

# Acting Up with Hardt and Negri: Capitalism in the Biopolitical Context

## *Unplugged* - The Critical Corner

Emrah Karakilic

**Abstract.** Since the early 2000s, we have been witnessing the interpolation of the notion of biopolitics into the domain of radical thought. In this endeavour, Hardt and Negri's contribution lies in locating the transformation of capitalism following its industrial form in the biopolitical context, which is largely attained through the infusion of Marxist concepts (i.e. living labour and real subsumption) into profoundly modulated Foucauldian concepts (i.e. biopolitics and biopower). The objective of this paper is to shed light on the key elements of Hardt and Negri's philosophical and theoretical-political fusion between Marx and Foucault, whereby a promising argument is proposed for the subversive bodies who are eager to act up against the forces of capital, that is, *the social powers of biopolitical production can no longer be contained in capitalist biopower.*

**Emrah Karakilic**  
Research Fellow  
RSB Lab, Nottingham Business  
School, Nottingham Trent  
University  
United Kingdom  
emrah.karakilic@ntu.ac.uk

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## INTRODUCTION

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's recent research programme is described by Danilo Zolo as 'a philosophical and theoretical-political syntax ... that trans-figures fundamental categories of Marxism, interpolating them with elements drawn from a broad span of Western philosophical literature' (2008: 12). In particular, Negri (2008a: 13) characterises his late research with Hardt as a 'hybrid' between Italian *operaist* Marxism and the post-structuralist perspectives of French political philosophy, in which a prominent role is given to Michel Foucault. This hybrid, in my view, directs us towards an intellectually fruitful terrain as its implications are as much promising as they are controversial.

In this short piece, it is not my objective to elaborate 'a thousand roads that link the creative review of Marxism to the revolutionary conception of biopolitics elaborated by Foucault' (Negri, 2008b: 231). Nor is it to discuss Rabinow and Rose's (2006), Toscano's (2007), and Lemke's (2011) critique of Hardt and Negri's reading of Foucault in general, and of their appropriation of the concepts of biopolitics and biopower in a way which is in contradiction with Foucault's anti-totalising, anti-universal, nominalist methodology in particular. Rather, my objective is to engage in Hardt and Negri's philosophical and theoretical-political fusion in which a promising argument for the dissidents is developed: 'capital no longer

succeeds in grasping the productivity of labour power; [capitalist] biopower is no longer able to hold back biopolitical productivity' (Negri, 2008b: 43).

## BIOPOWER VERSUS BIOPOLITICS

One of the axioms inscribed in Foucault's work is that where powers are continually made and remade, bodies resist. Hardt and Negri (2009) underline the dual nature of power as one of the distinguishing markers of Foucault's theory of power at large, which was developed in *Discipline and Punish* (1991) and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1990). In this duality of power, firstly, one is given the complex ways in which the disciplinary regimes exercise social command through a diffuse network of *dispositifs*, which might be thought of as the material, affective, and cognitive apparatuses that work on the production of subjectivity. Secondly, one is immediately provided with "other to power" or even "another power" which remains categorically unnamed. The latter could be best defined, according to Hardt and Negri, 'an alternative production of subjectivity, which not only resists power but also seeks autonomy from it' (2009: 56).

Recognising that power in Foucault is always double, Negri and Hardt invite readers to reconsider the concepts of biopower and biopolitics. The authors argue that 'history cannot be understood merely as the horizon on which biopower configures reality through domination' (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 31). There always flourish spaces of confrontation against the power that is imposed on subjects, that is, 'the power over life' (Revel, 2002). In other words, the power that administers and produces life is continually confronted by a resistance which derives from the desire to feel, think, and exist differently. This *resistance activating desire* is defined as 'power of life' (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 57). Hardt and Negri thus expose the difference between two powers; biopower is separate in its form from *the power of life* with which we move towards emancipation. In order to stress this fundamental difference, Hardt and Negri adopt a terminological distinction between biopower and biopolitics which remained somewhat veiled in Foucault<sup>1</sup>: 'the former could be defined as the power over life and the latter as the power of life to resist and determine an alternative production of subjectivity' (2009: 57).

