

AFFECT & LABOR

AFECTO Y TRABAJO

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Abstract

In this article I review theoretical approaches that attend to the entanglements between affect and labor in late capitalism. I examine the concepts of affective, re-productive, emotional, and intimate labor, with a focus on what each model illuminates and obscures. While recognizing substantial differences among many forms of affective work, I highlight the relocation of the boundaries between production and reproduction, and public and private selves, as essential common themes among them. Bringing affect into labor changes the ways scholars address traditional debates and categories surrounding workers' consent, alienation, and exploitation. The intersections of insights into labor and affect provide tools to re-search the contemporary transformations of work and the tensions and alignments between affective investments and political projects of emancipation from capitalist appropriation of labor.

Resumen

En este artículo, reviso los enfoques teóricos que abordan el entrelazamiento entre afecto y trabajo en el capitalismo tardío. Examinó los conceptos de trabajo afectivo, reproductivo, emocional e íntimo, con atención a lo que cada modelo aclara y esconde. Si bien reconozco las diferencias sustanciales entre muchas formas de trabajo afectivo, destaco la reubicación de los límites entre la producción y la reproducción, y el yo público y privado, como temas comunes esenciales entre ellas. Traer conceptualizaciones del afecto al estudio del trabajo cambia los modos en que los académicos abordan los tradicionales debates y las categorías que rodean el consentimiento, la alienación y la explotación de los trabajadores. Las intersecciones matizadas de los conocimientos sobre labor y afecto proporcionan herramientas para investigar las transformaciones contemporáneas del trabajo, y las tensiones y alineaciones entre las inversiones afectivas y los proyectos políticos de emancipación de la apropiación capitalista del trabajo.

Palabras clave

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Introduction

In the spring of 2017, subway cars in New York City displayed a series of ads by Fiverr, an “online freelance marketplace.” The campaign was called “In Doers We Trust” and it targeted freelance workers with the message that they should never stop pitching their ideas to potential clients—best conveyed in a video on the campaign website, of a woman checking her phone while having sex—nor ever take a break from work, as revealed in the ad where a woman updates her website from a toilet in a noisy bar. Work, we are shown, constitutes life itself with an urgency that overrides food, love, or sleep.

This message condenses many aspects of labor as we experience it in the 21st century. It reveals a workplace that is no longer fixed and contained but ubiquitous; a workplace that has been described as flexible and disrupted, precarious, contingent, and overflowing (Gregg, 2011; Snyder, 2016; Standing, 2011). Yet the ads also illustrate the *affective transformations* of work in late capitalism: the myriad ways in which the boundaries between public and private selves, money and intimacy, pleasure and duty, are shifting and relocating.

On the one hand, all economic and political regimes produce, circulate, and distribute sentiments (Hirschman, 1977; Stoler, 2007). Industrial capitalism, for instance, cultivated particular affects and dispositions towards time and kinship (Illouz, 2007; Thompson, 1967; Yanagisako, 2012), while Fordism fostered a public sense of belonging and collective identity for workers (Muehlebach, 2011)—albeit mostly male and white (Pugh, 2015). On the other hand, there seems to be something unique about affect in post-1970s capitalism¹, an era in which “the accumulation of capital has shifted to the domain of affect” (Clough, 2008, p. 17). Tero Karppi, Lotta Kähkönen, Mona Mannevuuo, Mari Pajala and Tanja Sihvonen use the term “affective capitalism” to indicate the present “broad infrastructure in which the emotional culture and its classed and gendered history merge with value production and everyday life” (2016, p. 5). Eva Illouz speaks of “emotional capitalism” to describe a contemporary culture in which “affect is made an essential aspect of economic behavior and in which emotional life—especially that of the middle classes—follows the logic of economic relations and exchange” (2007, p. 5).

These affective dimensions of late capitalism are particularly palpable in the world of work². Due to the spectacular rise of a service economy, many—if not most—workers are now “required to bring some level of personal identity and self expression into their work” (Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996, p. 4). To the extent that “our capacities to affect and become affected are transformed into assets, goods, services, and managerial strategies” (Karppi et al., 2016 p. 9), our very soul is put to work to produce value (Berardi, 2009). Simultaneously, as suggested in the ads by Fiverr, labor is (supposed to be) a major source of identity and self fulfillment for workers themselves.

