

# Labour and Language

'In the period of manufacture, and during the long apogee of Fordist labour, labour activity is mute. Who labours keeps quiet. Production is a silent chain, where only a mechanical and exterior relation between what precedes it and what follows it is allowed, whilst any interactive correlation between what is simultaneous to it is expunged. Living labour, an appendix of the system of machines, follows a natural causality in order to use its power: what Hegel called 'cunning' of labouring. And 'cunning' is known to be taciturn. In the postfordist metropolis, on the other hand, the material labouring process can be empirically described as a complex of linguistic acts, a sequence of assertions, a symbolic interaction. This is partly due to the fact that now labour activity is performed *aside* the system of machines, with regulating, surveillance and coordinating duties; but also because the productive process uses knowledge, information, culture and social relations as its 'primary matter'.

The labourer is (and *must* be) loquacious. The famous opposition established by Habermas between 'instrumental' and 'communicative' action (or between labour and interaction) is radically confuted by the postfordist mode of production. 'Communicative action' does not hold any privileged, or even exclusive place in ethico-cultural relations, in politics, in the struggle for 'mutual recognition', whilst residing beyond the realm of material reproduction of life. On the contrary, the dialogic word is installed at the very heart of capitalist production. Labour *is* interaction. Therefore, in order to really understand postfordist labouring praxis, one must increasingly refer to Saussure, to Wittgenstein and to Carnap. These authors have hardly shown any interest in social relations of production; nonetheless, having elaborated theories and images of language, they have more to teach in relation to the 'talkative factory' than professional sociologists.

When labour performs surveillance and coordinating tasks, its duties no longer consist in the accomplishment of a single particular aim, but rather in the modulation (as well as variation and intensification) of social cooperation, i.e. of the totality of systemic relations and connections that constitute the now authentic 'sustaining pole of production and wealth' (Marx). Such a modulation occurs through linguistic performances that, far from creating an independent product, are exhausted in the communicative interaction determined by their execution. Shortly:

a) labour based on communication does not have a rigidly finalistic structure, i.e. it is not guided by a predefined and univocal objective; b) in many cases, such labour

does not produce an extrinsic and long-lasting object, due to its being an *activity without Work* (opera). Let us look at these aspects more closely.

The traditional concept of production is one and the same as that of finalism: the producer is someone who pursues a determined aim. However, the strength of the production-finalism is dependent on the *restricted* character of labour: more precisely, on the rigorous exclusion of communication from the productive process. The more we are dealing with merely instrumental action, for which the fabric of dialogical intersubjective relations is inessential, the more finalism appears to be prominent and unequivocal. Vice versa, the moment communication becomes its constitutive element; it also damages the rigidly finalistic connotation of labour.

Firstly, let us consider the system of machines that characterise postfordism. Unlike the fordist automated machine, the electronic machine is incomplete and partially undetermined: rather than being the technological imitation of given natural forces, to be bended for a specific purpose, it is the premise for an indefinite cluster of operative possibilities. This cluster of possibilities requires to be articulated by a number of linguistic acts performed by living labour. Communicative actions that elaborate the *chances* endemic to the electronic machine are not oriented towards an aim that is external to communication itself: they do not introduce a precedent in view of a consequence, but have in themselves their own outcome. Enunciation is simultaneously means and end, instrument and final product. In a linguistic context, the rules of the project and those of its execution are one and the same. Such identity abrogates the distinction between the two moments: intention and realisation coincide.

Let us come to the second aspect. Besides contradicting the model of finalistic action, communicative labour often fails to give raise to autonomous work that will survive the labouring performance. Hence, the activities whose 'product is inseparable from the act of producing' (Marx)- i.e. activities that are not objectified in a lasting product- have a mercurial and ambiguous status that is difficult to grasp. The reason of this difficulty is obvious. Long before being incorporated in capitalist production, *the activity without Work* (communicative action) was the architrave of *politics*. Hanna Arendt writes: 'the arts that do not produce any 'Work' share certain features with politics. The artists who perform them –dancers, actors, musicians etc- need a public to show their virtuousisms, just as those who act politically need others to appeal to'. When communicative actions rather than new objects are constructed, we enter the realm of politics. Postfordist labour, as linguistic labour, requires attitudes and characteristics that used to be those of political praxis: presentations in the presence of others, management of a certain

margin of unpredictability, capacity to begin something new, ability to navigate amongst alternative possibilities.

