



COGNITIVE BIO-CAPITALISM, SOCIAL (RE)PRODUCTION AND THE PRECARIETY TRAP: WHY NOT BASIC INCOME?

ANDREA FUMAGALLI
afuma@eco.unipv.it
University of Pavia

CRISTINA MORINI
Cristina.morini@gmail.com
Independent and free researcher

ABSTRACT. Nowadays, there is a link between the theoretical framework which defines the current economic and organizational paradigm (we call it "cognitive-biocapitalism") and the issue of "social (re)production". This latter was already analyzed and investigated by the materialist feminism of the Seventies, but it needs to be updated. The link we intend to shed light on rests upon the fact that contemporary social reproduction takes the form of productive valorization, and it should therefore be analyzed not only from an economic point of view, but also from a sociological and psychological one. In fact, social reproduction is nothing else than the form assumed by contemporary production as a whole, in a metropolitan context where the city is the new factory and in which precarity becomes the main organizational form of the labor market, and human faculties as well as life time are ceaselessly commodified. This paper aims at analyzing the link between "productive" social reproduction (better said: "social (re)production") and the central role played by precarity as a generalized, structural and living condition. The rising of a "precarity trap" is the way through which social reproduction is valorized, and we argue that basic income could be the answer to the multifarious social problematics it raises.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, starting from our previous studies¹, our aim is to analyze the characteristics of cognitive-biocapitalism (para. 2) in order to focus on two aspects which are strictly correlated: the increasingly central role played by social (re)production (para. 3), and the precarity trap (para. 4). The first issue (together with financialization) has become paradigmatic of the new type of labour organization in the present accumulation and valorization paradigm. This latter deeply affects different activities, which in turn are connected to the process of commodification of arts, culture and life. The second fundamental aspect concerns the typical form of labour relations which, in a time of crisis, becomes a sort of social and disciplinary instrument, eventually bound to transform itself into a trap. We conclude by arguing that the introduction of a basic income could be a useful tool (certainly amongst others) to counterbalance the precarity trap and the exploitation of contemporary social (re)production. As such, from a political perspective basic income is strongly opposed by the present hierarchical structure of power (para. 5).

2. Characteristics of cognitive biocapitalism

In cognitive biocapitalism, finance, knowledge, and relations are the driving force of accumulation. Finance is the pulsating heart; knowledge is the brain; relational activities are the nervous system. Cognitive biocapitalism is a single body, within which the "real" sphere cannot be separated from the financial one, nor

¹ See A.Fumagalli (2007), C. Morini (2010), A.Fumagalli, C. Morini (2010), A.Fumagalli, C.Morini (2012)

can the productive sphere be separated from the unproductive, or labor time from life time, or production from reproduction and consumption...

We can say that in cognitive biocapitalism, financial markets directly influence and condition the process of accumulation and valorization.²

Financial markets thus exercise biopower (Lucarelli 2010: 119–138). Hence, in cognitive biocapitalism, we observe the “becoming-rent” of profit.³ Rent is the main tool for capturing both surplus value and the de-socialization/privatization of what is common to all. The meaning and key role of this becoming-rent of profit can be appreciated at two levels. On the one hand, this process is evident at the level of the social organization of production and of the distribution of income: the criteria underlying the traditional distinction between profit and rent become less and less pertinent. The confusion affecting the frontiers between rent and profit finds one of its expressions in the way in which financial power remodels the very criteria of corporate governance with the sole aim of creating value for the shareholder. The new governance of contemporary enterprises is increasingly grounded on a type of management whose fundamental performance is exercising financial and speculative functions while delegating to employed workers the real functions of the organization of production. On the other hand, the competitiveness of a company is largely dependent on external ones rather than on internal ones. This means that, in order to be competitive, corporation must gain the ability to capture productive surpluses which result from a territory’s cognitive resources.

Capital, then, freely benefits from the collective knowledge of society, as if it were a gift of nature. In other words, the valorization process takes place not only inside the production cycle, but depends more and more on the capacity of expropriation of the external social cooperation, namely on a rent. It is from this perspective that we use the expression: “becoming-rent of profit”. It indicates the actual form of privatizing what is *common*⁴, gaining income from the creation of a purely artificial scarcity of resources. It is the *common* that links together, in a single logic, the rent stemming from real estate speculation and the rent created by financial markets—which, since the beginning of the 1980s, has played a major role in the fiscal crisis and the dismantling of welfare state institutions due to privatization of currency and public debt. Thus, the becoming-rent of profit derives from the attempt to privatize knowledge and life (bios). This is achieved through a politics promoting the reinforcement of intellectual property rights so that the cost of numerous commodities is kept artificially high, although their reproduction costs are extremely low or even close to zero.

That is the consequence of the fact that value production is no longer solely founded on material production. Productive activities are increasingly based on immaterial elements, that is to say, on intangible raw materials, which are very difficult to measure and quantify, and that emerge directly from the utilization of the relational, sentimental, and cerebral faculties of human beings. The process of valorization loses, in this way, the measuring unit which was usually connected to material production. With the advent of cognitive biocapitalism, valorization tends to attach itself to different forms of labor, which go beyond official labor time, and increasingly overlap one’s whole lifetime. Today, the value of labor at the basis of biocapitalistic accumulation is also the value of knowledge, of affects, and of relationships; it is the value of the imaginary and the symbolic.