¹ There is hardly an agreement about how we should call our present configuration of capitalism, which presents a significant decline in manufacturing and a subsequent shift to a service economy (Wharton, 1993); a cognitive “revolution” in information and communications technology and the predominance of a “knowledge economy” (Boutang, 2011); state and corporate disinvestment from the provision of welfare and social protection (Fraser, 2016); the precarization of work (Standing, 2011); and the deregulation and globalization of financial markets (Harvey, 1990), to name a few. I favor the terms “late” or “advanced” throughout the article. For a more nuanced discussion on this topic see Benjamin Snyder, 2016.

² In this article I do not draw on the Marxist distinction between “work” as productive activity with use value, and “labor” as work with exchange value. For a discussion on the conflicting meanings of “work” see Jason Read, 2017.

Work has shifted from a Protestant ethic requiring the diminishment of the self and the repression of desire to a “do what you love” narrative which combines the “pursuit of pleasure and capital” (Tokumitsu, 2015 p. 5). Aided by new media technologies which make work omnipresent, white collar workers in particular have an “increasingly intimate relationship” with their labor (Gregg, 2011).

In this article I review theoretical approaches to affect and labor in late capitalism. I focus on four schools of thought. First, the influential theory of *affective labor* put forward by Michael Hardt (1999) and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) as an all-encompassing definition of production and manipulation of affects that is appropriated by capital. Second, I address feminist critiques to the affective turn that insist on foregrounding gender and the category of *reproductive labor* in its racialized, classed, and transnational configurations, in order to understand capitalist labor markets. Third, I engage with scholarship on work and emotions influenced by Arlie Hochschild’s (1983) landmark concept of *emotional labor*. These studies have examined multiple forms of affect provision in service occupations, contributing valuable tools with which to think about work and inequality. Last, I touch upon the more recent concept of *intimate labor* and discuss what the grammar of intimacy brings to light in debates surrounding the body, labor, and affect.

While these approaches do not do justice to the vast scope of literature on affect and work, they share overarching themes that go to the heart of what is at stake in the present stage of capitalist organization: the redrawing of the boundaries between production and reproduction, paid and unpaid labor, and public and private selves. They have become highly influential in shaping the ways we think about affective labor³ exchanged for money and about the novel forms of alienation, consent, and exploitation this exchange sparks⁴. The nuanced intersections of these insights into labor and affect thus provide key conceptual tools to address the contemporary transformations of work.

Affective and reproductive labor

The concept of affective labor was theorized by Hardt as part of his larger framework of immaterial labor. Hardt argued that since the 1970s we have transitioned towards an “informational economy” characterized “by the central role played by knowledge,

³ For the sake of clarity I use the term “affective labor” throughout the article unless specifically discussing other theories of work.

⁴ While discussing unpaid affective labor is beyond the scope of this article, there are multiple ways in which affect is exchanged through means other than money. Furthermore, sharing economies such as Couchsurfing (Mikołajewska-Zajac 2016) constitute liminal spaces where gift and market economies mix.

information, communication, and affect” (1999, p. 91). He did not mean that industrial production would disappear, but that even manufacturing would become subject to informatization—in other words, the division between manufacturing and services would become blurred.

This transition to an informational and service economy involves a radical change in work, which becomes largely *immaterial* in the form of knowledge and communication. Hardt is drawing on Maurizio Lazzarato’s (1996) earlier argument about the rise of immaterial labor as the dominant form of work,⁵ which “has come to assume a strategic role within the global organization of production” (p. 136). Again, it’s not that material labor disappears: rather, as Hardt emphasizes, immaterial labor assumes a hegemonic position with respect to other forms of work. Hardt (1999) distinguishes between three forms of immaterial labor: the communication technologies that transform the industrial production process; the immaterial labor of analytical and symbolic tasks; and *affective labor*: “the production and manipulation of affects” which “requires (virtual or actual) human contact and proximity” (1999, pp. 97-98) and is thus an essential aspect in the production of services.

Hardt acknowledges that these concepts build on theories of emotional labor (addressed below) and earlier feminist insights on traditionally female forms of labor which are “immersed in the corporeal” (1999, p. 96). Yet he claims that affective labor is immaterial in the sense that its products are intangible. Affective labor produces networks, collective subjectivities, and forms of community. It is therefore a form of *biopower* (an idea I develop in the last section). Hardt also recognizes that feminist analyses have long highlighted the social value of caring and other forms of reproductive labor. What is new, however, is “the extent to which this affective immaterial labor is now directly productive of capital and the extent to which it has become generalized through wide sectors of the economy” (1999, p. 97).

This conceptualization of affective labor is consistent with the affective turn in social theory, which formulates affect as virtual capacity for multiple engagements with the world (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010; Wetherell, 2012). In sync with this emphasis on “becoming” rather than on static categories, “affective labor” is a fundamentally *expansive* category. It has been used to describe extremely diverse phenomena such as the unwaged work that produces “good citizenship” through engagement in social service (Muehlebach, 2011), border-making practices by U.S. patrols and production of desire within urban night life scenes (Thomas and Correa, 2016), the free labor of MySpace users (Coté and Pybus, 2007), retail work in large companies (Carls, 2007),

⁵ According to Lazzarato, immaterial labor is “involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion” (1996, p. 133).

production of “youthfulness” for consumption in the “immaterial economy” (Farrugia, 2017), or the work of fashion models in photo shoots (Wissinger, 2007). Following Hardt and Negri, these works contend that through affective labor in advanced capitalism the production of capital converges with the production of social life (Oksala, 2016).

As this multiplicity shows, the concept of affective labor has escalated scholarly attention to the significant changes in the nature of work (Whitney, 2018). It has also been widely critiqued, first, because of its generality. If affective labor comprises consumption and leisure, what is *not* work? Is “labor” even a useful analytic category if we use it to describe life itself? Larger debates within affect theory question the notion of affect when it is used to disregard social meaning and ideology, and to gloss over the particularities that have been central to feminist and postcolonial analyses of power (Hemmings, 2005; Leys, 2011; Wetherell, 2012). Feminist scholars are among the most vocal critics of affect theory’s take on labor, arguing that we cannot talk about work in the post-Fordist era without foregrounding gender (Federici, 2006, 2011; McRobbie, 2010; Schultz, 2006), since “the characteristics historically present in female work—precariousness, flexibility, mobility, fragmentary nature, low status, and low pay—have increasingly come to characterize most of the work in global capitalism” (Oksala, 2016, p. 281).

Feminists in fact preceded Hardt and Negri in theorizing immaterial and affective work as part of their political project of expanding the category of labor (Weeks, 2007, 2011; see also Garey and Hansen, 2011; DeVault, 1991). *Reproductive labor*, understood as the “array of activities and relationships involved in maintaining people both on a daily basis and intergenerationally” (Glenn, 1992, p. 1), is a concept that came from these interventions to make visible the work of women that in capitalist societies became defined as unproductive in terms of having no exchange value (Boris and Parreñas, 2010; Folbre, 1991). By redefining the very notion of work, feminists have shown that women’s unpaid reproductive labor is key to capitalist production. Silvia Federici argues that the concept of affective labor ignores these feminist contributions by “suggesting that reproducing people is just a matter of producing ‘emotions,’ ‘feelings’” (2006).⁶

⁶ Against Hardt’s formulation of affective labor as producing intangible products, scholars point out that it can only unfold within material economies (Dowling, 2007) and depends on objects and technologies (Ducey, 2010). In addition to producing intangible goods, immaterial labor often also results in material commodities such as gametes or pornography (Burke, 2016). Conversely, all forms of “material” work entail mental processes, communication, and affect (Yanagisako, 2012).

As mentioned earlier, one of the key transformations of advanced capitalism is precisely the re-making of these boundaries between production and reproduction through the move of reproductive labor into the market in the form of services such as those provided by paid care workers, personal shoppers, or surrogate mothers. But rather than framing these moves as an evaporation of the production/reproduction distinction as Hardt and Negri do (see also Weeks, 2007), feminist scholars argue that these boundaries are constantly *restructured*. In her analysis of the gendered and racialized construction of reproductive labor in the 20th century, Evelyn Glenn (1992) shows that racial-ethnic women went from being employed as servants to service workers—in both cases relieving white women of the “dirty” aspects of this work (see also Whitney, 2018). Currently, neoliberal cutbacks to public services such as child and health care have reprivatized reproductive labor and forced unpaid women to “pick up the slack” at home (Schultz, 2006 p. 81; Fraser, 2016), while paid domestic labor and elder care are increasingly relegated to immigrant women from the Global South (Federici, 2011; Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2014; Hochschild, 2002; Uhde, 2016).

In other words, against a concept of affective labor that tends to erase the profound differences among a wide variety of workers (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Federici and Caffentzis, 2007), literature on reproductive labor “makes a convincing case that the gendering and racialization of this work interact to reproduce hierarchies of race and gender as well as labor in interlocking ways” (Whitney, 2018, p. 641). It reminds us that different forms of affective labor entail specific power relations, political consequences, and systems of exploitation (Oksala, 2016)—differences I will return to later.

While these critiques point to important pitfalls of the affective labor formulation, they also tend to overlook the contributions of a broad theorizing of affect that connects aspects of the economic order that would otherwise seem unrelated, thus challenging the narrow understanding of “productive” labor as the only capable to directly produce capital (Altomonte 2015). The exchange of energy and vital human connection implied in affective labor illuminates co-constitutive aspects of work, as Akemi Nishida (2017) argues in discussing the bodily “affective relationality” by which disabled persons and their care providers co-produce care practices. Critics of the affective turn also ignore that this perspective is fundamentally concerned with relations of power (Greco and Stenner, 2008; Stoler, 2007; Wetherell, 2012). The intersection between affect studies and work studies is a promising space to address some of the uneven distributions in what Sara Ahmed (2004) calls affective economies. One recent example is Shiloh Whitney’s (2018) theorization of affective labor as not only the work of producing affects or labor power, “but also the work of metabolizing unwanted af-

fects and affective byproducts” (p. 643), a labor that is unequally performed along racialized and gendered lines. These uneven distributions are key in analyses informed by the concept of emotional labor.

Emotional and intimate labors

Let us turn to the third approach that has largely shaped theories of affect and labor. Feminist sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983) coined the concept of “emotional labor” to define the management of feelings in organizational settings as prescribed by managerial norms. In service jobs, such as the flight attendants she studied, workers are forced to display certain emotions (cheerfulness, attentiveness) while concealing others (like anger or disgust). Hochschild argues that we all perform this “emotion work” in our personal daily interactions, but emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value (1983). It actually forms the contemporary substance of profit for capital.

Hochschild’s theory of emotional labor has situated emotion as a major subject of research in social science. Yet there is little conversation between this conceptual turn in the sociology of work and the affective turn in cultural studies. Some authors of affective labor explicitly differentiate it from emotional labor (Thomas and Correa, 2016; Wissinger, 2007) while others use the terms interchangeably (Gregg, 2011; Muehlebach, 2011; Whitney, 2018). This discussion is partly grounded in positing “emotion” as private feeling against a social and inter-bodied notion of “affect” (see Mankekar and Gupta, 2016). Scholars of affect claim that this concept refers to states of being rather than to their manifestation as emotions (Hemmings, 2005). Kathi Weeks makes an argument for privileging “affect” over “emotion” since the former more effectively “traverses the divisions of mind and body, reason and emotion” (2007, p. 241).

However, as Monica Greco and Paul Stenner (2008) argue, the distinction between affect and emotion is more grounded on disciplinary boundaries than conceptual substance. Both emotion and affect bridge the biological and the cultural; research on affect and emotion equally foregrounds the links between affective life and relations of power (Greco and Stenner, 2008). Returning to the focus of this article, both emotional and affective labor refer to work that creates value through interactions between workers and clients, and capture a deeply *productive* quality in the sense that workers are constituting the very subjectivity which is then drawn into their work (Weeks, 2007; see also Mankekar and Gupta, 2016).

Emotional labor has been empirically more studied than affective labor in research on service jobs, from retail clerks to phone sex workers, strippers, fast food and

restaurant workers, and child care providers (see Wharton, 2009 for a comprehensive review). These studies reveal several common affective characteristics across service jobs: emotional labor requires a worker to produce an emotional state or response in the customer; it is expressed among coworkers as well as with supervisors and subordinates as part of the expected job performance; and through selection, training, and supervision of employees, employers are able to exercise various degrees of control (Steinberg and Fligart, 1999, pp. 13-14). Furthermore, both the customer *and* the worker co-constitute the product, which is precisely their interaction (Dowling, 2007; Lazzarato, 1996; Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996; Wharton, 1993), and results are assessed by customer satisfaction or “happiness” rather than “objective” measures (Mankekar and Gupta, 2016).

