

Lecture Notes in Morphogenesis

Series Editor: Alessandro Sarti

Roberto Ciccarelli

# Labour Power

Virtual and Actual in Digital Production

*Translated by* Emma Catherine Gainsforth



Springer

# **Lecture Notes in Morphogenesis**

## **Series Editor**

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Roberto Ciccarelli

# Labour Power

Virtual and Actual in Digital Production

Translated by Emma Catherine Gainsforth

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*Labor is not the source of all wealth.  
(Karl Marx, Critique of the Gotha  
Programme)*

*Fin du travail, vie magique*

*Rennes, graffito, 28 April 2016*

*Ain't got no home, ain't got no shoes  
Ain't got no money, ain't got no class  
Ain't got no skirts, ain't got no sweater  
Ain't got no perfume, ain't got no beer  
Ain't got no man  
Ain't got no mother, ain't got no culture  
Ain't got no friends, ain't got no schooling  
Ain't got no love, ain't got no name  
Ain't got no ticket, ain't got no token  
Ain't got no God  
Well what have I got?  
I've got my life  
And nobody's gonna take it away  
I've got my life.  
(Nina Simone)*

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# Chapter 1

## About Labour-Power. A Philosophical Approach



The theory of labour-power intertwines two different concepts: potency and power. In the Western political and metaphysical tradition potency, with respect to act, has been considered as the place of possibility, faculty and capacity, as well as that which precedes the accomplished realisation. Power has been considered as the realisation of potency and consists in reducing it to the mechanical chain of cause-effect relations established by those who exercise power in the world. This book will expose the groundbreaking Marxian insight on labour-power which considers the contradictory relationship between potency and power on the same plane of immanence. The potency of labour-power is immanent to the body and the mind of everyone living and working in a capitalist society. Power is the actual realisation of a virtual, collective and cooperative faculty which cannot be reduced only to its transformation into an object, a good or a commodity. Labour-power is the common potency exceeding its reduction to the capacity to do or create something, the will to impose or to encourage action and the authority requiring obedience. Labour-power as individual and collective potency is the power of those who sell their capacity to work in order to survive in a capitalist society and the faculty to govern themselves in a liberated society.

### 1.1 The Problem with “Power”

The way I will use the concept of labour-power in this book should be clarified immediately. Labour-power is the English translation of *Arbeitskraft*, the concept used by Karl Marx to refer to working women and men. However, this translation is too reductive. *Kraft* can be translated with power, but it means at least six other things: *strength*, in a physical sense; *effort*, in a biological sense; *potency*, in a metaphysical sense; *energy*, both in a physical sense and as it is used in Aristotelian metaphysics; *power*, in the political sense of the term; *faculty*, in the Kantian sense. The English *power* does not convey the rich German polysemy of *Kraft*. However,

it also is polysemic. It is *force* in a physical and political sense: it is the *strength* and *effort* required to do something (work) or the *political force* necessary to impose or legitimate *power*. Also, *power* contains the invisible concept of *potency*.

The difference between *power* and *potency* can be appreciated in the original Latin which distinguishes *potestas* (power) from *potentia* (potency). In French these terms are translated with *pouvoir* and *puissance*. In Italian, *potere* e *potenza*. The difference is: *potestas* needs a subject to dominate or to be dominated to express itself; *potentia* is the force to create all uses of the world and the capacity to strive and exist in life. By *labour-power* (*Arbeitskraft*) I intend the multiple relation between the power to conduct ourselves in an autonomous and collective way within and against capitalist society and the *potency* (*potentia*, *puissance*, *potenza*) to create values, relations, practices and ideas which feed the *energy* of labour-power and also exceed the capitalist power to alienate the labour-power. *Potentia* and *potestas* are entrenched in the same concept of labour-power within which I will differentiate labour-power as a *faculty* or *potency* and labour-power as a *capacity to work*. As we will see in the second chapter, those concepts correspond to the Marxian distinction between labour-power as *Arbeitskraft* and labour-power as *Arbeitsvermögen*, “capacity to work”, “capacity for labour” or “labour-capacity” in English.

