Title: Being at Work: Immaterial Labor, Affectualization and the Presencing of Identity

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Abstract

Contemporary western organizations are described by Hardt and Negri as involving *immaterial labor* in the informationalized production of both goods and services. We examine immaterial labor in relation to identity and sociality with a focus on the *affectualization* of work. Drawing on Heidegger's idea of *presencing,* we explore the crises that workers face when communicating and informating with people who favor different perspectives on work and self. We argue that when people manage self and work through the increasingly speedy re-semiotization of meaning and identity, there is a concomitant requirement for rapid cycles of identification and disidentification. With the concentration of decisions about work and identity into the here-and-now, *presencing* peels away taken-as-given avenues for action, inviting new ones rapidly into being. People are called on to 'presence' not just knowledges and selves, but sensibilities as to what it means to be human, while at the same time negotiating the traces of older bureaucratic power structures. What emerges is a worker identity located between the "the misery of power [and] the joy of being" (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 413).

Key Words: Immaterial labor, Presencing, Identity, Affectualization, Dialogicality

Introduction

For most of the twentieth century, organizations and businesses, their interrelations and their exchanges have been largely conceived as more or less bureaucratic-administrative structures and processes that required relatively predictable skills, definable strategies and static vocabularies (Silverman 1970). More recently, however, these dimensions of modern organizations – their forms of management, work practices, socio-cultural experiences, and inter-organizational negotiations – are being recognized to be inherently multi-layered and multi-faceted. In the context of globalized capitalism, contemporary discourses have constructed and located organizations and their internal and external dynamics as being flexible, dynamic and competitive.

Central to new ways of thinking about inter- and intra-organizational relationships and processes is that organizations are global, national and local sites at one and the same time. They are places where traditional hierarchies are being dismantled and replaced or at least intersected by flattened hierarchies and work teams. Such organizations promise to build common core values and cultures emphasizing social relationships while being redefined through restructuring, reengineering and reorganizing. For some, this means we are living and working in 'postmodern' times where boundaries of all kinds are beginning to blur (cf. Parker, 1997). One important driver of these changes is undoubtedly the continuous updating of communication and information technologies, enabling people from across organizations to contribute in ways, and at speeds, hitherto unthinkable. These technologies are playing a key role in disrupting 'old' demarcations as new alliances and configurations are opened up and made possible, not only between disparate players within organizations, but also across organizations nationally and internationally. Here, the rules about who communicates with

whom, and about how often and how fast people communicate, are being rewritten from day to day (Jordan, 1999).

The changes to contemporary western organizations have been described by Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) as a movement from the industrialized production of goods to the informationalized production of services. The result, they argue, is an 'informational economy' involving 'immaterial labor' producing immaterial goods such as cultural products, knowledge and communication. Further, these changes are said to challenge the very basis of modern capitalism in that "the increasing importance of immaterial, intellectual labor in high value-added sectors of the economy is shaping a collective laborer with heightened powers of subversion" (Balakrishnan, 2000, p. 144), and therefore prone to resistance and independence. In this paper we wish to examine the idea of immaterial labor in relation to personal identity and sociality at work in a context of the "postmodernization of the global economy" (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 293). In doing so, we draw on Heidegger's notion of 'presencing' (Heidegger, 1969, 1973, 1991) to characterize the crises that workers now confront having to communicate and informate with people who often enact different views on work and self. We propose that what is expected now and what is essential to being a competent 'immaterial laborer' is not just the capacity to '(re)invent our selves' (Rose, 1996), but the ability to face up to and embody increasing degrees of interactive intensity and uncertainty (Lemke, 2003); that is, the capacity to absorb the *presencing* brought on by being "confronted with the immediacy of another person's existence" (Thompson, 2000). Using this notion that immaterial labor produces an unavoidable immediacy of the other as our point of departure, we argue that presencing represents an increasingly visible aspect of organizational interaction and identity. We conclude that, by producing the potential for workers to defy traditional organization and management power structures, presencing is the stimulus behind

both change management and immaterial labor, rendering organization not just the epitome of control and suppression, but also the site par excellence for incipient socialities, identities and ontologies.