Even the division of labor takes on cognitive characteristics and is therefore based on the differential access and use of multifarious forms of knowledge. Knowledge can be divided into four levels: information, codified knowledge, tacit knowledge, and culture (or systemic knowledge). All of these are characterized by unilateral relations of dependence. Information is the basic level of knowledge that is increasingly incorporated into machine elements. Codified knowledge is a specialized knowledge (know-how) that derives from tacit knowledge but which is transmitted through standardized procedures, with machines as intermediaries, where the bearer can be substituted at any moment, having no contractual power whatsoever. Tacit knowledge (know-that) can be based on personal learning processes or from specific investments in research and development (R&D), due to intellectual property rights; furthermore, at least until the codification process occurs, it can be transmitted only through a human being, thus possibly generating forms of enclosures. Those who possess tacit knowledge, which is relevant for the productive process, have therefore a higher contractual power, and define the hierarchical structure of labor and production.

² See Fumagalli and Mezzadra (2010: 237–239). For an in-depth analysis of the evolution of financial markets and the role of the monetary and credit markets, see Fumagalli (2007: chapter 1).

³ See Negri and Vercellone (2007); Vercellone (2010). See also Marazzi (2010), especially chapter 3.

⁴ For a discussion of the concept of the *common*, see Hardt and Negri (2009).

However, no matter how relevant it can be, tacit knowledge is bound to transform itself – sooner or later – into codified knowledge, and thus to lose value. Culture can be defined as the set of knowledge that allows an individual to perform the intellectual function, that is to say, the ability to act critically and creatively, namely in a way which is not immediately subsumed to the logic of biocapitalist valorization. As a consequence, culture is dangerous for the reproducibility of the socioeconomic system and also constitutes a surplus that exceeds control.

In cognitive biocapitalism, the condition of the labor force goes hand in hand with mobility and the predominance of individual contracting/bargaining (precarity). The reason for this is that nomadic individualities are put to work, and the primacy of private rights over workers' rights brings about a transformation of the contribution of individualities—especially if characterized by cognitive, relational, and affective activities—into contractual individualism. Labor relations based on precarious conditions, that is to say, the temporal limit and spatial mobility of labor, represent the basic paradigm within which the relationship between capital and labor takes place. Thus, precarity becomes a structural, existential, and generalized condition. Moreover, an essential character of cognitive biocapitalism is the dematerialization of fixed capital, and the transfer of its productive and organizational functions to the living body of the workforce.

This process acts as the ground upon which one of the new capitalist paradoxes is rooted: the contradiction between the increased centrality of cognitive labor as a lever for the production of wealth and, at the same time, the devaluation of that labor as far as salary and professional status are concerned. This paradox is inherent in Marazzi's definition of the "anthropogenic" character of contemporary capitalistic production⁵. In cognitive biocapitalism, living beings contain within themselves the functions of both fixed and variable capital, that is, of both the material and machine-like forms of labor belonging to the past and the current form of living labor: bios. That is particularly true in those industries related to wealth, learning, body care and people care (children and the elderly) services. It is not by chance that today, notwithstanding the crisis, these industries are the only ones which are able to grow.

Nowadays the separation between abstract labor and concrete labor is not as clear as it was in industrial-Fordist capitalism. First, what Marx used to call concrete labor, or labor producing use value, can today be renamed *creative labor*.⁶ This term allows us to better understand the cerebral contribution which is inherent in such activity, while the term *concrete labor*, although conceptually synonymical, refers more to the realm of *making* than to that of *thinking*, with a closer allusion to craftsmanship proper (Fumagalli 2013).

In cognitive biocapitalism, life itself is put to work and produces value. Thus, the labor theory of value should be renamed as a life theory of value (Fumagalli - Morini 2009). This redefinition occurs through the valorization of individuals' differences. These differences, in their uniqueness, make possible the relational activities that are the basis of the social cooperation producing the "general intellect"⁷. In addition to general differences based on race, gender, and so on, we also need to consider difference *tout court*, which is valorized without any relation to the anthropological characteristics that define it. What today is starting to be

⁵ See Marazzi (2000: 107–126). In particular p. 109, where we find the definition of the anthropogenetic model of production: "A model of production of man by means of man, in which the possibility of cumulative and endogenous growth is due, above all, to the development of the education sector (investment in human capital), the health sector (demographic evolution, biotechnologies) and the cultural sector (innovation, communication, creativity)".

⁶ Holloway (2006) writes: "The center of class struggle is located here: it is a struggle between creative action and abstract labor. In the past, we always thought of class struggle as a struggle between labor and capital, thus understanding labor as abstract, wage-earning labor. As a consequence, the working class was defined as the class of wage-earners. This is wrong. Wage-earning labor and capital are two theses mutually completing, the former being a stage of the latter. Doubtlessly, there is a conflict between wage-earning labor and capital, but it is rather superficial: a conflict on salary levels, on work conditions, on the length of the work day. All these things are important, but they presuppose the existence of capital. The real threat to capital does not come from abstract labor, but from useful labor or creative action, because it is the latter that is radically opposed to capital, that is, to its own abstraction. Creative action says 'No, we will not let capital control us; we need to do what we think is necessary or desirable.'" (Holloway 2006).