In my view, one can find more sophisticated approximation to biopolitics in Negri's *Reflections on Empire* (2008a). Negri (2008a: 70-71) shows in the *Reflections* that he is not unfamiliar with the way in which Foucault initially formulates the notion of biopolitics, that is, a technology of power, that concerns itself (through governmental practices and localised rationalities of biopower) with governing the health, hygiene, nutrition, sexuality and fertility of a 'population', where population is understood as 'an ensemble of coexisting living beings who present particular ontological/biological features and whose life is susceptible to be controlled with the purpose of guaranteeing, via a better management of labour-power, an ordered growth of society' (2008a: 71). In the same text, nevertheless, Negri defends his own interpretation of biopolitics (and biopower) by underlining a tension within Foucault's works.

Negri argues that biopolitics within the early texts of Foucault is delineated as a police science [*Polizeiwissenschaft*], that is, the science of the maintenance of social order of populations. Later, nevertheless, it

1. Foucault uses biopolitics as a synonym for biopower in some texts, and yet he uses it as the opposite of biopower in others (see Lemke, 2011).

comes to 'mark the moment of surpassing public law, and therefore every political function that lies within the traditional state-society dichotomy' (Negri, 2008a: 72). Biopolitics, in other words, denotes 'a political economy of life in general', 'a general fabric that covers the entire relationship between state and society' (Negri, 2008a: 72). The emergence of this second perspective, according to Negri, drives us to a T-junction: 'should we think of biopolitics as an ensemble of biopowers that derive from the activity of government or, on the contrary, can we say that, to the extent that power has invested the whole of life, thus life too becomes a power [*potere*]?' (2008a: 72).

Negri turns to the second formulation and 'lends the analytic of biopolitics the full ontological weight' (Toscano, 2007: 118). Biopolitics is no longer viewed as 'as an internal articulation of the governmental practices and rationalities of biopower' (Toscano, 2007: 114). On the contrary, it is recast as 'a power expressed by life itself, not only in labour and language, but also in bodies, in affects, desires and sexuality', that is, as 'a sort of counter-power, of a *potenza*, a production of subjectivity that exists as a moment of de-subjectification' (Negri, 2008a: 72). Let me quote a short passage from *Commonwealth* to make (Hardt and) Negri's position clearer:

Our reading not only identifies biopolitics with the localised productive powers of life –that is, the production of affects and languages through social cooperation and the interaction of bodies and desires, the invention of new forms of the relation to the self and others, and so forth – but also affirms biopolitics as the creation of new subjectivities that are presented at once as resistance and de-subjectification. (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 58-59)

In this way, Negri and Hardt bring forward a polemical argument that biopolitics and biopower are actually within an antagonistic relationship, or better biopolitics is biopower's antagonist: 'history is determined by the biopolitical antagonisms and resistances to biopower' (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 31). In other words, the entire development of humanity 'is dominated by this insubordination of life (the power of life) against Power (the domination of life)' (Negri, 2008c: 207). What we have here then is a distinction between the categories of biopower and biopolitics at a level which is not close to Foucault's own. Negri speaks of biopower as 'the big structures and functions of power' imposing 'command over life its technologies and its mechanisms of power [from the top]' (2008a: 73). And, he speaks of biopolitics 'when the critical analysis of command is done from the viewpoint of experiences of subjectivation and freedom, in short, from the bottom' (2008a: 73-4). In brief, as Toscano summarises, 'biopower is on the side of subjection and control, while biopolitics is rethought in terms of subjectivity and freedom' (2007: 118)<sup>2</sup>.

## CAPITALISM IN BIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

Hardt and Negri's research collaboration has been oriented towards locating the transformation of capitalist production following the industrial period on the biopolitical horizon. The key aspect of their project has been contained in the subjectivation of Foucauldian concepts through their interpolation with Marxian concepts, i.e. the infusion of Marxist *living*

2. We should note here that the transformation of these categories in this way also confirms Negri's position concerning the end of possibility of any sort of mediation and dialectic under the "real subsumption" under capital. In his 1989 book *The Politics of Subversion*, Negri openly declared that 'mediation is dead. The production of goods takes place through domination. The relationship between production and reproduction, domination/profit and resistance/wages cannot be harmonised' (1989: 183).

*labour*<sup>3</sup> into Foucauldian *biopolitical labour*, and Marxist *real subsumption*<sup>4</sup> into Foucauldian *biopower*. But, first and foremost, what does capitalism in biopolitical context mean?