Immaterial Labor

To begin our discussion, we turn to Hardt and Negri's (2000, 2004) work to elaborate how changes in the global economy and in organizations are heralding a growth in what they define as immaterial labor – that "labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication" (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 290). This immaterial labor, termed by some a 're-birthing of the industrial working classes' (Corbridge, 2000), is broad-ranging and is categorized by Hardt and Negri into three types:

> The first is involved in an industrial production that has been informationalized and has incorporated communication technologies in a way that transforms the production process itself ... Second is the immaterial labor of analytical and symbolic tasks, which itself breaks down into creative and intelligent manipulation on the one hand and routine symbolic tasks on the other. Finally, a third type of immaterial labor involves the production and manipulation of affect and requires (virtual or actual) human contact, labor in the bodily mode. These are three types of labor that drive the postmodernization of the global economy. (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 293)

The 'postmodernization' that Hardt and Negri refer to signifies a complex shift in relationships and work identities – one that we believe is not entirely pre-empted by the power and calculability inherent in bureaucratic and managerialized forms of organization, even

when that power and calculability is unquestionably present. Instead, the principle that currently appears to be in contestation with administrative calculability and financial-numerical reductionism is its opposite: social knowledge built upon flexible relationships and enterprising conducts oriented to articulating emergent ways of doing and being in the face of formal regulation. This is described by Hardt and Negri as a contemporary shift of equal magnitude to the industrialization that preceded it by well over a century:

> Just as the processes of industrialization transformed agriculture and made it more productive, so too the informational revolution will transform industry by redefining and rejuvenating manufacturing processes. The new managerial imperative here is, 'Treat manufacturing as a service'. In effect, as industries are transformed, the division between manufacturing and services is becoming blurred. Just as through the process of modernization all production tended to become industrialized, so too through the process of postmodernization all production tends toward the production of services, toward becoming informationalized (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 285-6)

This broad shift to informationalization also emerges as a crucial, constitutive element in how workers relate to their work both inter- and intra-organizationally: they become, in Morgan's terms (Morgan, 1997), nodes in an information network. This, however, is a complex positioning. Morgan's metaphorical description of a worker's new role may mislead us into a limited understanding of 'node' as a kind of technical point of contact. By contrast, in the global economy that Hardt and Negri describe, 'node' is more attuned with the idea of being a dynamic and inter-connected part of the organization and economy, building and working with knowledge as a function of social relationships. In their view, the shift to information-

centred and responsibility-based organization involves employees *at all levels* dealing with, and becoming, knowledge [sharing] specialists; that is, employees engaging in new kinds of interactions and positionings. Immaterial labor "immediately involves social interaction and cooperation ... [and]...cooperative interactivity through linguistic, communicational and interactive networks" (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 294).

Crucially, new forms of work interaction require an increasing variety of spoken and written conducts for workers to be able to 'informate' their work and their relationships, as well as incorporate the changes that are occurring faster and faster given the intensity that accompanies communication networking. The conducts that come into play here are complex and dynamic; they inhabit new discursive-interactive or dialogical spaces, and in those ways implicate new kinds of people (Iedema and Scheeres, 2003). An important corollary of this is that centralized managerial control is increasingly at risk on account of the more active participation of people. In this sense Hardt and Negri's point is that globalization goes beyond the deregulation of markets to an unraveling of centralized power because the "sinews of ... phantasmic polity – its flows of people, information and wealth – are simply too unruly to be monitored from the metropolitan centre" (Balakrishnan, 2000, p. 143).

In sum, immaterial labor is constantly mobile, fluid and circulatory in a ways that may exceed organizational control (Kalyvas, 2003), even when attempts at such control are palpable. Reconfiguring work from recursive routine towards (potentially volatile) situated interaction, immaterial labor manifests as "new autonomous social networks of cooperation spreading over the entire globe without the need for external mechanisms of hierarchy and authority that capital has mustered in order to regulate and exploit it" (Kalyvas, 2003, p. 268).