However, empirical work on service occupations calls into question Hochschild’s notion of emotional labor as always prescribed, since “interactive service workers” encounter routinization of interactions coupled with varying degrees of autonomy and subjectivity (Leidner, 1999; Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996; Wharton, 1993)⁷. In his discussion of care work in nursing homes, Steve Lopez (2006) refers to “organized emotional care” as affective work provided for money, yet not prescribed by managers. Rachel Sherman (2015) uses the term emotional work to convey production of affective labor by lifestyle workers without their interactions with clients being “scripted, standardized, or otherwise prescribed by and benefiting employers” (p. 166).

Others call into question the idea that standardization of emotional labor is always detrimental for workers. In highly routinized service jobs, such as fast food work, the scripting of workers’ emotional labor is sometimes welcome as a “buffer” that excuses them from unwanted interactions or intrusive conversations (Leidner, 1999; see also Zelizer, 2005b). As Elizabeth Bernstein (2010) shows in her study of clients and prostitutes in San Francisco, transactions of sex and intimacy on explicitly limited or “scripted” terms can provide a desirable boundary for both parts.

Regardless of these critiques, the theory of emotional labor remains extremely influential and has inspired a series of related concepts that capture different aspects of the interactive work involved in service occupations, such as body labor (Kang, 2003), relational labor (Mears, 2015; Zelizer, 2005a;), bridgework (Otis, 2016), or aesthetic labor (Warhust and Nickson, 2007). Among these, the framework of *intimate labor* defines “a continuum of service and caring labor, from high-end nursing to low-end housekeeping, and includes sex, domestic, and care work” (Boris and Parreñas, 2010, p. 2). Drawing on Viviana Zelizer’s definition of intimacy as “knowledge and attention

⁷ As Lopez (2006) points out, to some extent “emotional labor” has become a catch-all term to describe the emotional aspects of interactive work rather than the explicit control of workers’ emotions.

that are not widely available to third persons” (2005a, p. 14), Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas argue that intimate labor is work that tends to “intimate needs” which might include manicurists, prostitutes, therapists, and nurses, among many others. They distance this concept from emotional labor in that not all intimate laborers perform the latter in the sense of emotion management (i.e., sperm donors), nor does emotional labor always define the experience of intimate workers.

The category of intimate labor is based on claims to the “porous boundaries” between various work categories, which resonate with feminist arguments about the fluidity of, and interweaving between, types of reproductive labor traditionally performed by women (see DeVault, 1991). The grammar of intimacy captures the ways in which present work cultures bleed into multiple spaces, times, and relationships (Gregg, 2011; Illouz, 2007). As Lauren Berlant (1998) argues, intimacy creates the spaces that bridge the public and the private—a central aspect of 21st century labor. Intimate labor does not imply an immaterial conception of work, nor does it assume that production and reproduction become merged.

Intimate labor brings the body into focus, an aspect that is sometimes understated in empirical work on emotional labor⁸ yet is crucial in theories of affect (Clough, 2008; Thomas and Correa, 2016). In their study of Indian call centers, Purnima Mankekar and Akhil Gupta (2016) describe workers’ bodily production of intimate encounters in terms of “the intense concentration woven into the tightness of a young woman’s body,” “the determined smile” of another and “the sagging shoulders” of yet another one as they dealt with clients (p. 25). Intimacy, which is constitutive of this affective labor, reconstitutes the body itself—yet it does not need face-to-face interaction, as it can be (and often is) mediated by technology (Mankekar and Gupta, 2016; Ducey, 2010).

In their divergences and overlaps, the theoretical tools offered by concepts of affective, reproductive, emotional, and intimate labor underscore that affect has distinct positions in diverse productive processes of late capitalism. These insights are key for studying economies and circulation of affect and emotion, central concerns of affect theory. At the same time, the focus on affect changes the traditional categories and framing of debates that scholars of work have grappled with regarding workers’ consent, alienation, and exploitation, which I turn to next.