In the main, it designates the fabric of social production, defining the period of post-industrial capitalism. Namely, it defines 'cognitive capitalism' (Moulier-Boutang, 2011; Vercellone 2007) in which 'capital ... presents [itself] as biopower' (Negri, 2008b: 4). By biopolitical context, it is suggested, on the one hand, that 'capitalist power has invested social relations in their entirety' (2008b: 235). This precisely corresponds to 'the total subjection of life to the economic political rules' (2008b: 172). Nevertheless, it is in this very context, on the other hand, that the totalitarian self-assertion of biopower is 'no longer able to hold back biopolitical productivity ... by new subjects and by new social and political configurations' (2008b: 230-243). The biopolitical context is thus characterised by 'capital's wholesale invasion of life but, at the same time, by the resistance and reaction of [biopolitical] labour power against capital' (2008b: 182). The biopolitical context is, therefore, 'both a mark of the most endemic control and a sign of a new insurgency' (Toscano, 2007: 112). It is precisely in this biopolitical context that both the impasse and possibility of crossing the threshold of cognitive capitalism are intelligible. Allow me to break this down a little.

According to Negri, capital in the contemporary capitalism expresses itself as biopower, to wit a eugenic command and control upon the entirety of life from top. It increasingly orients itself towards integrating the entire productive potential of subjects into valorisation process. Capital, in other words, 'traverses imperiously (and attempts to configure) all the moments which produce value' (Negri, 2008b: 75). And it does so by 'regulating social life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, absorbing it, and rearticulating it' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 23). By capitalist biopower, then, one might think of 'the power [of capital] that acts to destroy humanity in order to put it at the service of productivity and profit' (Negri, 2008b: 32). For the sake of accumulation *ad infinitum*, capital 'invests the dimensions of the economic, those of the political, [and] those of consciousness' (2008b: 172, emphasis added). Capitalist biopower is therefore 'another name for the *real subsumption* of society under capital' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 365).

The "culmination" of *real subsumption of society under capital* corresponds to such a level of capitalist invasion that not only does it concern the synchronisation of industrial production with everyday life (i.e. social factory) but also capital's attempt to subsume the *social bios* itself, that is, the ways of life, the mode of living: 'the entire life made of needs and desires' (Negri, 1997: 37). In other words, it concerns the subsumption of all social forces under capital. At this level, Hardt and Negri argue, 'there is nothing, no "naked life", no external standpoint, that can be posed outside this field permeated by money; nothing escapes money [read as money-capital]' (2000: 32). The tendency of capital's invasion of *bios*, the-becoming-of-capital-biopower, has informed Morini and Fumagalli (2010), Fumagalli (2011), and Fumagalli and Lucarelli (2011) to introduce the concept of biocapitalism, referring to 'a process of accumulation that is ... founded on the exploitation of the entirety of human faculties' (Morini and

3. For Negri and *operaismo*, living labour is an ontological principle of production. Living labour has always a tendency to be autonomous, engaging in the processes of self-valorisation. Negri writes that 'the theme proposed by Marx is the omniexpansive creativity of living labour. Living labour constructs the world, creatively modelling, ex novo, the materials it touches... Its projection on the world is ontological, its prostheses are ontological, its constructions are constructions of new being: the first result of this indefinite process is the construction of the subject' (2002: 403).

4. Marx uses the concepts of 'formal subsumption of labour under capital' and 'real subsumption of labour under capital' in the *Results of the immediate process of production* (1990: 1019-1038) to make a distinction between *capitalist production proper* (the latter) from early mercantilist production (the former). However, in the same text, he highlights the the tendency of capitalism proper to invest the entire society beyond the factory, to wit the tendency of the subordination of social in its totality.

Fumagalli, 2010: 235). The formula of today's capitalist production is polemically argued to be 'the production of money by means of the commodification of bios, M-C(bios)-M' (Morini and Fumagalli, 2010: 239).