Presencing Identity

The transformation of organizations and the global economy that Hardt and Negri have elaborated also harbours changes to the way that processes of identity formation operate in organizations. Indeed, key to Hardt and Negri's analysis is that globalization and informationalization are "bound up with the production of new subjectivities" (Corbridge, 2003, p. 185; Seth, 2002). An important part of this is the rising inconstancy of social arrangements:

> Mobility, organizational change, cross-cultural contact and so forth produce less stable interaction systems, show how tenuous identities are and make more visible the processes of social production. (Deetz, 2003, p. 125)

Hardt and Negri's more radical proposition, however, is that the changes outlined call "upon the freedom of all those affected to actively participate in the making of their political and social organization" (Kalyvas, 2003, p. 263) where such participation might involve new identities that defy the strictures put in place by industrialization and modernization. While it may be spurious to suggest that such freedom and intensified participation have been or will be fully achieved, what Hardt and Negri propose is that the modern order of work is increasingly at risk on account of the very conditions that it created – conditions characterized by "an increasingly apparent malleability of all social relationships and permeability of borders" (Balakrishnan, 2000, p. 144).

The question we therefore ask is: what do these burgeoning changes mean for the process of the identity work embodied in immaterial labor? Indeed, a move to immaterial labor suggests

that people at work are in the midst of highly volatile relationships, positionings, processes and practices, more so than before (Grey and Garsten, 2001). Moreover, each of these has very complex implications for what and how people might together determine the appropriate way 'to go on' (Wittgenstein, 1953). Amidst this blurring of traditional linearities (organizational structures, lines of reporting, non-negotiable operating procedures), simple hierarchical or essential definitions of identity are becoming tenuous. As Deetz (2003) explains:

> Identities in contemporary society are increasingly fragmented as the sequestering of experiential realms is reduced (we are simultaneously workers, managers, parents, children, calculators and lovers) and the inadequacy of presumed coherent historically derived identities and category markers becomes more evident [...]. (Deetz 2003, 125)

To begin formulating our perspective on this incoherency and malleability of identity at work we now turn to Heidegger's concept of *presencing*. Presencing, or 'Anwesen' in Heidegger's original language, captures our sense of being confronted with life afresh as an effect of crisis. This happens at times when set ways of doing and saying prove inadequate, and we face not just having to 'make things up' as we go, but also having to let things be (Caputo, 1986, p. 183). Thus conceived, the notion of presencing also entails the idea that we do not act from within an originating ego that is already fully formed, but rather that we as identities emerge as our actions unfold through time (Schatzki, 2003). Here the "self's defining quality is what it is about to become rather than what it is" (O'Connor and Hallam, 2000, p. 238).

Bypassing Heidegger's emphasis on presencing, modern notions of 'self' have tended to prioritize essence such that "presencing is lost and existence is thought ... as what 'factually'

exists ... Being is set up as a permanent presence (nominal) abstracted from presencing (verbal) in terms of time space" (Stambaugh, 1973, p. x). Indeed, Heidegger showed that a danger of western thinking lies in the "systematicity of a world ordered according to technical know-how that fosters the forgetting of being" (Fielding, 2003, p. 2). This systematicity reappears also of course in claims affirming the authenticity of self-identity and established sociality and in accounts foregrounding the destructiveness of crisis and change. Such claims and accounts privilege persistence of the past and a 'forgetting of being' over conditions that foster presencing.

In any case, it is our proposition that, in the context of socialized, affective and fluid immaterial labor, imagining and conducting the self as a permanent presence across time is under threat. Put positively, the informationalizing of the global economy assuages, at least in part, the danger of the forgetting of being. In the traditional workplace, interaction routines and identities are "buil[t] up with the passage of life, [their] current state representing the persistence of earlier phases" (Schatzki, 2003, p. 311). For Schatzki, such identities and routines signal "the presence of the past in the present" (Schatzki, 2003, p. 311). Accordingly, if the globalized economy involves shifting networks of interaction and affectivity, the stability of identities and routines, although still common, is increasingly tenuous if not questionable. Hence, the informationalized organizational context renders presencing visible because social relations are expected to be less oriented towards stable identity and interaction routines, and more towards flexibility and reflexivity (Iedema and Scheeres, 2003).

Our argument seeks to highlight those contours of immaterial labor that engender an intensity of interaction and a concomitant uncertainty with regard to identity and conduct, resulting in presencing. Many authors have critiqued immaterial labor for precisely these reasons:

destabilization of traditional kinds of identity and rising uncertainty of knowing (e.g. Deetz, 2003; