

competitive enterprises can continue to exist indefinitely. The refusal of the guaranteed income as a general and explicitly recognized right brings with it, in this case as in others, the risk of a shortage of funds on the part of the entrepreneur.

As for the law on juvenile employment, it hardly merits more than a few ironic remarks, since its miserable failure is well known. With stunning ignorance, a genuine *work machine* has been set up for the new generations, clearly oriented towards a rigid command structure and the implementation of a full work day, while self-determination, mobility, and a preference for flexible employment have become deep-rooted habits for young workers. In other words, the state has promised a prolonged flow of wages in return for totally fictitious, but controllable labor—once again.

*Translated by Max Henninger*

## Post-Fordist Semblance

**Paolo Virno**

The subject of these notes is “socially necessary semblance” under post-Fordism. By this little formula (of Marxian origin, by the way), I refer to the ensemble of mentalities, images of the world and of oneself, behaviors and beliefs which, while false (that is, semblances) nonetheless originate in and derive a certain legitimacy from certain quite real and persistent aspects of today’s mode of production. It’s not a question, in other words, of subjective errors produced by the dominant culture, but of representations forcefully suggested by a very concrete condition. What is needed is an identification of the grain of truth that sustains false semblance. Such an investigation aims at a materialist recognition of subjectivity as it exists within post-Fordist capitalism.

It would certainly be more comforting to assume that the illusions current today are the product of media propaganda and that they can therefore be refuted by means of a patient pedagogical project of clarification. Unfortunately this is not the case. There is a *material basis for ideology*, an objective foundation that reinforces and reproduces deception. To give a classic example: in the work of Marx, a considerable part of capitalist ideology is traced back to that rather concrete institution that

is ... the wage. By being paid after labor has been made available, the wage in fact powerfully imposes the false belief that what is being remunerated is the work performed, when in fact what the capitalist purchases on the market is, for Marx, rather labor-power, the worker's pure psychosomatic capacity to produce. It is worth asking, then, what corresponds to the wage as an “ideological fact” in the era of post-Fordism: what are the contemporary foundations of socially necessary semblance? We will discuss three of many possible examples.

### 1. Self-employment

It's not difficult to identify the material conditions that substantiate the illusory conviction of a considerable number of subordinated workers that they are able to and/or have to behave as “their own employers.” Here, I want to insist on only one aspect of this phenomenon: so-called self-employment has its concrete basis in what *precedes* productive activity properly speaking—that is, in the vicissitudes one has to confront *before* performing this or that job (or in the interval between one job and another). No workers believe themselves to be managing their own lives because of the way they work, but rather because of the way they come to terms with the labor market.

The time devoted to finding long-term employment (often quite a protracted period, riddled with brief and diverse jobs that are off the books, seasonal etc.) is at the heart of the “self-employment” experienced by post-Fordist workers. This protracted “search” is no longer an empty and passive intermediate period, but a genuine *activity* that requires initiative, open-mindedness, calculation, a sense of compatibility, and even some rudimentary analysis of “market tendencies.” The person in search of employment ends up looking somewhat like a *small stock broker*, or a manager with public relations skills. Without the traditional mechanisms of job placement, it has become necessary to establish informal relations with the most diverse interlocutors. These relations, often rich with sticky psychological subtleties, require a certain amount of opportunism. And as Williamson teaches us, opportunism is the entrepreneurial skill *par excellence*.<sup>1</sup>

The concern with “keeping in touch,” with “being around” (that is, eternally available), with “seizing the unexpected opportunity” is a general feature of a form of socialization that takes place before and between jobs. Here, an important hypothesis suggests itself: the diversification and fragmentation of forms of employment occurs against the backdrop of a substantially unitary socialization process. It is this

socialization process that the project of political organization needs to grasp, whatever form that project may take. A critique of the illusions related to "self-employment" is possible only if it involves a recognition (and a political evaluation) of the enterpreneurial skills required for surviving on the labor market, the habit of not having any habits, the capacity to metabolize innovation.

