory world. While many of these traditions are intellectually brilliant and politically revolutionary, I believe that more theoretical sophistication is needed, or, perhaps, a different theoretical framework altogether. For instance, Abbie Hoffman was fond of saying that "reality is in your head," meaning that we are free to create any reality we want. That's not entirely true. We can and do create our own realities. But those realities are created by a communicative process that precedes and exceeds individual agency. And the Situationists, while extremely sophisticated, work from a stringent Marxian paradigm bound to the dialectic. Such dialecticism enables them to wage a totalizing critique of mid-twentieth-century consumer capitalism, but fails to demonstrate how we can successfully break free. This produces, in my opinion, existential

27. Quoted by Ana Carrigan, "Afterword: Chiapas, the First Postmodern Revolution," in *Our Word is Our Weapon*, ed. Juana Ponce de Leon (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), 440.

malaise and revolutionary defeatism. In the proceeding final section, I briefly outline some basic parameters for a political philosophy that I currently refer to as "neo-radicalism."

Rethinking the Radical Tradition

Traditionally speaking, radicalism goes to the root of social and political problems, overturns those root problems, and lays groundwork for a better world. If this is true, then immaterial labor, as specified here, deserves due attention. Rather than beginning radical praxis with, say, capitalism, the State, or mass media, we should begin with what is most radical: the primordial process of communicative labor. This allows us to understand various institutions, bureaucracies, systems, and homogenizing processes as secondary outgrowths that prey upon, steer, and control our reality-creating powers.

This starting point of analysis can be traced back to the Italian Workerist movement, which is the antecedent of the Post-Workerists. The Workerists begin with working-class subjectivity. They argue that working-class subjectivity is ontologically primordial to capitalism, and that capitalism feeds on that subjectivity. Workerists then conduct socio-historical analyses of working-class subjectivity (known as "class composition analysis"). They argue that capitalism is constantly changing, and those changes are based on class resistance. The working class always finds ways to subvert capitalism; capitalism then adjusts and reinvents itself (industrialism, consumerism, neoliberalism, etc.). The point of composition analysis is to better understand and thus subvert capital's subjugation of the worker. What form of resistance is most suitable for *today's* working class?[28]

Feminist Workerists have extended the notion of "worker" to non-waged labor.[29] For instance, the unpaid duties of birth-giving, nursing, child rearing, and caretaking (traditionally conducted by women) are now understood as forms of labor. Feminists argue that such duties are the most important labors of all—without them no civilization could sustain itself. This principle is then applied *en masse*—every human being embodies a form of living labor and thus contributes to the ongoing construction of the social field. Since we are all workers, we all have a stake in overthrowing capitalism. But capitalism is not the only problem. Workerists also resist any and all political institutions

28. For a great historical overview of the Workerist movement, see Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002). Franco Berardi also provides a helpful theoretical lineage in *The Soul at Work*, 27–70.
29. For some of the issues pertinent to feminist Workerism, see Silvia Federici, "Wages Against Housework," Caring Labor: An Archive, http://caringlabor.wordpress.com/2010/09/15/silvia-federici-wages-against-housework (accessed January 24, 2011; originally published in 1975).

that capture and/or subjugate living labor. The State, political parties, parliamentarianism, constitutionalism, and even trade unions place a homogenous and unitary identity over our inherently heterogeneous and diversified identities. Workerists reject the homogenous and unitary "one" and embrace the heterogeneous and diversified "many." In this way, Workerism (also referred to as Autonomous Marxism) is related to anarchism. The goal is to create a truly bottom-up world in which workers are no longer "workers" but rather human beings creating-in-common with one another.

The Workerist starting point combined with the Post-Workerist investigation into immaterial labor and my re-specification thereof allows me to develop the following logic: human beings are immaterial laborers who communicate reality into existence; that immaterial labor is captured, formalized, and controlled by the engines of contemporary power structures; our capacity to create reality is thus institutionalized and siphoned into the ongoing drudgery and oppression of an alienating, inhumane world. In order to reverse this trend, we must work at the level of reality-creation and subvert the institutions of control from and through our communicative labors.

Such a framework provides a non-totalizing beginning point for analysis and action: communicative labor, while common to all human beings, is inherently diverse, decentralized, and diffuse. Every human being—regardless of job, occupation, identity, culture, class, nationality, age, sex, or gender—materializes reality through immaterial means. Everyone thus has a (potential) interest in revolutionizing the world. But people must analyze their own individual situations and then take up the revolutionary call in their own unique ways. This is not hyper-individualism or "self-help for would-be radicals," and it does not preclude the possibility of or need for collective action. In fact, collective action is absolutely necessary—only through solidarity and collective struggle can we liberate our communicative capacities for alternative reality-creation. Collective action also necessitates revolutionary organization. Isolated, free-wheeling actions are good for rebellion; but protracted, deeply meaningful social change requires arduous coordination.

This goal both extends and grounds two contemporary concepts—intersectionality and *specifismo*. Intersectionality describes the simultaneous overlapping of various discriminations and inequalities that create implicit and/or explicit systems of oppression. Various categories of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia) do not exist independently, but rather, intersect to create varying degrees of oppression. And the Latin American term *specifismo* describes how different political positions can stand in tenuous and contentious yet healthy and productive solidarity. Reading these terms through an immaterial lens helps explain how we embody different and divergent yet interconnected and mutually influential realities that are liberated and/or marginalized in different contexts; and how we can disagree but also appreciate and support our different communicative labors for a better

world. Together, our various communicative labors aggregate into a multitudinous movement toward an ever-improving—though never perfect—world. Such a movement is inherently antagonistic, provoking real and serious conflict with various power structures.

Bigger questions obviously persist. For example, how do we actually withdraw and thus liberate our communicative labors from contemporary power relations? How do we develop political strategies around this process of creating alternative realities? Does the creation of one reality necessarily imply the destruction of another (opposing and oppressive) reality? What social infrastructures are needed to create a world of truly bottom-up, freely created realities? This last question is particularly important since creating liberatory realities is much more difficult for those who are impoverished, starving, or violently repressed. We are thus compelled to continuously address and fight for material necessities like food, shelter, clothing, work, healthcare, education, and transportation; to overturn dictatorships, military regimes, and capitalism; and to construct equitable social systems. But we must also take up the mantel of immaterial labor and develop new frontiers of thought, perception, understanding, and experience. Such immaterial constructions often provide the motivation and desire for radical social change, which is the whole point—to create conditions for the possibility of an alternative world. For now, I am referring to this political philosophy as *neo-radicalism*: a new form of radicalism that places communicative labor and the creation of reality at the center of its project. — • —