⁷ According to Marx (K. Marx, *Grundrisse*, London: Penguin Books, 1973), the general intellect – i.e. knowledge as the main productive force – fully coincides with fixed capital – i.e. the 'scientific power' objectified in the system of machinery. In cognitive bio-capitalism, as Virno notes, things are different: "conceptual and logical schemas play a decisive role and cannot be reduced to fixed capital in so far as they are inseparable from the interaction of a plurality of living subjects. The 'general intellect' includes formal and informal knowledge, imagination, ethical tendencies, mentalities and 'language games'" (see P. Virno, "General Intellect", <http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpvirno10.htm>, translated by P. Virno, "General Intellect", In U.Fadini, A. Zanini, eds, *Lessico postfordista*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2001). From this point of view, the General Intellect is the core of the anthropogenetic model of production.

segmented and divided are the cerebral differences, that is to say, individualities. Spatial and biological differences, gender and race in particular, can at most be instruments for the immediate disciplining of the social body. The worrisome emerging tendency, however, is represented by the constitution of a human subjectivity characterized by the contradictory conflict between creative actions and cerebral standardization. In other words, the risk is the creation of a sort of bionic being, capable of managing the anthropogenic process of production. These elements suggest a world where individuality is erased but individualism is exalted. Cognitive biocapitalism is bioeconomic production: it is bioeconomy.

Since life itself turns into value, differences become value (Morini 2010). The traditional binary dichotomies inherited from industrial-Fordist capitalism are no longer topical. We are witnessing the overcoming of the separation between life time and labor time. As soon as labor activities are inscribed in the existential faculties of individuals, it becomes impossible to define a temporal barrier between labor and non-labor time. Even if this distinction can nominally continue to exist on a formal, juridical level, the difference between life, labor, and work no longer exists. This is due also to new language- and communication-technologies: life appears to be completely subsumed under work and labor.

Moreover, we are witnessing the overcoming of the separation between work-place and life-space. The multiple forms of bio-labor refer to nomadic working activities, where mobility is a primary requisite. This phenomenon leads to the definition of non-places of labor, as opposed to classic forms of domestication. In this case, indeed, we should not talk about a convergence of labor-place and life-space but, rather, about the expropriation of the workplace and of all possible consequences that this process might have on work identity. We are witnessing the overcoming of the separation between production and reproduction⁸. This is the first consequence of life becoming work. When we talk about life, we do not only mean it as directly oriented towards productive activities, but also to the social reproduction of life itself, a clear example of which is the almost exclusively female character of care-taking work. Having said this, we can state that the erasure of this distinction implies the partial overcoming of specific gender differences and poses the issue of difference *tout court* (Morini 2010). In conclusion, we are witnessing the overcoming of the separation between production, circulation, and consumption. The act of consumption is, at the same time, a participation to public opinion, an act of communication, and self-marketing. In this sense, consumption allows the further valorization of commodities.

It follows that the income distributive rules need to be revised. In cognitive biocapitalism, basic income is the compensation for work and active life absorbed in the valorization process, just as wages are the remuneration of labor. The idea of basic income is based on the concept of compensation or remuneration and not of support or assistance (subsidies, transfer payments, etc.). The logic that justifies its existence is then completely opposed to the doxastic interpretation of the current situation, that is, to measures that would guarantee a continuity of revenue in a temporary, conditioned way.⁹ In the present context of cognitive biocapitalism, wealth is divided between those whose life becomes value (all residents, regardless of citizenship, etc.), on the one hand, and all those (much fewer) who create value from the private appropriation of the *common* or who profit from productive and service-related activities. As a consequence, basic income is, by definition, unconditioned and perpetual (for the duration of one's life). In other words, basic income is nothing other, today, than the equivalent of salary in the Fordist era (Fumagalli 2009).

It follows that in cognitive biocapitalism, the most adequate structure of welfare is the *commonfare*, or welfare of the common (Fumagalli 2007, 2008). *Commonfare* is based on two important concepts: on the one hand, we have the guarantee of continuity of unconditioned income, regardless of labour conditions and professional, social, and citizenship status. This concept is complementary to any other form of direct income, as compensation for the productive social cooperation that forms the basis of value creation, currently expropriated for private rent and profit. On the other hand, we have access to the common and to common goods - material and immaterial goods that allows full participation in social life by way of the free fruition of common natural/environmental goods (water, air, the environment) and immaterial common goods (knowledge, mobility, socialization, currency, primary social services).

3. Social (re)production

⁸ See para. 3.

⁹ An example of such measures is the French *Revenu minimum d'activité* (RMA) – and analogous apparatuses – which simply function as social shock absorbers and promote the return to work.

The concept of social reproduction is paradigmatic of cognitive bio-capitalism. It includes the main novelties of the new accumulation and valorization paradigm, by considering a wide range of activities, from care, health, education to knowledge and culture diffusion. And, as already mentioned, all these activities have become productive. Social (re)production is at the same time a collective and individual activity, since it simultaneously deals with individual learning and social relations.

It is not by chance that in the Fordist paradigm reproduction has been neglected and construed solely as the antithesis of "productive" labor. Productive labor occurs outside, on the market, in the public space of a city, in the factory; reproductive labor is developed inside, within a room, away from the streets: it is therefore the shadow of productive labor, the realm of which production represents the content. Marxist feminism in the 1970's and 1980's had already provided explanations about the origin of this shadiness. Alisa del Re and Maria Rosa Dalla Costa, Lucia Chisté, Silvia Federici et al¹⁰, around that time, denounced the existence of this unbalanced binomial, originating in the sexual division of labor and in the sexual contract which establishes a crystallized hierarchy, that is, the fact that only productive labor can grant the right to citizenship.

This "productive labor" finds its support in a broadly multidisciplinary ideological construction, which cuts across classes and is shared by both religious and lay ethics. From the protestant-Calvinist ethics the notion was transposed to political economy, to finally become common sense, a norm of behavior, a pivotal piece of our society's imaginary. Since Adam Smith¹¹, "external" labor, directed to the "market", together with capital (as fruit of the labor activity), has been considered the productive factor par excellence. All the rest of labor becomes eclipsed, as it does not generate value - one claims - and therefore has no value. We are well aware of that since, in summary, according to Karl Marx's theory of value, productive labor is that which lends its labor to the production of commodities and tangible merchandise which have an exchange value¹². Conversely, non-productive labor, since it is not attached or incorporated into any physical object, adds no value to anything: it is the labor of domestic workers, and that is the women's reproductive labor.

But even Marx realized that the desire for surplus at the basis of the capitalist process keeps in itself a possibility of crisis and dissolution. This is so because the superficial balance of the process of valorization, the triumph of the metamorphosis of commodities is constructed upon the eternal suppression of human needs and on a contradiction which is continuously dissimulated but remains fundamental: "once the weave that ties together commodities and money is temporarily loosened, the result is a rupture from which the fundamental contradictions of capitalist life emerge"¹³. As Georges Bataille claimed¹⁴, the capitalist accumulation is based on portions of unfulfilled desire, in other words, on the rupture of the social ties which must be torn apart to become linked to the intrinsic contradictions of the goods.

The enigma of reproduction lies in its being "a hidden phase of the capitalist accumulation", but also in the fact that it is always inseparably linked to the cycles of the exchange process which bind goods and money, revealing the deep and inescapable truth of the social reproduction process.

Today we can say that social (re)production becomes the visible core of the present "primitive accumulation" as a condition for the diffusion of cognitive bio-capitalism¹⁵.

¹⁰ M.R.Dalla Costa, S. James, 1972; L. Chisté, A.Del Re, E. Forti, 1979; S. Federici, 1980; Leopoldina Fortunati, 1981.

¹¹ A. Smith, 2008

¹² K. Marx, 1969

¹³ G. Caffentzis, 1996, p. 183.

¹⁴ G. Bataille, 2003.

¹⁵ We prefer the term "primitive accumulation", instead of "original accumulation" (even if these terms are often considered synonymous) because the process of valorizing social (re)production is a sort of primitive expropriation, as intended by Marx. He writes: "The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of black-skins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation." (see K. Marx. Capital, vol. 1, "Chapter XXXI, Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist," in Marx/Engels Collected Works, vol. 35 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2005), 738. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch31.htm>). The valorization of social (re)production can nowadays be seen as the further step of this "primitive accumulation", a step which is adequate to cognitive-biocapitalism. On this topics, see also S.Mezzadra, "Attualità della preistoria. Per una rilettura del capitolo 24 del primo libro del Capitale, «La cosiddetta accumulazione originaria»", <http://www.uninomade.org/per-una-rilettura-del-capitolo-24-del-capitale/> and D. Harvey, The new imperialism Oxford University Press, 2005.

It's not surprising, in fact, that the centrality of social reproduction has been made evident by Michel Foucault when he cast light on capitalism as a system that develops life, i.e., biopower: "This biopower has, without any doubt, been one of the indispensable factors in the development of capitalism, which could only be consolidated through the controlled introduction of the bodies in the production apparatus, thanks to an adaptation of the phenomena of populations to the economic processes. But it has asked more than that: it demanded the promotion of the growth of both, their reinforcement and their utility and ductility. It also demanded the introduction of methods of power susceptible to greater forces, attitudes, life in general without turning more difficult their subjection"¹⁶.

The "entry of life into history"¹⁷, which Foucault discusses, helps us in identifying a theory of social reproduction which questions once and for all the alleged subordination of the spheres of life external to the market with regard to the internal ones. From this perspective, the possible links between the theories inherent to relational-cognitive bio-capitalism and the issue of social reproduction must be stressed. It is an interesting, dramatically contemporary and heavily tensed passage, which becomes concrete in the overt becoming of the social aspect of production which must be analyzed resorting not only to economic laws but also to psychoanalysis and current events. In this context Maria Rosa Dalla Costa, Leopoldina Fortunati, Silvia Federici and other feminists¹⁸ who, from the mid-1970's onwards, focused on the issue of labor invisibility – recognizing that the most important source of social surplus is unpaid labor – provide some powerful insights.

Obviously, this vision is confirmed today, in the generalization of the free character of labor made explicit by the generalization of the processes of precarization of labor. Symbolically, those processes transfer the entirety of the current economic process to a sort of "economy of working at home": the comprehensive restructuring of work implies that labor acquires many of the features typical of female work, except that it can now be equally carried out by men and women. This opens up the concrete possibility of being used as a reserve army of labor, more similar to servants than to workers, subjected to paid and unpaid labor time, regardless of the agreed-upon work schedules. This transformation supposes large-scale downgrading of jobs. The domestic work economy means that "the factory, the home and the market are integrated in a completely novel relationship, and that the women's positions are crucial and must be analyzed with regard to the differences between women and with regard to the meaning the relations between men and women take in different contexts"¹⁹.

In a broader sense, taking into account the whole life, we can say that reproduction is a weave, a net formed by cultural factors stemming from the mere act of living. And nowadays those cultural factors take on a special meaning at the level of exchange, contaminating use value. In the process of exchange, use value (that is, the utility a certain product has to an individual), is transformed into exchange value (the value a product has when exchanged in the market). Whereas use value is directly associated to the relation of men with that which they "shall use", the capitalist value of goods is realized in the exchange, that is, in that social process which is at the basis of its production and which allows different types of products of human labor to be commensurable. The crucial issue lies precisely here, in this transition, in the transformation of linguistic-relational products into commodities, in the shifting of relations into commodities. This is where the epochal change of the productive paradigm which we are experiencing lies: what becomes obvious is that the entire economic process nowadays is founded on the "becoming-commodity of the human", confirming the thesis of the "workerist" feminism with regard to the generalization of the production of surplus. And as the becoming-production of reproduction is established, we also need an update of the labor theory of value. It must be stressed that concrete labor (labor qualitatively defined, which produces some sort of use value), which constitutes the sole property of the free worker, becomes so fully embedded in the productive process that it is transformed into surplus. And since the productive process excludes the ownership of the means of production by the capitalist (we, ourselves, are the means of production), we could venture to say that the transformation of the (linguistic-relational) commodities into money takes the shape of income rather than that of profit. And perhaps one should add that if we do not become collectively aware of the amplitude and the seriousness of those processes and devices, capital will end up by actually taking over us completely, by maximizing its interest through the living matter and the ways of living.

Words and messages, just like physical objects, do not exist in nature, but are rather produced by men. The concept that simultaneously permeates all of those elements which seem to be separate ("material

¹⁶ M. Foucault, , 1991, p- 124.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p- 125

¹⁸ M. R. Dalla Costa, 1974; S. Federici, L. Fortunati, 1984.

¹⁹ D. Haraway, 1995, p. 63

production" versus "linguistic or immaterial production"), is the notion of labor. In fact, if material commodities are quite different from linguistic or relational products, the labor from which they result is in essence the same, since the notion of labor refers to men and women, in their complexity and unity, at the same time. If anything, so far, the concept of labor has excluded the so-called reproductive labor. As we have already pointed out, earlier on the scope of industrial capitalism was the production of manufactured commodities, and the type of organization associated with it required the formal marginalization of reproduction. Today, however, this exclusion is all but functional. The scheme has collapsed; nothing remains of the old days. Recalling Rossi Landi: "Man is a working and talking animal who sets himself apart from all others by producing tools and words"²⁰.

4. Precarity trap and the new industrial reserve army

The total amount of employed precarious workers within the labor market in Italy is about 4 million (more than 20% of the total workforce). Those workers are more concentrated in the service sectors. The average remuneration is less than 1,000 euros per month, 25,3% lower than stable workers performing the same working activity. However, if we also consider the existential precarity – related to the opportunities to build a family, to be autonomous, and to plan a life project – that amount reach the astonishing figure of 7 million. This situation is worsened by the difficulty experienced by precarious people in getting a stable job. Of over 100 precarious young people entering the job market, in 2009 only 16 succeeded in becoming permanent workers (10 lower than the previous year)²¹. This situation is more diffused in education, health and care sectors, and in the public administration²².

We face four different situations which correspond to different subjectivities: precarious workers who are not able to reach a stable and certain working activity (*discouraged* inactive but potentially active people); Neet young workers, who are neither unemployed nor discouraged, but constantly live a precarious existence; the certified unemployed workers; traditional employed workers with a stable job but psychologically precarious since they perfectly know that it suffice a downsizing, outsourcing or restructuring process to lose their labour conditions. This fact explains why precarity is today a generalized conditions²³.

It is starting from these premises that we now introduce the concept of *precarity trap*, an expression that can convey different meanings.

One definition of the precarity trap refers to a sort of vicious circle which leads individuals to the impossibility to exit precarious conditions due to the high costs of finding a stable job. Living on the basis of precarious conditions means having to cover significant expenses – which, in economics, are called "transaction costs"²⁴ (time spent applying for benefits, temporary job loss and search for new activities, time and cost of learning new tasks, management of all the other activities, e.g. child care, in the context of a new job). Such transaction costs may very well gobble up one's largest share of income, and this can lead to a sort of precarity trap.

Another broader definition has to do with the fact that living in the precariat means experiencing the full cogency of the risk society at an individual level. From this point of view, the precarity trap is the result of the lack of a comprehensive social security policy – most often this issue is seen as a merely conjunctural phenomenon. In some recent studies²⁵, starting from the observation that precarious labor is more diffused in advanced service and creative industries, it is argued that creative economic policies could be a panacea for the economic downturn and could lead to the overcoming of precarity. Existing policy instruments are mostly uncoordinated but can be divided into four categories: 'education and training'; 'awards and contests'; 'business support'; 'social security policies'. It must be noted that the greatest emphasis is place on the first three categories. Escaping the precarity trap – existence without security as typically experienced by many cultural workers – requires a rehabilitated notion of 'flexicurity' that includes both exceptional, sub-sectoral, and generalist strategies to support cultural workers. Therefore, only a more holistic policy framework – that uses a rights-based perspective and emphasizes social security measures – could be valid.