Now, at this point, we must note that for the *operaisti* mode of thought, the constituent power is always anterior, that is, there is a primacy of proletarian subjectivity. The-becoming-of-capital-biopower is accordingly explained as 'a consequence of the potent struggles [of the 1960s and 1970s] whereby insurgent multitudes have forced an increasingly polyvalent and microphysical response by capitalist power' (Toscano, 2007: 199). In more precise terms, the shift of power of capital into biopower is discerned as a response to the transformation of social ontology with the rise of the biopolitical production and its paradigmatic labouring figure, *The Monster*<sup>5</sup>. Capital, in other words, has tendentially come to express itself as biopower so as to command the emerging modality of social production, that is, biopolitical production, in which labour tends to create not only the means of social life but the social life itself, namely social relations, forms of life, and the subjectivity itself. 'One might still conceive of economic production as an engagement of the subject with nature, a transformation of the object through labour, but increasingly the "nature" that biopolitical labour transforms is subjectivity itself' (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 172). Along the same lines, Moulner-Boutang argues that 'whereas industrial capitalism could be characterised as the production of commodities by means of commodities, cognitive capitalism ... produces living by means of the living. It is immediately production of life, and thus it is bioproduction' (2011: 55).

Hardt and Negri conceptualise the biopolitical context as a Janus-faced notion, comprising of two unmediatable totalities: capitalist biopower and biopolitical production. When Negri says that 'biopolitical context is an extension of class struggle' (2008a: 74), he does two things: first, he re-affirms that it was precisely the potent struggles of workers in the 1960s and 1970s that moved the production to the biopolitical horizon. Second, more significantly, he speculatively offers that the social powers of biopolitical production can no longer be contained in capitalist biopower, and hence there is a growing rupture of capital into two antagonistic subjectivities. But, how does Negri argue that capitalist biopower is no longer able to hold back biopolitical labour?

The answer lies in the argument that biopolitical production increasingly exceeds the bounds set in its relation to capital. By *excedence*, one might envision two ideas. Firstly, Vercellone speaks of 'the driving role of the production of knowledges by means of knowledges' (2007: 16) and argues that 'the labour-force's capacity for learning and creativity replaces fixed capital as the key factor in accumulation' (2013: 435). He summarises the great mutation from industrial capitalism to cognitive capitalism in the following formula: 'we pass from the static management of resources to the dynamic management of [the set of] knowledges' (2007: 33). That is to say, the knowledge mobilised by living labour is now hegemonic with regard to the knowledge incorporated in dead labour. This signifies the increasing importance of *living knowledge of labour over dead knowledge of capital*. Along the same lines, Moulner-Boutang writes that 'the essential point is no longer the expenditure of human labour-power, but that of invention-power:

5. 'The Monster becomes the real political and technical subject of the production of commodities and reproduction of life. The monster has become biopolitical ... He is no longer a margin, a residue, a leftover: he is internal, totalising movement, a subject. He expresses power' (Negri, 2008c: 206-7).

the living know-how that cannot be reduced to machines' (2011: 32). This indicates that the living knowledge of labour has to be continuously mobilised and managed by capital. Therefore, on the one side, we affirm that capital desires to set in motion and absorb the living knowledge of labour, on which the value and wealth increasingly rest. On the other side, however, labour in a knowledge-based production is not crystallised in a final product that is then divorced from the producer. For example, a research article, code, design, analysis, solution, etc. is different from a car, furniture, textile product, etc. because they cannot be divorced from the worker as these products keep residing in the living subjects who produced them in the first place. Therefore, biopolitical labour tendentially overflows the subsumption mechanisms set by capitalist biopower.

Secondly, and in a direct connection with the first argument, in industrial capitalism, which finds its fulfilment in the Taylorist-Fordist production process, one's innovative, creative, technical capacities are rigorously confined to the specific production space. Consider, for instance, an assembly line worker working in a cable assembly factory. The whole ensemble of technological and mechanical knowledge the worker has accumulated through her/his lifetime are hardly put into work, and more significantly, those put into work are almost exclusively site specific (e.g. the factory workshop). However, the production of immaterial products or immaterial elements of material products (e.g. their symbolic, aesthetic, and social value) immediately mobilises workers to actualise and develop their creative, intellectual, communicative, know-how, cooperative, and alike capacities. Furthermore, the fruits of biopolitical labour power, which cannot be confined by corporate walls, exceed work and spill over different spheres of life (as economists call externalities), and they begin to produce *the common forms of wealth*. This is point where one might begin to envision the linkage between *excedence* of biopolitical labour power and the accumulation of its fruits in *the common*.

