

The past months, many pieces have been written about the relevance of Michel Foucault's writings during the coronavirus pandemic, often reduced to vague historical analogies. They variously apply Foucault's (1975) descriptions of the plague in *Discipline and Punish* and his reflections on biopolitics to the current condition. As interesting as these historical comparisons could be for academics, most challenges we face today are not really addressed by knowing that the current pandemic is not only dangerous or complex but also "biopolitical." Is there really nothing more to Foucault's relevance than mere historical analogies? By the 2000s, some Italian political philosophers—such as Antonio Negri (Hardt and Negri 2000), Paolo Virno (2004), and Maurizio Lazzarato (1996)—had already updated Foucault's ideas for the twenty-first century by linking biopolitics to the politics of labor. They argued that contemporary capitalism had shifted to a post-Fordist mode of production based on "immaterial" or "biopolitical" production in which life itself has become the motor of production. Many workers in Western countries today do not laboriously produce commodities at the assembly line but

sell their creativity and social skills in the service sector. What makes life human—our capacity to speak, socialize, create—has been captured within the capitalist accumulation cycle. According to these Italian neo-Marxists, production becomes biopolitical when human life itself becomes a profit source. They thereby move the focus of class struggle from the traditional working class to the vibrant multitude of knowledge workers and emotional laborers that populate today's labor market. For these theorists, this multitude constitutes the revolutionary subject of this age.

However, Angela McRobbie (2020) has recently stressed the very material underbelly of one such service sector, the fashion industry. The fashion industry's glamorous facade of creative young designers and social-networking influencers has a hidden underside of warehouse workers and couriers who are underpaid by Zalando and other

"click and collect" companies. She argues that algorithmically managed warehouses entail a drastic change in labor practices that seriously disempowers workers in these sectors. By specifying the meaning of the concept of biopolitics in the context of the pandemic, we would like to emphasize that post-Fordist immaterial labor always went together with deskilled, precarious labor—a fact that has remained underexposed in many theories of post-Fordism but that the

## The Multitude Divided: Biopolitical Production during the Coronavirus Pandemic

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current pandemic has made clearer than ever. As Achille Mbembe (2020) has recently suggested, the biopolitics of the current pandemic enacts “a vicious partitioning of the globe” in which some lives are valued more than others. Many of the knowledge workers described in the texts of theorists of post-Fordism sit at home teleworking while so-called essential workers risk their lives caring for the sick, delivering goods, or packaging food. The pandemic, in other words, exposes a series of divisions within the multitude that complicate its capacity to resist.

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Foucault (2003) introduces his concept of biopolitics while investigating the history of public-health policies. He argues that, throughout modernity, governments have increasingly concerned themselves with managing the health of their populations. While sporadic epidemics were already a problem in the Middle Ages, Foucault argues that only since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have governments regarded disease as a permanent factor requiring a consistent public-health policy. He writes that biopolitics is not so much concerned with temporary epidemics, but with “endemics”: that is, with the ways illness affects a population in a systematic and lasting way (243). The point of public-health measures was obviously not to have people idly sit at home in perfect health but to produce and maintain a healthy, docile, and

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especially productive workforce. Endemics were a problem because they “sapped the population’s strength, shortened the work week, wasted energy, and cost money, both because they led to a fall in production and because treating them was expensive” (244).

It is rightly noted in this context that Foucault somewhat neglected the role of class inequality in his studies. In his best-selling *Returning to Reims*, Foucault-biographer Didier Eribon (2013, 241) explains the lack of class analysis in

Foucault’s work by arguing that, in order to acknowledge other forms of oppression and struggle (such as sexual, gendered, and racial oppression), Foucault had to wrest himself away from the Marxism that dominated French intellectual life in the 1960s and 1970s, which was only focused on the struggle for the working class. However, Eribon

avows that this led to a neglect of class oppression altogether. Similarly, various Foucault-inspired scholars have taken up the task to study the role of racism and colonialism in greater detail than Foucault had done. Mbembe (2013, 167), for example, argues that many of the most brutal events of the twentieth century were made possible by decades of colonial and racist dehumanization intertwined with class oppression: “This development was aided in part by the racist stereotypes and the flourishing of a class-based racism that, in translating the social conflicts of the industrial world in racist terms,

ended up comparing the working classes and ‘stateless people’ of the industrial world to the ‘savages’ of the colonial world.” That the present division between people who can safely stay at home during a pandemic and the people who have to do unpleasant and risky work reproduces class, racial, gendered, and colonial forms of inequality goes without saying. Biopolitics segments the population into various groups and targets these groups with different policies to increase the health and productivity of the population as a whole.