²⁰ Ferruccio Rossi Landi, *Il linguaggio come lavoro e come mercato*, Bompiani, Milan, 2003, page 63.

²¹ This percentage lowers to less than 10% in the metropolitan areas, as for example in Milan. See A.Fumagalli, *Intelligence Precaria*, 2011, pp. 229-250.

²² These data are extracted by the Annual Report on Labor Market, released by the CNEL: See: http://www.cnel.it/53?shadow_documento=18534

²³ C. Morini, 2012, pp. 175-198

²⁴ G. Standing, 2011

²⁵ See, for instance, C. Murraya, M. Gollmitzer, 2012, pp. 419-438

In these two interpretations, precarity traps can be solved by the opportune implementation of adequate policies. However, according to our analysis, precarity is a structural and generalized phenomenon. It follows that it could be eliminated only if a drastic modification of labor market dynamics occurs. Hence, the precarity trap also possesses a physiological dimension, which is crucial especially in the short term. This dimension is constantly “fueled” by the peculiarities of the existing labor activity, based on the exploitation of life faculties and subjectivities of human beings.

In our opinion the precarity trap is the result of the existence of a new type of the industrial reserve army. The traditional definition of the industrial reserve army is based on the idea that unemployment acts as a pressure towards the employees by reducing their bargaining power. Let us recall Kalecki's famous essay on the political origins of unemployment²⁶, in which the Polish economist argues that in a system based on industrial relations it is quite convenient for the entrepreneurial class to give up to the optimization of profit (which will lead to full employment) to artificially create a pool of unemployed, whose function is to reduce Trade Unions' bargaining power. This assumption makes sense if the distinction between labor and non-labor time (i.e. between employed and unemployed) is clear and precise, as it was during the Fordist period. But today, in the era of bio-cognitive capitalism, this distinction tends to vanish and the modality of labor control will increasingly tend to be based on income blackmailing and on the individualization of working relations. As we have already argued, that is the main reason why the precarious condition is generalized and structural. And it is precisely this precarious condition, individually perceived in a different, distorted way, which nourishes and defines the new industrial reserve army: an industrial reserve army no longer situated outside the labor market, but directly inside it.

It follows that there are good political reasons to keep a certain amount of precarity, despite any public and official declaration, just as in Fordist free market was not “convenient” to reach a full employment situation (partially achieved only with the implementation of public policies). In other words, the precarity trap plays today the same role played in the last century by the unemployment trap. There is, however, a fundamental difference, that makes the current situation even worse. In fact, today, precarity is added to unemployment with an anti-cyclical dynamics. In a recovery stage, as it was the case in first half of the last decade, before the big financial-economic crisis of 2007, unemployment could decrease and be turned into precarity, whilst in recession phase, as is the current one, the opposite occurs: precarious workers are the first to become unemployed, assuming the appearance of discouraged or Neet. In any case, the biopolitical device through which the workforce is subsumed is guaranteed together with the crisis of traditional Trade Unions and the fall of social claims and conflicts.

5. Social (re)production, precarity trap and basic income

One possible tool (surely not the only one) to overcome the precarity trap is the introduction of a basic income. We conceive of basic income as the provision of a certain monetary amount to meet deadlines, to perpetually ensure a decent life, regardless of the working performance. Basic income must have two fundamental characteristics: it must be universal and unconditional, i.e. it must be considered as an inalienable human right. In other words, it should be given to all human beings in a non-discriminatory way (independently from gender, race, religion, income). The mere fact “existing” is enough to be entitled to basic income. Hence, such a measure is not subject to any form of constraint or condition (i.e. it does not require the beneficiary to take particular responsibilities and/or to conform to particular behaviors). The two attributes – universality and unconditionality – clarify many misunderstandings. The concept of income falls exclusively within the sphere of the redistribution, once given the level of total wealth: it is an instrument of welfare. All redistributive measures that refer either to the employment status (unemployment or precarity, which is insufficient to guarantee a minimum income) or to the obligation to make contractual commitments, even if detached from working performance (such as the Rma in France²⁷), are discriminatory and do not conform to the status of “inalienable individual right”.

Basic income is the most suitable distribution (not redistribution) variable of cognitive bio-capitalism. In a context in which life is not only enslaved to labor, but is directly put to work, it becomes clear that basic income is the remuneration for a productive existence. Thus, it is a “primary” income²⁸.

²⁶ M. Kalecki, 1943

²⁷ . Rma stands for Revenue Minimum d'Activité. In France, it designates a form of income granted to those unemployed who participate in a back-to-work scheme. Since 2008, it has substituted the Rmi, Revenue Minimum d'Insertion

²⁸ Primary income is the direct income which derives from income distribution among productive inputs. On the contrary, secondary or indirect income comes out from public intervention in terms of welfare or fiscal policy, after income

It is no coincidence that actual labor time tends to "overflow" the labor contract, thereby eliminating the distinction between labor and non-labor, or between income and wage. Basic income is therefore defined by two components: the first component is purely a wage, calculated on the basis of the life-performance that immediately translates into labor-performance (labor time certificated and remunerated, but also life time oriented toward education, activity reporting, and reproductive activity). The second component (in addition to the first) is a form of income which results from the distribution of social wealth to each individual. This income comes out from social cooperation and territorial productivity. This second component is today entirely expropriated by profits and financial – as well as real estate – rent.