## 2. Professionality

This universally applicable little word exemplifies one of the most persistent optical illusions generated by post-Fordism. Reading the results of a recent study on the workers at Rome's Fiumicino airport, one is struck by how a large number of the younger workers (precisely those most affected by the phenomena of "contingent" and "temporary" employment) attribute great importance to "professionality," considering it the characteristic most likely to improve their situation. Note that the keyword is *professionality*, not *specialization*. The distinction is important. "Specialization" refers to an ensemble of pre-defined tasks that require a certain level (sometimes higher, sometimes lower) of technical expertise; it involves apprenticeship and, in some cases, academic studies. "Specialization" is something impersonal, an objective requirement that can be evaluated on the basis of socially shared parameters. "Professionality," on the other hand, is seen as a *subjective property*, a form of know-how inseparable from the individual person; it is the sum of knowledges, experiences, attitudes, and a certain sensibility. Correctly understood, post-Fordist "professionality" does not correspond to any precise profession. It consists rather of certain *character traits*.

Far from referring to any particular skill, "professionality" is the awkwardly roundabout term by which one refers to the putting-to-work of a person's most generic traits. Starkly put, it's nothing more nor less than the art of *being in the world*, of negotiating the most varied situations, of responding to the blows of chance. And it is highly significant that this art of being in the world, transfigured into "professionality," presents itself as a *productive resource*. A systematic examination of the most recent manuals for managing "human relations" (Franco Angeli has published many of them, both American and European) would be of decisive importance for the investigation of the spontaneous ideology of professionalism. For example, job interviews tend to focus more on the inclinations and habits, the ambitions and "values" of the candidate than on his familiarity with a specific task. The aim, to be sure, is not so much to evaluate the candidate's capacity for

subordination as to measure his ability to react in a prompt and well-timed manner to the vicissitudes of the network enterprise, or of just-in-time production. As in the case of "self-employment," the critique of ideology must not eliminate the material reality in which ideology takes root: in the case of "professionalism," it is a question of the integration of the productive role of affect, taste, inclination, and linguistic-relational capacities.

### 3. Individualism

No doubt post-Fordist neo-individualism has numerous causes, many of them complementary. I will refer only to one. The ideology of progress has given way to a pervasive *ideology of the possible*. The notion of a cumulative and future-oriented time, dramatically promoted by the material organization of Fordism, gives way to a sense of being constantly confronted with a phantasmagoric ensemble of *simultaneous* opportunities, to be negotiated with flexibility. What seems to come to the fore in this relationship with possibility *qua* possibility is the individual dimension of experience. It's certainly true that the "opportunities" that flare up intermittently under post-Fordism are abstract, serial, interchangeable, far from giving rise to a well-structured biography; nonetheless, it remains the case that each of them always presents itself as "my" opportunity, the opportunity of a contingent and unique I.

The *ideology of the possible* has its real basis in the fluid relationship between labor and non-labor—in the sudden shift to different tasks, the necessity of adapting oneself to continuous innovation, the changed experience of social time, the decline of the "community of producers," and the prevalence of the aleatory over the pre-determined. (By the way: it would be appropriate, at some point, to conduct a comparative investigation into the emergence of post-Fordism and the spread of game shows in Italy.) The link between individualism and the cult of the possible has found an apologetic but efficacious representation in "weak thought" and its various derivatives.<sup>2</sup> The surplus of postmodern theories needs to be seen as something more (and worse) than a case of bad writing. It registers an important transformation with the precision of a seismograph, but presents that transformation as a beneficial and liberatory development.

It's certainly not a question of negating or condemning "neo-individualism." Rather, one would have to see in it a symptom that is not so despicable, all told: a heightened sensitivity to what is unique and irreproducible in the life of the individual. The very notion of the "public

sphere” would merit re-conceptualization with regard to this sensibility. And what is more, Marx once spoke, in an oxymoron that is more than a little suggestive, of the “social individual” (that is, of an individual whose singularity is not attenuated, but heightened and rendered more sophisticated by collective experience) as the powerful basis of communist subversion.

*Translated by Max Henninger*

### Notes

1. Virno is referring to Oliver Williamson, a contemporary economist known for his work in transaction cost analysis and his theory of the negotiation and modification of contractual agreements. See Oliver Williamson, *Markets and Hierarchies* (New York: The Free Press, 1975). (Translator’s note.)
2. The expression “weak thought” [*pensiero debole*] was coined by contemporary Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo. “Weak thought” is Vattimo’s term for a post-Enlightenment, post-logocentric, and post-Marxist philosophical approach that has lost all faith in the grand narratives of modernity. “Weak thought” might be seen as a specifically Italian version of what commonly goes by the name of “postmodernism.” See Pier Aldo Rovatti and Gianni Vattimo (eds.), *Il pensiero debole* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983). (Translator’s note.)