

**Teresa Świąćkowska**

## **WHAT IS "COGNITIVE CAPITALISM" AND WHAT IS IT FOR?**

The term "cognitive capitalism" has been proposed as a critical alternative to overenthusiastic conceptions of the information society, the new economy, or an economy based on knowledge and information. Theorists using this term have paid more attention to work relations, exploitation, and distribution of surplus value. Those coming from the tradition of Antonio Negri have also been looking for a new revolutionary subject - not the industrial worker any more but the information worker or "cognitive worker."

The question of the revolutionary subject has often been closely connected to the question of a "tendency." Marx claimed that the proletariat was the class with the potential to abolish all classes. We know that at the time when Marx made this claim the proletariat in Europe was a minority. In fact, other 19th century revolutionaries, like the Russian Narodniki, rejected Marx's claim and instead placed peasants in the center of revolutionary theory. Marxists could argue, however, that the proletariat expressed a tendency for two reasons: first, it was sure to become a majority in the future; and second, it expressed the characteristics of the new dominant mode of social organization - capitalism - and therefore moved into the centre of social conflict, even though it was still a minority.

The problem of the relative importance of "cognitive workers" or "information workers" in the present or in the future might be easier to tackle if it was quite clear who these workers actually are. Unfortunately, the concept has been used in a rather fuzzy way. Sometimes it refers to scientists, journalists, teachers, artists and maybe engineers, sometimes also to librarians or call-centre agents, sometimes to everyone working in what the economic statistics call "services." All of these notions are problematic. Academic professions have already existed long before anyone started talking about "cognitive capitalism." Of course, one might argue that with the expansion of higher education they have become more significant for capitalism. On closer observation, however, it would turn out that many higher education graduates end up working in places like call-centres where work is hardly more "cognitive" than in a factory. On the other hand, the statistical expansion of "services" is often explained not by the disappearance of industrial production but by statistical effects: the organizational break-up of the big factories of the mid-20th century has led to situations where fork-lift drivers now work for transport companies, canteen workers for catering companies, and assembly-line workers for temporary work agencies. Thirty years ago they all would simply have worked for the company owning the factory. Thirty years ago the statistics would have counted them as industrial workers, now they count as service workers, although materially their work has not changed. But even according to the official statistics, we only need to look beyond Europe and North America to find that worldwide the total number of industrial workers as well as the share of industrial production have been increasing. And even in the world's "North" the trend is not quite clear: industrial production is still fundamental for countries such as Germany, Japan or Poland. In Poland over 28 percent of all the employed persons work in the industrial sector, again not counting the hundreds of thousands of - usually young - workers from temporary work agencies standing at Polish assembly lines.

More than anything, the concepts of "new economy," "information society" or "cognitive capitalism" have been dominating public discourse, while simultaneously industrial work has disappeared from public imagination. In 1997, two French sociologists Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux asked their students about the number of industrial workers in France. After a long silence these third-year sociology students first said 200,000 and then after some discussion arrived at 1.5 million. In reality there were 6.5 million industry workers. This anecdote illustrates the phenomenon of understating the number of workers. According to Beaud and Pialoux, this phenomenon is closely connected to the defeat of worldwide movements of industrial workers in the 1960s and 1970s (reaching into the 1980s in the case of Poland). The break-up and segmentation of the big factory, which was the power base of the industrial workers, has been complemented by a discursive turn which has made industrial work and industrial workers invisible, although they continue to be central for the reproduction of capitalism. Instead, the discursive sphere has been filled by talk about the information and knowledge economy.

It is certainly attractive for academics and artists to identify with a future "tendency" of capitalism. Not only can we feel important for the development and reproduction of our contemporary society, but also this view puts us in the driver's seat of any future social change.

If something actually has changed, what if information technology does play a more important role than in earlier times? What does this mean for those who work neither in manufacturing, nor in modern service factories?

Donna Haraway characterizes the existing techno-economic system as an "informatics of domination" which causes massive intensification of insecurity, cultural impoverishment and the breakdown of subsistence networks for the most vulnerable, while people like ourselves - artists or academics - find themselves rather on the dominating side of the hierarchies created by this system. From this point, we can start a discussion on the artist's place, role and new challenges in current capitalist societies, regardless of the confusing definitions and conceptions which have been introduced in the last three decades.