Daniele Lorenzini (2020) is hence correct to have more recently described biopolitics as a politics of differential vulnerability: “Far from being a politics that erases social and racial inequalities by reminding us of our common belonging to the same biological species, it is a politics that structurally relies on the establishment of hierarchies in the value of lives, producing vulnerability as means of governing people.” The population is not a single homogenous totality but an internally fractured collective differentially subjected to various dangers and policies. Depending on one’s contribution to the population’s productivity, one receives a different treatment. Foucault (2003, 241; emphasis ours) hence succinctly defines the modern configuration of governmental power as “the right to make live *and to let die*.” Biopolitics implies that certain groups are structurally more exposed to health risks, exploitation, poverty, and generally unfavorable living conditions in order to safeguard the health of another part of the population.

We know by now that COVID-19 does not make everybody equally vulnerable but that various

groups of people are much more exposed to the virus’s lethal or financially devastating consequences—from people in Brazilian favelas to everybody without adequate health insurance in the United States. We also know that for a part of the population to stay at home, do telework, and minimize their risk of exposure to the virus, other people have to keep on working, harder than before, forced to risk their health. Still others lose their jobs and face unemployment because the sectors they work in are closed down. A Foucauldian intervention would thus not stop at saying that we live in “biopolitical times” but should examine the political conditions that make a specific unequal distribution of living conditions “acceptable” and should describe these conditions in all their diversified forms and ramifications.

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Since the 1990s, Italian neo-Marxist thinkers have taken up the notion of biopolitics to theorize their experiences with labor struggles in Italy throughout the 1960s and ’70s. They started from the workerist thesis of Mario Tronti’s 1966 *Workers and Capital*, that labor power always precedes and exceeds the capitalist mode of production in which it is integrated. As living labor, workers are always capable of much more than what is required of them in the capitalist mode of production, but to survive they must commodify their living labor and sell it as labor power at exploitative rates to the capitalist. Due to their weaker bargaining position, they must accept wages lower than the value they actually produce. For Tronti (2019, 155) this means that the workers’ subjectivity is split between two

antagonistically opposing sides: “Labor-power is not, therefore, just potential labor but also potential capital.” As living labor, labor power is the human potential to produce use values, but, as part of the capitalist accumulation process, labor power is nothing but a cog subsumed in a labor process beyond its control. Capital integrates labor power into its operations to generate even more capital: “Workers enter into capital, are reduced to a part of capital, as a working class. Capital now has its enemy within” (138).

Workers are, in other words, simultaneously capital and noncapital, and from this contradiction arises their resistance to capitalism’s attempt to integrate them into the production process. Working-class politics, from Tronti’s point of view, is not an effect of capitalist domination but is an integral element of the system. Workers are always already in struggle with capital, from the very moment they sell their labor power on the market. They oppose, “within and against capital” (*dentro e contro il capitale*), their own reduction to labor power serviceable to interests beyond their control.

However, Tronti wrote his magnum opus during the heydays of large-scale industrial production and the Fordist social factory, and this model ran out of steam by the end of the 1970s, forcing workerists to rethink their evaluation of contemporary capitalism. This rethought mode of production is usually designated as “post-Ford-

ism,” but the term has caused a lot of confusion. Post-Fordism is often described as a shift from the production of material goods to an age of “immaterial labor.” In the Fordist factory, workers produced standardized material commodities through monotonous labor at the assembly line. But this kind of labor moved to low-productivity-cost countries while the Western economy increasingly specialized in the provision of services and intangible goods. The commodities produced are no longer standardized material

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goods like cars or refrigerators but immaterial and intangible goods like information, affects, and knowledge. The bulk of the Western workforce no longer consists of a traditional working class employed in large-scale industry but of teachers, nurses, scientists, therapists, consultants, and so on. The very skills that make up the daily lives of people, such as social

skills, tastes, affects, opinions, creative and intellectual capacities, are now the main driver of capital accumulation. The production process itself is also far less rigid. As Virno (2004, 62) writes, “The tasks of a worker or of a clerk no longer involve the completion of a single particular assignment, but the changing and intensifying of social cooperation ... a conspicuous portion of individual work consists of developing, refining, and intensifying cooperation itself.” Workers are expected to flexibly and creatively cooper-

ate with each other and their clients to produce immaterial goods. An airline flight attendant must not mindlessly perform the same operation over and over but must “connect” with each client in a singular fashion. A nurse, likewise, must not merely cure a patient but also must employ soft skills to learn more about the patient’s medical history. Instead of executing centrally predetermined production targets, workers are left free to use their personal “virtuosity”—in Virno’s vocabulary—in whatever way they see fit to cultivate social cooperation.