When we speak of language put to work, the main issue is not the massive increase of communication industries, but the fact that communicative action predominates in all industrial sectors. Therefore, one needs to look at the techniques and procedures of the mass media as a model of universal value, independently of whether we are considering the work on cars or steel. It is worth asking what the relation between the peculiar characters of the culture industry and postfordism in general is. As we know, since Adorno and Horkheimer, the 'factories of soul' (publishing, cinema, television, radio etc) have been scrutinised under the microscope of criticism, in the hope of finding out what made them comparable to the productive chain. The crucial point was to demonstrate that capitalism was able to mechanise and parcellise spiritual production, just as it had mechanised and parcellised agriculture and manufacture. Seriality, indifference to the singular task, econometrics of emotions and feelings: these were the habitual refrains. Of course, it was conceded that some aspects of what could be defined 'production of communication by means of communication' seemed refractory to a complete assimilation to the fordist organisation of the labouring process: but, rightly, these were regarded as non influential, residual, modest nuisances, minute scoria. However, looking at things with the eyes of the present, it is not difficult to recognise that such 'residues' and such 'scoria' were in fact pregnant with future: not echoes of a preceding period, but real *predictions*. In brief: the informality of communicative action, the competitive interaction that is typical of an editorial board meeting, the unpredictable twist that can animate a television program, and generally, all that would be inconvenient to regulate and rigidify beyond a certain level within the culture industry, has now become the central and propelling nucleus of all social production under postfordism. In this sense, one could ask whether 'toyotism' consists, at least in part, in the application of operative models that were once *only* applied to the culture industry to factories that produce lasting commodities.

The communication industry (or 'culture' industry) has an analogous role to that traditionally occupied by the *industry of the means of production*: it is a particular productive sector that determines the operative instruments and procedures which will then be largely applied to each corner of the social labouring process.

The putting to work (and to profit) of language is the material ground, hidden and distorted, on which postmodern ideology rests. Examining the contemporary metropolis, postmodern ideology underlines the unlimited and virtual proliferation

of 'linguistic games', the insurgence of provisional *dialects*, the multiplication of dissimilar voices. If we limit ourselves to fix our eyes on this exuberant plurality, it is easy to conclude that it eludes any analytical approach. In fact, the postmodern vernacular sustains that we are faced with a net without mesh: the forms of metropolitan life –often *brought about* rather than *reflected* by the new idioms- could only be defined by saying a rosary of 'no longer' and 'not even'. A nice paradox: precisely due to its eminently linguistic nature, the metropolis seems now *indescribable*. Hypnotized by the generalised noise, postmodern ideologues proclaim a drastic *dematerialisation* of social relations, as well as an enfeeblement of domination. In their view, the only ethico-political dimension oscillates between the acceptance and the refusal of the multiplicity of idioms. The sole unforgivable sin is the wish to limit the diasporas of 'linguistic games'. Apart from this, *everything is fine*. The plurality of idioms would entail in itself an emancipatory effect, by melting away the illusion of a univocal and restrictive reality. The hermeneutics that has become common sense suggests that that which, as we go along, results from the crossing of different interpretations is properly 'real'. However, the ironic infatuation for the plurality of discourses reascribes to language all the myths that liberalism once nurtured about the market. Centrifugal communication, fed by infinite independent speakers, is dealt with the same deferential arguments once given in favour of the free circulation of commodities: Eden of rights, kingdom of equality and mutual recognition. But does multiplicity as such really weaken control? Is it not rather the case that the latter is powerfully articulated in each of the 'many'? None of the stockbrokers is now aware of the hermeneutic character of truth or the ephemeral character of each interpretation: is this sufficient to revoke any objection to their form of life?

A distinctive feature of the contemporary metropolis is the full identity of material production and linguistic communication, rather than the swarming of idioms. This identity explains and increases that multiplication. But this identity has nothing emancipatory. Contrary to what the postmodern jingle suggests, the coinciding of labour and linguistic communication radicalises the antinomies of the dominant mode of production, rather than weakening them. On the one hand, labouring activity is less measurable on the basis of abstract temporal units, since it includes aspects that up until yesterday belonged to the sphere of the *ethos*, of cultural consumption, of aesthetic taste, of emotion. On the other hand, labour time remains the socially accepted unit of measure. Hence, the multiple 'linguistic games', even the most eccentric, are always about to be configured as new 'tasks', or as desirable requirements for the old ones. When wage labour gets abolished because it constitutes an excessive social cost, then even taking the word is included in its

horizon. Language presents itself at once as the terrain of conflict and as what is at stake, to the extent that *freedom of speech*, with a less parodic meaning than the liberal one, and *abolition of wage labour* are today synonyms. The critical stand must possess this radicalism; otherwise it merely amounts to resentful grumbling. In a way, we cannot question wage labour without introducing a powerful idea of freedom of speech; whilst we cannot seriously invoke freedom of speech without aiming to suppress wage labour.

Translated by **Arianna Bove**