

## Reviews

### *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*

by Maurizio Lazzarato

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By Lukas Slothuus

In *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, Maurizio Lazzarato reevaluates contemporary critical theory's analysis of revolution and capitalism. He wants to answer Lenin's perennial question of "what is to be done?" and problematise the process by which revolution happens: "revolutionary possibility can always be identified by the impossibility it makes real" (2014: 20). Today, after 1968 overturned the party and the unions are "completely integrated into capitalist logic" (2014: 22), Lazzarato argues that contemporary critical theory is outdated and does not adequately consider the production of subjectivity, especially through machinic enslavement, as the primary driving force of neoliberalism. He revives Félix Guattari's argument that the crisis beginning in the early 1970s, subsequently leading to the advent of neoliberalism, was a crisis of subjectivity. Hence, it is a crisis detached from a social reality of commodities; an abstract crisis that subsequently lead the way for the logic of neoliberalism to permeate all aspects of life. Lazzarato seeks to apply this insight to the current crisis and thus calls for a fundamental restructuring of critical theories of capitalism.

Based on Guattari's untranslated 1984 seminar *Crise de production de subjectivité*, Lazzarato seeks to elevate one component of Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the production of subjectivity, namely 'machinic enslavement', to a level equal, or even prior, to their concept of 'social subjection' that informs contemporary theorists from Badiou and Rancière to Žižek and Butler. By utilising the critiques of structuralism advanced by Deleuze, Guattari, and Foucault, Lazzarato wants to politicise the production of subjectivity in general and machinic enslavement in particular and eventually advance these as the defining enabler of neoliberal capitalism. Written before but published after his Anglophone debut *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition* (2013), *Signs and Machines* lays the groundwork for the theoretical notion of the indebted man who is the outcome of the machinic enslavement advanced in this work. To readers unfamiliar with Lazzarato's work, reading *Signs and Machines* neatly introduces his thought and argument. To fully appreciate the nuances of *The Making of the Indebted Man*, *Signs and Machines* thus functions as a necessary

framework within which to situate the debtor/creditor relationship.

Lazzarato's starting point is his claim that political economy is identical with subjective economy (2014: 8). He locates the weakness of capitalism in the production of subjectivity, a task which neoliberalism cannot adequately perform: contemporary subjectivities are residues from early capitalist stages (religion, class, categories of sexuality, gender binaries). Today, the production of subjectivities takes place primarily through machinic enslavement, most apparent in the phenomenon of the indebted man and entrepreneurial subjectivation - the process by which every individual is turned into an enterprise (immortalised by Jay Z in Kanye West's 'Diamonds From Sierra Leone (Remix)': "I'm not a business man / I'm a business, man"); complete with internalised risk-taking previously done by the state apparatus, as well as immiseration: unemployment, precariousness, instability, and mass clinical depression.

This "entrepreneur of the self" is the "last avatar of individualism" (2014: 24), above all structured by the debt condition which shapes social relations under neoliberalism by means of indebting the individual not to God but to money with all the guilt and misery that follows. The "despotic superego" is at work (2014: 53) in relocating the blame from corporations to the individual. Deleuze delineated the shift from factory to corporation and the accompanying shift in subjectivity (1992), and Lazzarato extrapolates from this to suggest that capitalism is developing certain new tensions which it can subsequently exploit. Thus, after Foucault's society of discipline and Deleuze's society of control, Lazzarato proposes a society of enslavement whereby organs, faculties, and individuals are controlled by a collective assemblage.

The immiseration of the worker is nothing new, but Lazzarato's political application of Guattari's theoretical framework allows for an understanding of contemporary capitalism's driving forces; above all machinic enslavement. Machinic enslavement refers to the governing of variables by a technological assemblage to ensure the equilibrium of the whole, in which the individual submits as a gear or cog in the financial system. As constant capital replaces variable capital, society becomes machinic: "capitalism is essentially a series of machinisms" (2014: 34). It is based on the notion of asignifying semiotics, which Lazzarato argues is the defining feature of neoliberalism, and spends a significant proportion of the book attempting to explicate (2014: 80-94). Key examples of asignifying semiotics are currencies, stock listings, computer languages (2014: 80) and these, together with machinic enslavement, prevent the kinds of political ruptures that could overcome capitalism.

The work expands Guattari's influence by tracing a path to Foucault

and subsequently developing a political theory which incorporates both. In particular, this prompts Lazzarato to take issue with Rancière's outdated position on political action. In the illuminating and original final chapter of the work, *Enunciation and Politics*, Lazzarato builds a case in support of Foucault's concept of transvaluation over Rancière's Platonic philosophy of argumentation and interlocution to reach a society of equality. In the chapter *Conflict and Sign Systems*, Lazzarato establishes an analysis of the semiotic regime that governs the media apparatus, and consequently politics. Partly a critique of the Habermasian communicative action ideal, it sets the scene for the rebuttal of Rancière.

