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A voracious system monetizes what we can barely define

TEXT Leonardo Caffo

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IN OUR SOCIETY, time is increasingly an economic commodity, a unit of value measurement, if not on par, certainly an alternative to money. In *The Capital*, Karl Marx had already identified time as a unit of measurement of wage exploitation, and this reasoning gave rise to the concept of the working day organized based on a certain amount of hours rather than on a production objective. As a result, it became possible to retain workers by “blocking” their time even when they had nothing to produce. Time is, by all accounts, a grip on reality: humans have a strength that is money, and a space within which they can act on that strength that is time.

In the past the tempo of nature governed the time of work: farmers got up at dawn and went to bed at sunset. With the advent of capitalism, time disengaged from nature and the circadian cycle, becoming a cage and the unit of measurement of production. We could think that, over the decades, these patterns have weakened and become less relevant in contemporary society, but that is not the case.

The idea of the assembly line that began with the birth of Ford’s system and the Stock Union has never changed. From consumer goods to services, we are still part of an assembly line: instead of tightening bolts we participate in Skype calls. Business practices such as smart working act within this same Marxist framework: it is not the space in which the employees are stuck that counts, but the time for which they are stuck in it. After all, it is something inherent in the very structure of capitalism, present in its original etymology: its root, *caput*,

has the dual meaning of “head” and “total amount of working hours.”

Time is the first element on which capitalism has acted: to increase the pace of production it has compressed the time of the action, of the movement. By overcoming the distinction between time and duration envisaged by Henri Bergson, time has ceased to be a matter of cognitive perception, becoming a pure material fact. However, if it is true that duration is different from time, and that these two concepts are not the same, it becomes possible to force employees to work more than eight hours, by expanding the duration of the action or, better, by dilating their perception of the action, cognitively distorting it by introducing fake comforts such as ping-pong in the office or pizza among colleagues. The last great challenge of capitalism is the monetization of sleep: the only thing it has not yet managed to tackle is the fact that at some point we have to sleep.

A number of different forms of time have sprung up in contemporary society: there is work time, but also the time of the body, of the mind, and of holidays. But the capitalist system has not yet managed to dominate the time of the present, the *hic et nunc*, the instant. In no functioning capitalist society, be it dictatorial or democratic, can one afford to possess the present: one always works for later or always for before. And this is the great hiatus with pre-modern work, in which one acted in the present (the seed sown upon the ground by the farmer).

In such a framework, working in the “here and now” becomes a subversive act, because there is only the moment, only the immanence: in the present no planning



is possible, there is no meeting we must attend. It is not by chance that the time of the trade union struggles and of fighting for rights is the time of the present, of suspension, of sit-ins, of a more human reprogramming of work. For Marx, the “here and now” represents the impossibility of generating a capital gain. In today’s society we work seven days a week without realizing it, giving data and content to the big tech corps: a perennial generation of added value that, as Marx himself predicted, does not generate any value.

But how did we get here? The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, a diligent scholar of Marx, reminds us that post-capitalism, which he calls “immaterial capitalism,” no longer sells goods, but rather services and experiences where added value is generated by the monetization of time. In this perspective, car sharing, and delivery apps are all solutions to save time. These services let us buy someone else’s time so that we can do something else in the meantime. Time saved is the new production level index.

We all realize the paradox of the way we live, but we are aware that unfortunately this is also the only way we can live. So what is well-being if not the possibility of using the services that save us time? Because well-being is nothing more than being within the spirit of the time, and the spirit of our time is the absence of time. Paradoxically, the lack of time has become a status symbol to showcase, the proof of having achieved a status in society.

The great power of post-capitalism is precisely that of making us work for intangible exchange currencies

as alternatives to money — such as visibility, passion, networking, which however do not generate any wealth at all. Whereas Marx’s worker had a very different currency in his pocket — money — and, of course, if he had been rich he would not have had to work hard on the assembly line. In this sense, there is no difference between capitalism and post-capitalism: the currency of exchange is different, but we are still within Georg Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. It is such a pervasive dynamic that, although we are aware of it, we cannot get out of it: we are slaves to a dynamic that takes away time without giving us anything in return.

In principle, technology should allow us to work less, ideally giving us a future with a lot of time available. But the fact is that we work much more than ever before; in fact, we have never worked so much. And the more the tools and technology evolve, the more the working week stretches: factory workers put in the hours planned for their shift and, when they clocked out, they didn’t take their work home. Instead, our working day begins when we wake up and post content online with which social media generates profit and ends when, before we close our eyes, we answer our last email. Automation will undoubtedly eliminate some jobs, but it will not reduce work. The job of the cashier will disappear, but the cashier will continue to work by posting on Facebook, doing searches on Google, and so on. As the philosopher Maurizio Ferraris says, “what the Nazis failed to do, contemporary technology has.” More than “total mobilization,” I would speak of “total immobility:” you can’t do anything anymore, because you do everything.