De Angelis (2004), Hardt and Negri (2004, 2009), Fuchs (2010), Hardt (2011), and Vercellone (2017) have theorised biopolitical production with its connection to the concept of common. What is meant by the common? Typically, the common denotes the wealth of nature (e.g. earth, water, air, elements, animal life) to be shared by all humanity. In other words, the common refers to the natural world, harbouring the natural resources, outside of society. By a fair extension, the common also denotes '*those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production*' (Hardt and Negri, 2009: viii, emphasis added). The concept of common thus permeates equally all spheres of life, blurring the division between nature and culture, referring not only to the fruits of nature shared by human beings but also, and above all, to the artificial common(s): the creative, social, knowledge common(s); for example, the languages we construct, the knowledge we create, the social practices we enact.

According to this second formulation, the common makes an appearance both at the beginning (as a presupposition) and at the end (as an outcome) of biopolitical production. To put it more precisely, the common consists of both the results, as well as the means of biopolitical production. In terms of being the presupposition, it might appear convincingly in mind that biopolitical labour performs, and it can actually only perform only on the terrain of common. Indeed, no one produces all alone but only within and through the spectres of the others' past and

present existence. Consider, for example, the production of ideas, knowledge, solutions, images, codes, language, and so forth. These products cannot really be produced by such a persona of “genius” in an ivory tower, that is, by a human being who is entirely isolated from the accumulated common intellect. Marx elegantly notes that knowledge and such products are ‘universal labour’, that is, ‘brought about partly by the cooperation of men now living, but partly also by building on earlier work’ (1992: 199). As Hardt and Negri maintain, ‘our common knowledge is the foundation of all new production of knowledge; linguistic community is the basis of all linguistic innovation; ... and our common social image bank makes possible the creation of new images’ (2004: 148). The workers then must have an open-direct access to the common intellect in order to produce. This open-direct access to the common is essential for one’s creativity, productivity, and more importantly for the realisation of one’s potentiality.

The outcome of biopolitical production, on the other side, exceeds and accrues to the common that then becomes a condition for the expanded production. The results of biopolitical production are not identical to material products, for they immediately tend towards being common through their circulation in social, cultural, and digital networks. Gorz argues that when knowledge is produced and diffused, ‘it no longer has proprietors’ (1997: 18, my translation). From the perspective of economics, Moullet-Boutang argues that today scarcity is no longer fatal. What we witness is that the ‘digital world restores abundance that had been destroyed partly or fully by industrial organisation of scarcity of commons’ (2013: 86). In other words, since the results of biopolitical production can be coded in the digital media, reproduced, and delivered virtually at zero marginal cost, we may speak of the inversion of scarcity of commons in terms of immaterial products.

So, what we have here is a sort of virtuous cycle which is typical of biopolitical production process. Workers in biopolitical labour, through working on the accumulated common forms of wealth, create new commons which, in turn, becomes the base (i.e. raw materials) for expanded production. Fuchs (2010) upholds that all humans benefit from the commons: the present generation works on the commons produced in the past and then hands over the enriched commons to the future generation. From what we have noted until now, we can discern another aspect of biopolitical production. Consider, for instance, the production of scientific knowledge. The potential outcome in our case might be a journal paper, monograph, conference speech, series of lectures, accruing to the general intellect and, at the same time, contributing to the ground basis for the production of further scientific knowledge. We have already pointed this out. In addition, the production of scientific knowledge necessitates, by its nature, engagement in communication, cooperation, collaboration, affective relation etc. between researchers, students, supervisors, editors, reviewers, and fellow academicians. Marx writes that ‘communal labour ... simply involves the direct cooperation of individuals’ (1992: 199). No scientific knowledge, no idea, no computer code, no natural language, no artificial language, no authorship etc. can be produced without this sort of engagement. From this point of view, the common appears at the centre as well. That is to say, the biopolitical production is increasingly conducted in the common. In this respect, Negri puts that:

We assume not only that value is constructed within social production (which is obvious), but also that social production today presents itself in a manner which increasingly has the quality of the common, in other words as a multiplicity of increasingly cooperative activities within the process of production. (2008a: 183)