The same polysemy of *Kraft/Power* characterises the concept of *Arbeit/Labour* that can be translated, depending on its use and contexts, with *work*, *job* or *gig*. In this case the German and English language allow to distinguish the movement within the activity carried out by labour-power, while the Italian language does not distinguish what is active and what is passive in the concept of work. In German and English *werk/work*—the result of work—and *arbeit/labour*—the operation or process it produces, the ability to carry out work—are distinct concepts. In Italian they are reduced to a single word: *lavoro* (*work*). The difference between labour-power and the capacity to work cannot be grasped in *forza lavoro* (*labour-power*). Nor does this Italian expression have the complexity of the German Marxian concept that distinguishes *Arbeitskraft* from *Arbeitsvermögen*. As in English, the result is the loss of the difference between the *faculty* or the *potency* to create use values and the capacity for labour. This means that labour-power is conceived only as an alienated capacity for work, that is to say commodified work. This problem actually occurs in all languages and it is created by the original capitalistic operation, which defines commodity as a subject and simultaneously reduces the subject to a commodity. If we consider this process starting from work in itself we can say that work is considered only as a result and not also as the process that produces a commodity. This is how work loses the characteristics of a built object and is never considered as a contingent manifestation of a much larger and always ongoing labour-power. Its value is attributed by the utility that the recipients of work recognise in a commodity, not by the worker who has materially conceived and realised it. The value of labour-power is incorporated into the commodity and is used for purposes that are not those determined by the worker. In this perspective, the owner who buys the work counts, not the one who has created it.

The great mutability of all these concepts depends on the social and productive relationship between capital and labour-power. This is the heart of what Marx called

capitalist alienation of labour. These are the main principles that have led me to develop the theory of labour-power exposed in this book, the first of a trilogy.<sup>1</sup> From now on I will use the concept of labour-power and I will indicate, case by case, its specific meaning.

## 1.2 Spinoza and Marx and the Theory of Labour-Power

I will extend the concept of power (potency) used by Marx in the Aristotelian sense to Spinoza’s conception. The key to this reading lies in a reconsideration of materialism, one that views Spinoza as precursor and Marx as successor.<sup>2</sup> It should also be said that the relationship between the German philosopher and the Dutch philosopher is not a strong one, apart from some important early notes by Marx on Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise*.<sup>3</sup> Rather than searching for continuity, or attempting an academic comparison between different lines of thought, it is a matter of developing a Spinozist critique of the Marxian concept of labour-power and a Marxian critique of the Spinozist theory of power in a materialistic perspective on immanence in which both thinkers occupy a prominent position.<sup>4</sup> According to this definition it is possible to go beyond the Aristotelian definition of motion understood as actuality of a being in potency towards the articulation of becoming as being animated by living forces. Already Leibniz went from a model where form disciplines matter in potency to a conception according to which forms emerge from matter and are shaped in ever-changing ways (modes).<sup>5</sup> If capitalism hollows out power, forcing it to be the actuality of commodities, a theory of labour-power views this model as being invaded by the living and by the ways in which it can express itself in the single act.

The potency of labour-power is not only possible, it is individual, collective and cooperative, it expresses its essence at all times. In other words, it is historical. Its power is neither an action of an individual moral consciousness nor the effect of an abstract will separated from social and productive relationships. It is embodied into the *conatus* which is the tendency “to endeavour to persist in its own being.”<sup>6</sup> *Conatus* is the active and living force of each thing, not the manifestation of will, the expression of consciousness or a productive power extraneous to the life of the subject. Labour-power is not *potential being*, rather, it is an *eternally actual potency* where the principle is not separated from its effects and the substance from its modes. In this process there is no Subject or Being, while individuals contribute to the creation of capital (God or substance), of which they are also the product (creature or mode), with

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<sup>1</sup> See Ciccarelli [1, 2].

<sup>2</sup> See Matheron [3, 353–382].

<sup>3</sup> See Marx [4]. On Spinoza in the history of the labour movement see Tosel [5, 515–525].

<sup>4</sup> See Ciccarelli [6].

<sup>5</sup> See Deleuze [7].