From this point of view, basic income is not only a welfare benefit, a subsistence payment, or a tool against poverty. Of course, it can also be effective reducing poverty, but in the sphere of production basic income is above all the remuneration for a previously performed productive activity, which is currently not certified neither by laws nor by bargaining dynamics. In other words, basic income is *the remuneration for social (re)production*, which is the basis of the general intellect growth.

Basic income, in theory, can function as income stabilization and uncertainty reduction. Furthermore, it can enhance the learning process and ultimately foster capital accumulation, according to the following scheme:

Basic income → social (re)production↑ → general intellect↑ → productivity↑ → accumulation↑

However, almost the entirety of social actors are opposed to the introduction of basic income. Trade unions because they have not yet fully understood the current transformation of labor, as well as the new mode of valorization. Moreover, they fear losing touch with their social basis and, above all, they are still linked to an ethical conception of wage labor (i.e. the so-called work ethic)²⁹. Entrepreneurial associations, assuming a different attitude than the conservative one chosen by most unions, consider the introduction of basic income as potentially dangerous for the maintenance of labor discipline. Indeed, from their point of view, they are right. The introduction of basic income, in fact, can be considered as a potential counter-power that undermines the current system of subordination and blackmailing in which the precarious multitude is constrained³⁰. In fact, to act of ensuring a stable and continuous income regardless of labor activity means the reduction of worker's blackmailing. This blackmailing is imposed by contractual individualism and by the need to work for a living. Basic income can lead to exercise the "right to choose one's own work" (instead of the traditional "right to work", whatever it may be). This is an element that could shake the foundations of hierarchical and social control in cognitive bio-capitalism. At the same time, the partial or total removal of income blackmailing can potentially foster a process of recomposition of the precarious multitude. We say "potentially" because such recomposition is not automatic; rather, it depends on the subjectivity of involved individuals³¹. The consequence of basic income, in any case, would be a lesser degree of blackmailing exposition: workers would be less available to supinely accept negative labor conditions. Secondly – and this is an even more important factor, although most often misunderstood – basic income presupposes that a portion of the social wealth produced by the general intellect and by the structure of cooperation returns to its

distribution has already occurred. It is a second level distribution, defined as redistribution level, to distinguish it from first level distribution or distribution level. See C. Vercellone, 2006.

²⁹ There are numerous pronouncements that are common to several European trade unions, leftist parties and even relevant newspapers. It is enough to analyse the Congress of the ETUC (European Trade Union Confederation), or the French and German trade unions in order to have a confirmation. Even in Italy the situation does not change. The same applies to the area of the radical left, as represented by the Trockist parties, Attac and Le Monde Diplomatique in France, and by the left of CGIL, the Communist Refoundation Party (PRC). and Il Manifesto in Italy. With a few exceptions, however remarkable they may be, even antagonist unions and most antagonist groups oppose the principles of basic income, considering it a reformist tool, unable to undermine the essence of the capitalist exploitation ratio. However, other subjects are in favour of basic income: some groups operating in the Social Centers movement in Italy; some European journals, such as Multitudes in France, and Posse and Infocxa in Italy and, more recently, the UniNomade 2.0 Network (www.uninomade.org). Only recently, for example, the slogans "right to income" or "reclaim the money" have been fully accepted by the EuroMayDay, the most visible demonstration of the precariat in Europe, which takes place every year in Milan on May 1st. In this context, it is of fundamental importance the birth in 2009 of the association called Basic Income Network – Italy (www.bin-italy.org), and of the Saint Precarious icon (see: www.precaria.org), and of the journal Quaderni di San Precario (<http://quaderni.sanprecario.info>).

³⁰ For a deeper analysis, see A.Fumagalli, 2005.

³¹ We agree with Guy Standing's reflections on the risks that the precarious condition can lead to dangerous results, if the individualistic and corporative ideology becomes a majority. Such risks include social dumping and racist political positions. It seems to us that he only antidote is a "politics of paradise"! See. G. Standing, 2011.

"producers". This means a reduction in profit margins which rest on the exploitation of social cooperation and common goods, unless immaterial productivity gains, generated by more stable and satisfying income conditions, are not able to compensate for this reduction.

In cognitive bio-capitalism, the claim for basic income can therefore be considered analogous to the claim for higher wages in the era of industrial-Fordist capitalism. In Fordism, a wage increase or a high wage policy – according to the happy expression coined by Keynes – could have two effects: to undermine the productive system if this increase was not bearable by the existing cost-structure and technological conditions (thus opening up the possibility of going beyond the capitalist system itself); to ensure full employment growth with the consequential increase in revenues and profits. The Fordist social pact was indeed aimed at promoting the second alternative through a disciplinary mechanism and the social control guaranteed by the nation-state.

Unlike a wage increase, however, the introduction of basic income would bear only partially on firms' costs, since it would be covered by local, national or supranational public authorities. In other words, the financing of the basic income depends on the existing tax structure.

In cognitive bio-capitalism, a new social pact could therefore consist of basic income and, thus, be compatible with a tax constraint – as yet to be defined. In other words, basic income does not necessarily result in a change of control over the relations and hierarchies in the labour market³².