Hardt and Negri (2000, 30) name the post-Fordist mode of production “biopolitical production.” Whereas the capture of living labor studied by Tronti only regarded the integration of workers’ physical and mechanical movements in large-scale industrial production, the post-Fordist capture of life goes much deeper into workers’ social relations and personal inventiveness. The subsumption of labor under capital goes much further, spanning the entire network of social cooperation among human beings. An airline company, for instance, not only captures its stewards’ physical labor into its operations but also their emotions, their social skills, their smiles. The hospital does not need nurses to merely perform standard, robotic operations but profits from their inventiveness and social skills. What makes us human, the capacity to be creative and engage with other people, becomes a direct source of profit in the

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post-Fordist regime. Human life itself as an incessant entanglement of social cooperation—or, “the multitude” in the Italian vernacular—is integrated into the process of capital accumulation. The political antagonism Tronti discerned in the commodification of living labor thus also becomes much more pronounced. And if life itself is commodified, then the struggle between living labor and capital is also diffused throughout the multitude, making human life directly political. If corporate profits depend on workers’ affective and social skills, then also the realms where those skills are cultivated become directly

political. In this way, the class struggle spreads from the workspace to the home and everyday life. Workers can oppose capital not only by struggling for their rights at the job but also by reclaiming the spaces post-Fordism has rendered serviceable to capital accumulation. For

Italian neo-Marxists, biopolitics is thus not primarily the government of populations but the struggle of life itself against its integration into the post-Fordist production process. Globalized capital paradoxically contains and produces the potential for resistance, which is now everywhere: “Resistances are no longer marginal but active in the center of a society that opens up in networks” (25).

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The Italian thesis of biopolitical production emphasizes the possibilities for a politics of life

but hardly connects to Foucault's original insight about differential vulnerability and the segmentation of the population. This shift becomes relevant once we note just how one-sided the immaterial-labor thesis really is. While Italian neo-Marxists frequently present the move to post-Fordism as a clear-cut shift from industrial mass production to a postindustrial economy based on immaterial labor, with industrial factories in low-productivity-cost countries, the reality is far more complex. The immaterial-labor thesis neglects the precarious and deskilled jobs post-Fordism has also generated in Western countries: warehouse workers, Deliveroo couriers, truckers, and so on. Script reading in a call center, for instance, might be directly communicative, but it can hardly be called "virtuosic"; on paper, nurses might be expected to chat with their patients, but in reality, their work is so closely monitored that they simply lack the time for such courtesies; warehouse workers in Amazon's fulfillment centers have not escaped factory disciplining at all but run from one aisle to another following a machine's commands. Clearly, though theories of post-Fordism have been very successful in describing the rise of high-skill, virtuosic jobs in the Western service sector, they have mostly ignored the simultaneous proliferation of deskilled jobs in, for example, the transportation sector, call centers, and distribution chains.

Hardt and Negri (2000, 292) briefly acknowledge this effect briefly in *Empire*, discerning "a corresponding growth of low-value and low-skill routine symbol manipulation, such as data entry and word processing," but they only give a detailed account of contemporary "digital Tay-

lorism" in their 2017 book *Assembly*, and even here their analysis is limited to just three pages (Hardt and Negri 2017, 131–3).

To find out how the multitude has become divided between high-skill immaterial laborers and deskilled workers subjected to digital Taylorism, it is helpful to look at business literature since the 1990s. This literature advises corporations to distinguish between their "core competences" and "non-essential activities" (Weil 2014). To guarantee their attractiveness to financial investors, corporations purportedly have to decide what their main contribution to the economy is and outsource the rest to subsidiary companies. Apple, for instance, is at its core a brand that markets high-quality tech products, so manufacturing those products, cleaning office spaces, or delivering the goods to local franchises are all nonessential to Apple's business model. That is why one of the most profitable corporations today employs only 137,000 workers worldwide. Those workers predominantly perform immaterial labor, but they are only the tip of the iceberg in Apple's entire production chain. While Apple employs many people in marketing and brand management, subsidiary branches like Foxconn handle "nonessential" matters like production, maintenance, and repairs. Corporations focus on their core competences in immaterial labor and subsequently set up contracts with a series of subsidiaries for the rest. Those subsidiaries subsequently hire the minimum number of deskilled workers needed to meet contractual standards. Given that the workers are now employed by a myriad of smaller companies, their political bargaining power is scattered. They possess fewer labor protections and

lower wages, and parent companies carry less responsibility for their subsidiaries' scandals. Sometimes the extreme working conditions in a company like Foxconn reach Western media and damage the parent company's public image, but usually these scandals pass by unnoticed.