<sup>6</sup> Spinoza [8, 283].

their activity. This thesis is incomprehensible for the Cartesian-Kantian philosophical rationality, although it can be traced to Aristotle, who thought of nature in terms of immanence.<sup>7</sup> However, the power of being to its fullest degree, the actuality of power, is not to be found in the movement of nature but in God. With respect to this version of immanence, it is a question of reversing the heights of transcendence and reuniting the virtualities of an ontological power with the potential of the labour-power: its right to existence. Power is actual when it is expressed in both the ontic and the ontological. This is possible starting from the concept of *immanent cause*. Substance is self-generating, as are its modes. Power is expressed both in singular things, through the attributes that constitute the essence of the substance, and in the substance that is self-produced in an open and unlimited way.<sup>8</sup>

To maintain, however, that substance, like capital, is the cause of itself means that every affirmation of power reproduces the structure of capital, the Total Individual that Spinoza speaks of. It is the same difficulty faced by Marx elsewhere, when he demonstrates that labour-power is not capital, but that labour-power cannot but generate capital in that it is destined to become a commodity. It is possible to react to this difficulty by suggesting that the structure of this total order, both substance and capital, is given by connections that change according to the relations they determine. Each connection is a modality of the same power and is composed of infinite multiplicities that are assembled together in becoming. At the centre of which is not substance, but an anonymous force in which what counts is not only form, or its functions, but the capacity to be affected or to affect another force. The system is defined by the modes it acquires, and these modes are the expression of the *conatus*.

Capital searches constantly for this power, which it attempts to redirect towards the system, but this does not mean it has always been in possession of all its manifestations. For the same reason workers remain in possession of the faculty of labour-power, regardless of its objectification in a commodity. This aspect emerges when one considers the meaning of power as *conatus*. The principle of self-preservation (*conatus*) is a fundamental principle of the law of nature generally attributed to the stoic idea of *hormē* (ὁρμή), primary inclination, impulse or appetite. Present in Roman and Christian philosophical anthropology, *conatus* and appetite are considered as being synonymous starting from Cicero.<sup>9</sup> Spinoza uses *conatus* as a synonym of *force* (*vis*)<sup>10</sup> and establishes immanence between the physical and ontological expression of *potentia*: when the power to act is expressed, then the power of a life is expressed. His thesis is: life is the power to exist.<sup>11</sup> This power is to be understood in terms of physical force and energy, it is power that makes things persist in their own being<sup>12</sup> and power through which God perseveres in his being. When referred to the mind, *conatus* is called *will* (*voluntas*); when referred to both body and mind it

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<sup>7</sup>See Chatelet [9, 45 ff].

<sup>8</sup>See Bove [10], Del Lucchese [11], Negri [12].

<sup>9</sup>See Wolfson [13].

<sup>10</sup>B. Spinoza, *The Ethics*, II, 45, scholium, 270–271.

<sup>11</sup>B. Spinoza, *The Ethics*, I, 11, dem., 222.

<sup>12</sup>B. Spinoza, *The Ethics*, III, 6, 462.

is called *appetite* (*appetitus*). *Conatus* is called *desire* (*cupiditas*) when individuals are conscious of their appetites and exercise them consciously.<sup>13</sup>

There are three distinct modes of power connected to a different capacity for action and linked to the awareness of the use of the power to act. The use of power is common to all individuals, who have the choice of which means to use to favour self-preservation and the creation of a greater capacity for action than the initial one. *Conatus* is not an act of free will, the will of an individual or of God, of a physical or natural necessity. Divine power is identical to the existence of all things, and vice versa. Both affirm the actual essence (*essentia actualis*)<sup>14</sup> or the given essence of something that is opposed to the ideal essence.<sup>15</sup> All affections of body and mind, as well as their activities, are considered on the same immanent plane as other living forms, from the vegetable to the animal world. Thus the separation between human and animal, as well as the separation between dianoetic (discursive or pertaining to knowledge) and ethical (practical) virtues, are understood in a new doctrine of parallelism based on the power of action in which the perseverance of self-preservation of life is expressed.

The intersection between the Marxian definition of labour-power and Spinoza's definition of *conatus* allows us to explain the interpenetration of the physical principle of *energeia*, the metaphysical principle of *dynamis* and the anthropological principle of *conatus* in the definition of labour-power. *Conatus* is the affirmation of power in finite life, while *potentia* is the affirmation of *conatus* in its modes of historical, technical and ethical individuation. In contrast to capital, where the process is without subject because it is *an actually existing abstraction*, labour-power is *an actually existing potency* that affirms a right of every mode of its being: "(every man) always endeavours as far as in him lies to preserve his own being (...) since every man has right to the extent that he has power."<sup>16</sup> The actually existing abstraction and the actually existing power should not be understood in a distinct way, but on the basis of the immanence of labour-power, where subjectivity and its historical, productive or political position are shaped. The constitutive duplicity of labour-power must be understood in this dialectic between different and conflicting principles. This is all the more true in the case of labour-power which has no other property than that of selling its capacity for labour. Being without property does not mean being without quality or power.