But nothing can ensure this compatibility: the potential role of monetary counter-power (i.e. the independence from income blackmailing) and of counter-cultural production (the possibility to choose and not to suffer from negative working conditions, as well as the re-appropriation of part of the social wealth) depends on the perception and the subjectivity that constitute the precarious multitude. Such perception and subjectivity are, by definition, not controllable. From this point of view, basic income can become subversive and affect the exploitation ratio and the production of surplus value in cognitive bio-capitalism.

On this basis, it can now be clear that the introduction of basic income can be a valuable tool to avoid the precarity trap. There are various reasons that lead to this conclusion:

1. The dominant framework for economic policy has always argued that for economic growth to occur an increase in competitiveness was necessary, especially in the context of globalization. To do this, production costs must be reduced while labor flexibility and mobility must be augmented. Only once this effect is achieved (first step), it will be possible to adapt to new labor conditions and social security, improving living conditions and social well-being (second step). It's the same approach which today states that in order to overcome the European debt crisis austerity policies are unavoidable. Only by accepting sacrifices now you can enjoy the benefits in the future. But we know that this second step (the benefits) will never come. Just as austerity policies create economic recession, in the last twenty-five years flexibility policies created precarity, with negative effects with regards to the competitiveness of the economic system as a whole. This is the origin of the precarity trap, and the Italian case (as in other countries, primarily Spain) clearly confirms such an analysis. It is necessary to reverse this policy, by inverting the temporality of the two steps. First, measures to remunerate social (re)production and support social security must be enacted, and only afterwards labor flexibility can be increased. Given the current characters of the precariat (namely the contemporary form of the industrial reserve army within the labor market), the introduction of basic income becomes, among others measures, an appropriate means to promote economic growth as well as social equality, in such a way that an escape from the precarity trap can finally be envisaged.
2. Basic income reduces uncertainty and allows workers to experience a higher degree of freedom in choosing the desired labor. Is it likely that anyone will want to do less fatiguing work and be less considered? Not necessarily. Every job performance has its specificity and its remuneration to make it more or less acceptable, more or less appealing. The guarantee of income, reducing the supply of people willing to accept low-paid, alienating and exhausting jobs, puts enterprises at a crossroads: either they pay more those who perform these fatiguing tasks, or they adopt more complex technologies and organizational solutions instead. There were similar objections at the time of the debates about the reduction of the working day to 8 hours: the result was not only an improvement of labour conditions, but also a relevant growth due to the necessity to modernize production systems.
3. A poverty trap is "any self-reinforcing mechanism which causes poverty to persist"³³. If poverty persists from generation to generation, the trap begins to progressively reinforce itself unless steps are not taken

³² For a more detailed discussion, see thesis n. 9 in "Nothing will ever be the same", in A. Fumagalli, S. Mezzadra, 2010, pp. 254-259. In Italian, see A. Fumagalli, A. Negri, 2008: www.eco.unipv.it

³³ See C. Azariadis, J. Stachurski, 2005, p. 326

to break the vicious circle. In the traditional literature, the poverty trap describes a structural condition from which people cannot rescue themselves despite their best efforts. The poverty trap is different from the “welfare trap³⁴”, or “unemployment trap³⁵”. This latter, in this context and by contrast, refers to the barrier created by social grants that (it is said) ends up representing perverse incentives. One of the most common criticisms to the hypothesis of basic income has to do with the persistence of the poverty trap. The argument runs as follows: the payment of a grant to the unemployed can rationally lead them to prefer to remain unemployed rather than to re-enter the labor market, with a consequent lack of efficiency in the economic system. Therefore, a wide mainstream literature tries to demonstrate how an increase in welfare benefits, especially when unconditional (as the proper definition of basic income requires), is one of the causes of voluntary unemployment, which would negatively affect the optimal, “natural” equilibrium³⁶. But the empirical results are controversial. In the current situation, facing precarity as a structural condition, this kind of argument is almost irrelevant. The mismatch, in fact, is not between the choice between working and not working, but between a precarious job and a desired one. If, in cognitive bio-capitalism, life is put to work (no matter whether directly or indirectly) and then valorized, then the concept of unemployment radically changes. The unemployed today is no longer the one who is inactive, in the sense of unproductive (from a capitalistic point of view), but rather the one who performs a productive activity which is not certified as such, and therefore is not paid for.

Precarity is blackmailing and perversely induces the workforce to control itself. Precarity is the death of culture and knowledge activity. The precarity trap is the consequence of this. It is the way to keep people under ignorance. We are in a opposite situation to that of the welfare trap, whose existence could make sense (if it ever did) in the Fordist era. If at the time, the welfare trap could arise from the existence of social security policies, today's precarity trap is the result of the absence of policies promoting social security and of the pressure to keep brains under control.

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³⁴ According to mainstream economic theory, a welfare trap is an example of the perverse incentive: the welfare recipient has an incentive to avoid raising his own productivity because the resulting income gain is not enough to compensate for the (increased) work effort. Actually, it can be more convenient in presence of income subsidies not to become employable, if the cost-benefit analysis is negative.

³⁵ See B. Petrongolo, 2008.

³⁶ See for a survey of the literature, among others, see J. D. Gwartney, R. L. Stroup, R.S. Sobel, D. A. Macpherson, *Economics: Private and Public Choice*, Thomson South-Western, 2011, XIV ed.

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