

The Flesh of Labour – by Dave

In the *Flesh of Labour* workshop I hope we can make a space where we can talk openly and critically about how so much of our lives are dominated by capital, compelled to work (in all meanings of that word), the role the sexuality has in all this and the possibility of a resistant and collective politics. Personally I find that my thinking on these subjects is helped by a number of radical theorists. I am aware that what is called “theory” is often made inaccessible to a lot of people and often in radical circles those who have had previous access to it – most often through the university – can appear to be ‘smarter’ or have a ‘better’ understanding than those that don’t. Though like so many things in this appearances can be deceiving. Since for me I have found some theorists useful, I have decided to prepare some short summaries (from my point of view) of some important points. These authors don’t form a single school of thought, in fact they are very different from each other, and these points are not a set of coherent arguments, but perhaps rather (I hope) a diving-board for discussion. Also each of these authors is for more complex than my summaries of them – and better writers to boot.

- In *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body and Primitive Accumulation* Silvia Federici makes a number of radical claims. She argues that capitalism was a *counter-revolution*, against the European-wide peasant revolts that had destabilised feudalism. Capitalism is a system based on the exploitation of labour-power, that is our creative abilities, and this power lives in our bodies. Thus for capitalism to develop the body had to be disciplined. This disciplining was not just about punishing aberrant behaviours (and there was an mass increase in laws and prohibitions) but also cultivating a type of personality that was self-regulating, that cared and trained for their body in ways that made it ‘useful’. Tied to this was a massive war against women, a vast devaluation of their work, and the use of sex to build forms of hierarchy within the proletariat. Also reproduction became increasingly important, because the work of care, of raising, of keeping the home was the work of reproducing the worker and thus crucial for capitalism to function – the public life of capitalism and wage labour, can only function due to the hidden private life of the work that goes on in the home. This is work largely done by women; and in a condition of oppression and violence. Thus in capitalism’s origins, and still today, the experience of our bodies is normalised and gendered so we can be useful to capitalism
- In *History of Sexuality Volume 1: The Will To Knowledge* Michel Foucault argues that sexuality is not something natural, innate or given and it is not repressed, nor does it need to be freed. Rather it is created by numerous distinct and interlinking apparatuses that constantly incite us to talk, think and understand ourselves as having a distinct sexuality – and that sexuality expresses the “truth” of us. These process subject us to a constant surveillance (much we do ourselves) of our feelings, relations and responses. Some are celebrated, others punished – all are catalogued, described and inscribed on us. For Foucault sexuality is part of how *biopower* is created and deployed. Biopower is when life becomes the subject of power, not as something just to be taken away when we defy the law, but when certain forms of life are created and encouraged. Biopower is a term for the “explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations” – of which sexuality is the linchpin. Thus thinking emancipation through

the lens of sexuality can result in both spreading out further and making tighter the very practices that discipline us

- Paulo Virno argues, in *A Grammar of the Multitude*, that biopower can only be really understood when we understand that labour-power is not a thing but a potential that lives in us, it is our creative potential that capitalism tries to harness. But you can't hold a potential, the best you can do is control and normalise what it exist in, our fleshy bodies (which of course include our minds). As capitalism develops, as it subsumes our lives, the forms of labour it demands become more complex. Work today is a complicated procedure that involves the deployment of emotions, culture, intellect and understandings (for those interested Virno explores these phenomena with the term "General Intellect" and "Mass Intellectuality"). Thus the regimes of biopower intensify, becoming Deleuze's society of control. What role does sexual play in this?
- Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (in both *Empire* and *Multitud*) argue that today production is *biopolitical production*. We no longer just produce things (a pair of shoes for example) or provide a service (serve a coffee) but rather our work today is the creation of relationships and entire ways of being. This work doesn't just take place in specific moments of wage labour but across the entire terrain of the society and our lives. The world hums with a great creativity, but it is one that is trapped and vampirised by capital. But at the same time the creativity and cooperation that capital exploits can be pulled away and manifested autonomously to make communism. Thus what is often thought of as private – the intimate, the pleasurable, the fleshy – is the actual caught up in production; the production either of value for capital or new worlds for ourselves.

The body, our bodies, us, are wealth. Feelings, desires, thoughts – they too are wealth. Human interrelationships are creative and productive, they produce wealth. Not just in that love or pleasure, a shoulder to cry on etc, is a real treasure, but they are now directly the stuff of the production of value, the accumulation of profit. The relationship created in a cafe, the voice on the help-line, the attitude of teacher, the feelings elicited from a movie. Perhaps in the past capital cared about the body because it held the *source* of wealth, now everything about the body is put to work. Sexuality, the construction of a particular identity about the body, about pleasure, about desire and emotions works in a way to compel us back to work, to insert us again and again in the productive matrix (which perhaps we never leave.) I find it hard to imagine the body as being freed without the collective reappropriation of social wealth, of which the body (drinking a coffee, thinking about Friday night, tired from the train ride, working on a computer, downloading music – to use just one moment from any metropolis anywhere) is part. To talk of the free body is to talk of taking over what is now post-modern capital's factory. And to do this also means taking over the literal factory, the streets – in fact contesting capital in all its domains as part of the complicated, multifaceted and creative process of generating communism.