To sum up, the general outlines of the technical composition and *excedence* of biopolitical labour indicate the growing autonomy of the labour process. First, the workers of diffuse intellectuality tend to get direct access to the common where the raw materials of production are located. They work on it in cooperation and collaboration and produce a new product that leans towards the common, which facilitates tomorrow's production. In addition, Hardt and Negri recognise that 'labour itself tends to produce the means of interaction, communication, and cooperation for production directly' (2004: 147). Producers, in this context, are virtually in no need of a figure from "outside" (e.g. so-called leaders, capital owners, board of directors, shareholders, state representatives) that would administer the design, surveillance, and control, or better "management" of the labour process. Production tendentially reveals itself as a sort of shared; a common process inasmuch as the essential aspects of economic production no longer have to be made available by an "outsider" because these aspects increasingly flourish internally within the networks of production (i.e. by-product).

## CONCLUSION: A POLITICAL OPENING

In today's capitalism, Hardt and Negri bring forward, the economic production is biopolitical and increasingly conducted in *the common*. In this regard, Vercellone (2010) asserts that the functions and responsibilities associated with 'capital ownership' and 'functionary capital' (Marx, 1992) increasingly vanish from the production process as superfluous. There appears a widening breach within capital-labour relation which reveals itself as a political opening, or *kairos* (i.e. the opportune moment of breaking the chronological time of repetitiveness). The emergence of *kairos* allows us to think of the ultimate project of *exodus*, that is, 'the process of subtraction from the relationship with capital by means of actualising the potential autonomy of labour-power' (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 152-3). It consists in the refusal of capitalist biopower and its subsuming apparatuses. It concerns the transformation of the relationship of production and mode of social organization under which we live -and mostly suffer. But, who can organise the project of *exodus* in the direction of emancipation?

The answer lies in the biopolitical character of today's economic production. It might be read as bio-POLITICAL in the sense that the qualities, capacities, abilities of the workers and the activities these workers perform in the process of production (e.g. the cooperation, collaboration, and communication of singularities in the common) are immediately *political* -perhaps, in the Hannah Arendt-ian sense. On this aspect, Hardt and Negri state that:

In the biopolitical context ... the production of ideas, images, codes, languages, knowledges, affects, and the like, through horizontal networks of communication and cooperation, tends toward the autonomous production of the common, which is to say, the production and reproduction of forms of life. And the production and

reproduction of forms of life is a very precise definition of political action. (2009: 364)

It is, at the same time, understood as BIO-political, in the sense that what is produced is not objects for subjects but the subjectivity itself which is not quite separable from the political realm. The productive activity in the biopolitical context, therefore, might be conceptualised as 'a political act of self-making' (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 175).

In industrial production, the means of cooperation (largely vertical) were provided by the owners of means of production, labour was subsumed under capital in real terms, and labour was not sovereign. Marx writes that:

The co-operation of wage-labourers is entirely brought about by the capital that employs them. Their unification into one single productive body, and the establishment of a connection between their individual functions, lies outside their competence. These things are not their own act, but the act of capital that brings them together and maintains them in that situation ... An industrial army of workers under the command of a capitalist requires, like a real army, officers (managers) and N.C.O.s (foremen, overseers), who command during the labour process in the name of capital. (Marx, 1990: 449-450)

In today's production, however, labour creates cooperative encounters, it is increasingly more autonomous, and the networks of cooperation are horizontal. These are only some of the relevant aspects of economic production that suggest that today workers can actually "do" without the governance, surveillance, and control of managers; they can organise the production process within and through *the common* by using their own means of interaction, collaboration, communication, cooperation, and so forth. Workers, in other words, have all the capacities for reversal and creating alternative forms of producing and living.

However, we must always bear in mind that the political opening just signals the possibility of a new political composition of labour. The democratic and political potentiality of biopolitical labour never culminates in the organisation of *exodus* in an abrupt manner. The *potential* has to be transformed into *actu* by the means of political action and organisation. The ultimate desire is emancipation through the process of subtraction from capitalist biopower. *Exodus*, in contemporary capitalism, is promising only with the protection and expansion of *the common* and the means of political action and organisation.

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**Acknowledgments:** The author would like to thank to the editors of M@n@gement in general, and the editor of *Unplugged* section, Olivier Germain, in particular for accepting such a speculative piece. I also would like to thank my colleague Natalie Toms (Miss Nando) who proofread the text.