In capitalism a singular reversal takes place because what is not-yet is more important than what is-already, and possibilities act both in actions and in an imminent being—otherwise. Establishing a right over this power in a manner that is in line with Spinoza's conception means identifying the priority of "corporeity"—of the "living personality" of labour-power—in a process that alienates these qualities from the subject who possesses them. In the movement that always begins with the act of

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<sup>13</sup>B. Spinoza, *The Ethics*, III, 48, dem., 302.

<sup>14</sup>B. Spinoza, *The Ethics*. I, 8, 219.

<sup>15</sup>Spinoza [14].

<sup>16</sup>B. Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, II, par. 8.

selling labour-power, what has priority is a labour-power imbued with virtualities that move labour and capital.

The majority of ways in which labour-power is identified are absorbed by the abstraction of capital. In this case—it is the norm of contemporary life—the Spinozist definition of labour-power makes it possible to distinguish the abstraction lacking the singularity of the labour-power from its differentiation with regard to the commodified totality of existence. Abstraction exists because of differentiation, not the other way round. Both are the result of an immanent cause where the subsumption of labour-power corresponds to the affirmation of a power that is individuated in a different way. Labour-power, as faculty of a living personality, is one of the modes of such power. Capital tends to conceal it, and to replace it with an abstraction, so as to make it impossible to identify labour-power and power. Such an abstraction cannot exist without the actually existing power that generates the system and its modes.

Spinozism allows a theory of labour-power to recover the richness of an autonomous and intelligent form of life in an experience marked by alienation, violence and expropriation. The continuous search for the expression of the power to act *in these conditions* makes it possible to clarify a decisive aspect of the Marxian discourse: labour-power does not only pursue the reproduction of life—“its self-preservation” which coincides with its being commodified. It is the expression of a potency that depends on the exercise of a certain use of labour-power as a faculty of the faculties available to life, independently of the idealistic morality of transcendence, the reproduction of hierarchies and the glorification of the sacrificial morality of labour.

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## Chapter 2

# The Theory of Labour-Power



Labour-power is the faculty that in-futures itself starting from the here and now in every material and intellectual act, in the production and reproduction of goods, relations and uses. The relationship between being like this (alienated) and otherwise (liberated) of labour-power is to be understood in terms of a dialectic between actual and virtual.

### 2.1 The Dark Side of the Digital Revolution

Editors of TV programs sometimes ask me to provide them with a human case. Some author has read about today's "slaves" in the paper. The word is an idiomatic expression used as a synonym of extreme poverty, lack of rights, poor work. And so a reporter sets out in search of a "story". In some cases he or she comes to me, because, as a journalist, I deal with issues relating to labour. I refuse to name names, I say I don't know any slaves, I have no "human case". Which is also how the people in question answer. To be defined as slaves, subjects without freedom, things without a will, is an offense. Especially when slavery is used as a metaphor that turns personal vulnerability into social stigma. The ancients conceived of slaves as talking animals. Contemporaries as personal human cases to be interviewed.

This representation of labour-power can be found in talk shows, newspapers and in the publishing industry alike. Research on the titles of books that have come out in recent years shows how recurrent the term "slaves" is. In second place we find the term "temporary", or "precarious", always used with a victimising connotation. Avoiding this is healthy. Once a journalist who was concerned about the increasing number of self-employed and freelance workers being refused work explained her way of reasoning: you have to strike below the belt and shock the viewers. It is best if the human case resembles an unemployed son, father or mother. The problem will sound familiar to the television audience. This approach, however, is questionable. It might have shocked audiences years ago. Today we have an understanding of the situation,



we know who those responsible are. Repeating the same pattern means separating the suffering caused by alienated work and reducing it to a biographical or generational fact. Victimisation strengthens the perception of a widespread subalternity, it does not increase the knowledge of the causes that produce it, nor does it reverse the perspective.