In Rancière's universe, the 2005 Paris riots were not political because the suburban youth did not adhere to the Agoran ideal of performative speech, a clearly problematic position shared in part with Žižek. In Lazzarato's view, the Platonic model was beneficial in the 20th century but is inapplicable to the political reality of today: "The struggle for "an other life" and "an other world," the fight for political transformation and the transformation of the self", he says, "must go beyond both political representation and linguistic representation" (2014: 225). For Rancière, equality is necessary and sufficient for an emancipated society whereas for Foucault, equality is a necessary but insufficient criterion. Lazzarato thus critiques the lopsided focus on equality, which in liberal theory has witnessed a resurgence with Piketty, and argues that capitalism will not break through social democratic demands.

Hence, the problem with Rancière, and the Left more generally (2014: 239), is their insistence on trade unionist, republican-type social democracy as a solution to the problems of capitalism, when such a model represents the neater class structure of the 20th century Global North but not the current one. Instead, due to the prevalence of immaterial labour and the debt condition, old structures of democratic socialism are bound to fail, and a new politics must be imagined. Thus, it might not come as a surprise to learn that Lazzarato supports insurgent tactics: "we must pass through points of nonsense, through the asignifying and non-discursive which in politics manifest themselves in the strike, revolt, or riot" (2014: 223). Asignifying semiotics, the non-discursive and the enunciated provide an avenue for creating the ruptures he seeks. The signifying and discursive are obstacles to a revolutionary rupture, and therefore must be eliminated.

A major issue for Lazzarato is the continued reliance by critical theories on analytic philosophy, structuralism, Lacanianism, and "a certain type of Marxism" (2014: 224), all of which depend on linguistics and traditional semiotics. This hinders the possibility of revolutionary change because "only a rupture with the mode of subjectivation" can establish "new forms of life" (2014: 223), and subjectivation is established and sustained by

these linguistic paradigms. Furthermore, Lazzarato's problem with contemporary critical theories on a more practical level is that they play a central role in preventing those ruptures from occurring. Here, he turns to an analysis of Foucault, nonetheless still informed by Guattari, and uses the example of the intermittent workers' struggle in France in 2005. The intermittent workers momentarily created a rupture in the system of machinic enslavement that keeps them under control. By challenging the monopoly on problematization and delineation of the "horizon of interpretation" (2014: 144) held by the media assemblage, and thus the semiotic regime that governs individuals' lives, they threatened the semiotic regime. Moreover, Lazzarato uses this example to criticise the French Left's approach to the working class. By "defining a framework that sets the limits of the possible" (2014: 144), the Left invariably prevents revolution, and thus aids in programming the system, instead of exploring the possibility of the impossible. Progressive slogans today "do not open up onto new worlds" and hence do not create subjectivation processes. Explained in the words of Deleuze, "there is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons" (1992: 4), and Lazzarato initiates a crucial discussion of the modes of political action available to direct this struggle.

The work is heavily influenced by Deleuze and Guattari in advancing a semiotic-political analysis of capitalism. Lazzarato invokes their distinction between being and becoming to explain the distinction between subjectivation and enslavement. Subjectivation refers to the *state of being* a certain collection of identities whereas enslavement refers to the immanent *process of becoming* a certain extra-individual entity that dismantles identities (a point oft forgotten in critical theories, according to Lazzarato). The strength of capitalism lies precisely in this dichotomous harmony between the individual and extra-individual of social subjection and machinic enslavement, respectively. However, a major shortcoming of the work is its uneasy oscillation between high theoretical commentary on Deleuze and Guattari's ontology and the practical political philosophy that Lazzarato advances. As such, the book's longest chapter, Mixed Semiotics, could reasonably be omitted without weakening the political argument.

At its best, the book is clear, hard-hitting and original but occasionally descends into postmodern ramble. In addition, the copy-editing is sloppy: there is no distinction between single and double quotations to distinguish semantic emphasis from quoting other works. Coupled with selective referencing, this blurs the line between especially Lazzarato's and Guattari's contributions. Unless this is a deliberate stylistic-theoretical decision (which would need to be explicitly justified), it makes the work less enjoyable and more difficult to read closely, especially if Lazzarato is to be established as a theorist in his own right rather than a Guattari scholar. Nevertheless,

Lazzarato's writing style on the whole lends itself well to the complex arguments he is setting forth and the book is a welcome contribution to a reevaluation of contemporary critical theory. The translation of continental European works of theory is important in fostering dialogue between various approaches to the political and with the publication of *Signs and Machines*, Semiotext(e)'s Foreign Agents series continues to underline its significant contribution to heterodox social and political theory.

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