In Western countries, as well, nonstandard employment contracts have spread through outsourcing. Cleaning, transportation, or menial data management are subcontracted to minor subsidiary firms that, thanks to their small size, avoid standard labor laws. These companies can hire and fire almost at a moment's notice and go bankrupt without making a sound. The platform companies McRobbie describes have especially perfected this strategy. Airbnb owns no real estate, Uber does not employ a single driver, Deliveroo workers have to bring their own bicycles to the job. Platform companies effectively render each individual worker into its own one-person subsidiary company. Investments (renting a delivery van), financial risks (not meeting your daily quota), health risks (not being able to work due to illness and stress), and constant availability (zero-hour contracts) are subsequently the burden of the individual worker. Workers compete with each other for gigs while the platform allots tasks through an opaque and unaccountable algorithm. The rise of such a gig economy at the

center of the post-Fordist economy puts serious pressure on the multitude's capacity for collective resistance. Capital still integrates workers into the process of capital accumulation but without the social cooperation that made the multitude capable of resisting and overcoming its subsumption. Workers in an Amazon fulfillment center are hired and fired by an algorithm that tracks their productivity in real time; Uber drivers spend most of their days alone in their cars;

Airbnb hosts never meet, except maybe online. These are not circumstances conducive to collective working-class politics. The competitive and impersonal working conditions of a labor process run by algorithms make it difficult to organize collective-labor struggles; the formation of unions is often explicitly discouraged, and collective bargaining for better working conditions is made near impossible.

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The coronavirus pandemic has made the dangers of the gig economy crystal clear. Now that many countries are in various stages of lockdown and are encouraging people to work from home, populations have become increasingly dependent on companies like Deliveroo and Amazon for their subsistence. Amazon has especially shown its pivotal position in the coronavirus economy, with double-digit growth in share prices combined with relentless pushback on

workers' resistance. While Amazon itself focuses on managing its internet platform, it uses largely self-employed independent contractors to actually deliver goods to people's homes. Its "core competence" is managing and promoting its platform as a reliable and convenient online marketplace. Other, "nonessential" matters like delivery can be outsourced to subsidiaries. In its fulfillment centers, Amazon's algorithms set the work pace and automatically fire those who cannot keep up with the accelerated rhythm. This makes it easy for Amazon to manage its workforce: the company establishes or suspends contracts in line with market demand without having to consult workers or respect labor regulations. When a worker gets unlawfully fired, Amazon can blame a glitch in the algorithm. During the pandemic, this has allowed companies like Amazon to massively increase profits. Amazon now has a quasi monopoly on the distribution of goods, and it does not have to share profits with its workers. To the contrary, workers' resistance is met with quick dismissal, as has become evident with the case of Chris Smalls, a packager at a New York fulfillment center who was fired after organizing a protest against the insufficient safety measures at Amazon's warehouses during the pandemic. While workers were exposed to infection, Amazon's board of directors was more concerned with winning the PR battle against what they

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called, in a leaked memo, a "not smart or articulate" worker (Blest 2020). Amazon's core business lies in self-promotion in the media, so it invests in immaterial labor to manage its public image while underinvesting in the deskilled labor that performs the actual material work of sorting and transporting packages.

Amazon is obviously not the only corporation in this position. The immaterial labor described by Italian neo-Marxists has always depended on deskilled, outsourced, and digitized labor. The

same could hence be said about Deliveroo, Zalando, or even the care sector—traditionally a source of middle-class jobs.

The knowledge workers of immaterial labor are thus just one side of the post-Fordist coin. On the other side are the masses of deskilled workers hired by subsidiary companies or stuck in parasubordinate self-employment. For the

past few months, this segment of the workforce has worked extra-exhausting shifts, delivering packages and working in distribution warehouses, exposing themselves to the virus and other health risks in doing so. This reality shows with painful clarity that the further away one works from the "core" of immaterial labor, the more disposable one's life becomes. The business models of companies like Amazon depend on the brand management conducted in their headquarters rather than on the factory-like

precarious labor of its warehouse and delivery workers. The latter can, in case of illness or resistance, easily be replaced with other, healthier, more compliant workers. Especially when, due to the pandemic, many workers in other sectors are losing their jobs, distribution companies like Amazon can count on a postindustrial reserve army to undermine workers' struggles against exploitative and dangerous working conditions.

Italian neo-Marxists would thus have done well to connect their analysis of post-Fordism to Foucault's original insight of biopolitics as a politics of differential vulnerability. The multitude they announced as the new political subject of the post-Fordist era is in fact riven with divisions and segmentations that upset some of its capacities for resistance and expose those workers deemed disposable to poverty and possibly a premature death. Not only does the post-Fordist business model of core competencies and nonessential subsidiary jobs divide the multitude between immaterial "core" workers and deskilled nonessential and disposable workers, but the biopolitics of governments during the pandemic also segments the multitude into different layers according to how valuable their contributions are to the overall health and productivity of the population. These two mechanisms intersect to create a patchwork of different levels of exposure to infection and impoverishment, riven with class, gendered, and racial dimensions. At the bottom of this hierarchy within the population, we find the deskilled, disposable workers that operate the distribution network of the coronavirus economy.

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