⁸ Hochschild (1983) did highlight the embodied dimension of emotional labor in her discussion of female flight attendants’ engineering of smiling or appearing physically attractive and available. See also Miliann Kang’s (2003) analysis of bodily emotional labor in Korean-owned nail salons in New York City, where she examines how workers enter into “extended physical contact” with their customers.

Alienation, consent, exploitation

Drawing on Marx's theory of *alienation* of the industrial worker from the product of her labor, Hochschild famously argued that an estrangement of the private self is produced by emotional labor. The production and managing of emotions for work "draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality" (1983, p. 7). The private management and exchange of emotions is appropriated for profit and, in the process, standardized and engineered in ways that cause estrangement "from display, from feeling, and from what feelings can tell us" (1983 p. 189). Hardt and Negri (2011) also note that in the production of affective labor "capital alienates from the worker not just the product of labor but the laboring process itself, such that workers do not feel their own their capacities for thinking, loving, and caring when they are on the job" (p. 140).

Yet what exactly are these "true" affects or selves from which emotional labor alienates workers? As scholars of affect have emphasized, capitalism produces subjectivities and affective labor produces particular laboring subjects (Mankekar and Gupta 2016). Cinzia Arruzza (2014) points out that capitalism interpellates us to value emotions as the most authentic expression of our selfhood, while *simultaneously* making them into detachable skills to sell in labor markets. The search for authenticity implied in Hochschild's idea of alienation is therefore problematic (see Mankekar and Gupta, 2016; Weeks, 2007).

Hochschild does not deny that workers who sell emotional labor can truly feel affection for their customers. On the contrary, she distinguished between two methods for performing emotional labor: surface acting (workers are aware that their display of feelings is superficial) and deep acting, in which workers show a "real feeling that has been self-induced" (1983, p. 35). Still, workers' affective investment in work requires us to rethink the contradictions among agency, consent, and alienation beyond the notion of "acting" (Gregg, 2011). A significant characteristic of labor in advanced capitalism is the increasing exercise of autonomy and individuality by workers, one way in which work is made highly meaningful and central to identity while simultaneously diminishing expectations of stability and proper compensation (Gregg, 2011; Pugh, 2015; Tokumitsu, 2015). Consent to participate in unequal labor exchanges is based on different affective grounds: from social ties, gifts, and intimacy (Mears, 2015) to workers' construction of identities as "caring selves" (Stacey, 2011) or norms of reciprocity with clients (Sherman, 2007).

Focusing on affect also changes the ways scholars of labor address contemporary forms of *exploitation*. As noted earlier, reproductive and affective work are unequally

distributed along gender, class, and ethnic-racial lines (Cabezas, 2011; Dowling, 2007; Glenn, 1992; Hochschild, 2002; Kang, 2003; Uhde, 2016).⁹ Emotional labor can mirror and produce unequal exchanges because customer and client assume different rights to what they are allowed to feel and display (Hochschild, 1983). As scholars of care work show, another source of exploitation stems from the difficulty of measuring affective exchanges (Folbre, 2012). When affective labor is exchanged for money it becomes subject to a double misrecognition: “the invisibility of emotional labor as a job requirement and the consequent lack of remuneration for the competent performance of those skills” (Steinberg and Fligart, 1999, p. 13). There is extensive evidence of the persistent devaluation of paid affective, emotional, and reproductive labor (England, 2005; England, Budig and Folbre, 2002; Fraser and Gordon, 2013). Activities that women have historically undertaken without payment, such as housework and care, teaching and nursing, are regarded as unskilled work, making it difficult for them to be sufficiently rewarded when commodified (Boris and Parreñas, 2010).

The issue of exploitation therefore requires us to go back to some of the earlier distinctions among different forms of affective labor. Hardt and Negri (2011) note that capital expropriates affective labor not only on individual but on collective levels, in the sense of appropriating the forms of cooperation that emerge *among* immaterial workers: “information flows, communication networks, social codes, linguistic innovations, and practices of affects and passions” (p. 140). This idea has been taken up in studies of white-collar workers (Gregg, 2011) as well as by scholars that examine the “free labor” provided by Internet users as social media transforms the boundaries between production and consumption of content (Coté and Pybus, 2007; Terranova, 2004). As opposed to these kinds of professionals who have greater degrees of autonomy, training, and resources (Wharton, 1993), frontline service workers “are given very explicit instructions concerning what to say and how to act” and remain under constant supervision (Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996 p. 3) in return for very low wages. They lack the “status shield” afforded by professional recognition that serves as a protection against emotional demands from customers (Hochschild, 1983) and have been referred to as the “emotional proletariat” (Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996). As Silvia Federici and George Caffentzis (2007) argue, there is little in common between a male artist or teacher and a female domestic worker—both of whom, on Hardt and Negri’s terms, might be providing affective labor.