The widespread discourse on the digital revolution causing a decline in human work contributes to this outcome. This revolution was supposed to guarantee greater autonomy, but it ended up extending the already existing dominion over bodies to the brain, the psyche and affects. Despite this, there is no end of labour in sight, and the replacement of humans with machines will be a distant prospect also in 2025 or 2050, when this transition is supposed to take place. Already today automation is forcing the labour-power to work more with increasingly lower wages. The scarcity of jobs and the incessant transformation of professions are not, however, caused by robots, but by a series of social, economic and productive factors that bring about a profound transformation of labour-power and its productivity, something that is still very much overlooked. Workers are twice as powerless: not only have the “old” jobs left them unemployed in a land where the dawn of a new beginning never occurs, they will also be unable to determine the work of the future, when the prophecy of the augurs of the techno-apocalypse will be fulfilled. The tale of the ongoing digital revolution has an ancient origin: it is the illusion of unmanned work, a direct emanation of Capital. Like the *German ideology*, which Marx and Engels wrote about in 1846, also the *Californian ideology* of the Silicon Valley of the twenty-first century removes the material conditions of life and the faculties of living individuals in contact with machines and the digitalisation of the world. Today labour-force is the dark side of the digital revolution.

This book proposes an alternative to futurology and to the compassionate narrative of labour. It elaborates a philosophy that acknowledges a nameless centrality—that of labour-power—and restores the conditions for a critique grounded in the history of flesh and blood individuals engaged in a productive activity which involves wake and sleep. This philosophy is neither apocalyptic nor Luddite, it affirms a philosophical materialism and investigates the possibility of a Spinozist ethic. The question it poses is not *what is labour?* Rather, it asks the more concrete and powerful question: *what can labour-power do today?*

## 2.2 Brand New Future or Golden Age

Never before has the concept of labour been used in such a totalising way. Never has the value of labour-power been so negligible. A shared meaning of labour has been lost, the name of what we are has become obscure: labour-power. This situation is reminiscent of the Baron of Münchhausen who manages to pull himself out of a swamp by his own hair. In the same way it seems that labour produces itself, commodities mysteriously appear in our homes, money is the embodiment of the mathematical will of an algorithm. Workers, who despite this continue to work, are

told that their activity has no meaning beyond mere execution. It is up to the masters to find meaning, servants are denied the very sense of work that comes from working. It is employers who decide what their labour-power is, and what it is not. Employers exercise the power to give or deny a name, in addition to establishing tasks and salary. This is the score being played everywhere: labour is deprived of its force, it has no flesh and blood subjects. The only subject is the abstraction of work. This reversal is subtle, like all metaphysics, and has imposed a specific order of discourse: today we talk about labour without talking about the conditions that make it possible, i.e. labour-power.

Labour-power is understood as a materially operational ghost.<sup>1</sup> It has been suggested to use the image of the “labour black box” to describe this condition.<sup>2</sup> The association is suggestive; however, it is only a metaphor. A black box records data or conversations between pilots, it withstands shocks, fire and high pressure. Its “work” allows to reconstruct the causes of a catastrophe and thanks to its objective memory to retrospectively re-establish responsibilities. This is what labour will do once it has disappeared: it will retain a memory of what has been. Labour-power, instead, is the faculty that feeds circuits and automatisms in real time, it is the capacity that allows to produce a commodity and its value. The association between a black box and labour-power, however, remains valid at a time when the material conditions of production and reproduction of this labour-power are removed, when it is comforting to imagine that cars will one day, perhaps, drive themselves without the decisive contribution of a human being. It seems we must inevitably admit that labour-power is the outcome of the interaction between machines, while on the contrary it is the condition that allows such interaction to take place.

Labour-power has evidently not disappeared in the automated and silent flows governed by algorithms. Women and men continue to work, hours are increasingly longer and conditions are increasingly worse. Also in the face of a structural excess in the demand for employment, labour-power is never idle. Whether it is included or discarded, banned, underestimated or persecuted, it is an always active faculty. This forces the multitudes that live in the gray zone between work and non-work to move, to cross borders and to become hostage to a cognitive trap: despite the aspiration to paid and secure employment, this labour-power is perceived as a working mass, as mere manpower to be employed, not as a social and collective individual. The resurgence of unthinkable conditions, at least in capitalist countries, of material deprivation and marginality, reinforces this perception and, in addition, subjects the reproduction of labour-power to binding trajectories that severely impact its material and ethical existence.

The disciplining, the transfiguration and removal of labour-power—its *invisibilisation*—are the result of a cultural hegemony so powerful that workers themselves believe they are invisible. Despite being labour-power, these workers act as if they were not seen. The reversal of perception, and the inability to give a name and a face

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<sup>1</sup> See Marvit [1].

<sup>2</sup> See Irani [2], Scholz [3].