In other words, certain types of affective labor do not afford the social recognition and economic compensation that others do; and not all forms of affective labor are

⁹ Mankekar and Gupta (2016) make a similar point regarding the international division of immaterial labor in IT, in which higher-end software development is done in Silicon Valley, while lower-end functions are offshored to places like India.

equally exploited by capital. Thus, “we need to pay attention to *how* labor is affective in different cases” (Mankekar and Gupta 2016 p. 35), and ask *who* provides *what forms* of affect and labor, and with what consequences. It matters greatly whether affective, reproductive, emotional, or intimate labor are paid or unpaid (Dowling, 2007), provided in intimate or public settings (Zelizer, 2010), or in globalized markets (Boris and Parreñas, 2010), in addition to whether they produce affects or reproduce labor power (Oksala, 2016). Gender, class, race, ethnicity and citizenship determine to a large extent who fulfills which service jobs and the expectations that these allocations carry (see Kang, 2003), with sharp divisions along “front” and “back” of service provision (Dowling, 2007; Sherman, 2007); or “dirty” and “nurturant” care work (Duffy, 2011; Glenn, 1992); among others.

Fear, pleasure, and anti-capitalist critiques of work

In this article I have been concerned with approaches to how late capitalist economies engender new “affective practices” (Berlant, 2007) in the arena of labor. I would now like to outline some implications that these perspectives offer for researching the transformations of work.

First, the concept of affect is key to understanding contemporary subjectivities, identities, and intimacies of workers both inside and outside the workplace. Affective practices have consequences not only for the type of jobs we do, but for the type of workers we are expected to be. The Fiverr ads described earlier convey these expectations quite graphically: 21st century workers seem to always be *at work*. Technology is a key aspect of this constant engagement. New media and devices force workers to engage in “affect regulation and emotional distance” as they deal with the overflow of work into multiple spaces and times, as well as with new problems such as “collegial over-exposure and enforced intimacy” derived from the expectation of networking as part of the job (Gregg, 2011 p. 12). As new technologies continue to mediate work—think social media and its culture of reviews—research can explore how self-discipline and workers’ sense of worth is transformed and enacted through increasingly personalized management and tracking practices (see Moore, 2018).

Affect is also central to what Allison Pugh (2015) calls an “insecurity culture:” “a culture of personal responsibility and risk, linked to the spread of precariousness at work, the neoliberal receding of the state, and the dominance of the market” (p. 4). Because this culture combines low expectations for employers and high ones for workers, it thrives on fear and anxiety. As Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt (2008) argue, these “negative” affects (fatigue, exhaustion, frustration) are obscured in theories of affective

labor, yet largely shape our relationship to work. “Insecurity about one’s place during periodic innovation, fear of losing recently gained privileges, and anxiety over being ‘left behind’ translate into flexibility, adaptability, and a readiness to reconfigure one-self” (Virno, 1996 p. 16)¹⁰. As an increasing number of scholars refer to precarization as the defining feature of modern labor (Gregg, 2011; Snyder, 2016; Standing, 2011), examining precarity’s multiple affective dimensions will shed light on how it shapes our lives and social relations (see Pugh, 2015).

Conversely, studies of labor have paid little attention to the *pleasures* produced and circulated by work. As Hochschild (1997) notes, “the emotional magnets beneath home and workplace are in the process of being reversed” (p. 44), as work provides respite from emotional and domestic challenges at home and holds promises of public recognition. Paid labor has become, at least ideologically, a search for individual happiness and identity¹¹. Pugh (2015) finds that the language with which workers describe their labor as a personal “calling” resembles the search for a soul mate in love. Scholars have focused on how these affective attachments serve the demands of labor in late capitalism (Tokumitsu, 2015). The fact that affective labor is framed as a “labor of love” rather than actual “work” (Burke, 2016; England, 2005; Rodriguez, 2014) makes it difficult for workers across occupations to demand better wages, schedules, or benefits. Yet studies of affect and labor would benefit from examining not only the perils but the potentials of work’s “emotional magnets.” As Patrick Sheehan (2019) notes, a true critique of capitalism would imply that we demand “the right to do work we love *and* get paid for it.”

The relationship between affect and labor stands in unresolved tension with projects of struggle against capitalist regimes. If affects at work are not only intrinsic to accumulation of capital but to social life itself, how can we resist their appropriation? Is it possible to de-commodify affect without “falling into a romantic ideal of authenticity”? (Arruzza, 2014). How should anti-capitalist critiques of labor advance without reversing to a separate spheres logic by which constructs such as “home” or “family” are idealized in opposition to “work”?

Feminist scholars argue that labor politics should revolve around overcoming capitalism’s “rapacious subjugation of reproduction to production” (Fraser, 2016, p. 117). In other words, feminist critique insists on preserving “a reproductive sphere of practice separate from a sphere of properly capitalist production” (Weeks, 2007 p. 248).

¹⁰ These claims are specific to the U.S. culture and its well-documented tradition of a work ethic in which individual commitment to work signals honor and moral worth (Pugh, 2015; Sherman, 2017), in addition to an “American obsession with self-reliance” (Tolentino, 2017).

¹¹ This is particularly the case for middle-class workers, as well as women and other people previously excluded from the rewards afforded by paid work to white men in a Fordist regime (Pugh, 2015).

Highlighting that capitalism has always benefitted from unpaid labor (mostly done by women) feminists argue for a more radical reorganization of both production and reproduction (Oksala, 2016) —for instance, by creating a welfare model of “universal caregivers” (Fraser, 2013), demanding wages for housework (a famous campaign pursued by Italian feminists in the 1970s) or a basic universal income (Weeks, 2011).

Scholars of emotional and intimate labor tend to advocate for restructuring labor conditions and practices, which involves the great challenge of imagining new forms of worker organization and mobilization that respond to the changing nature of work in late capitalism (see Cobble, 2010). Second, they draw attention to micro-level forms of resistance embedded in everyday processes and interactions between workers, managers, and customers in service occupations. Workers respond to situations according to different “feeling rules,” not only organizational but also professional and social (Bolton and Boyd, 2003); they may likewise choose to withhold emotional labor (Sherman, 2007). Specific strategies and cultures of resistance emerge in specific service settings (Macdonald and Sirianni, 1996; see also Kang, 2003).

Finally, one of Hardt and Negri’s most influential claims is that affective labor is directly productive of capital and fundamental for processes of accumulation, yet also productive of social relations potentially *autonomous* of capital. Echoing Foucault, they call this a form of biopower: Affective labor generates social cooperation that overflows the boundaries of capitalist relations because it is created in encounters among workers without being directed from above, “even in some of the most constrained and exploited circumstances” (2011, p. 140). Although we cannot take for granted that social cooperation will arise among workers in precarious settings (Dowling, 2007; Federici, 2011), affective labor might infuse social movements that redirect the production of affect toward progressive goals (Gregg, 2017; Thomas and Correa, 2016). Labor’s instability could thus offer the potential for new kinds of politics (Gill and Pratt, 2008).

Within these discussions, the idea of a “post-work society” emerges as one that questions “the necessity and centrality of work to our lives” (Tokumitsu, 2015, p. 148). As Weeks (2007) points out, the fact that the subjectivities shaped at work “inhabit all the spaces and times of nonwork and vice-versa” does not mean that work and life are indistinguishable (p. 246). This demarcation cannot be pre-given but, rather, it forms the substance of a political debate—which, Weeks argues, should be based on potential and imagined subjectivities rather than claims about essential versus estranged “selves.”

The struggle to formulate a cohesive “affective labor politics” (Gregg, 2011) exposes an ongoing quest for developing new vocabularies that capture the shifting intertwinements of public and private, emotions and labor, life and work. These ambivalences that infuse affective labor are simultaneously new and old, as they constitute the relation between work and capital in general (Dowling, Nunez and Trott, 2007; Read, 2017). The challenge for affect and work studies is to incorporate these contradictions systematically without losing a critical perspective on the unequal relations that infuse this arena of social life.

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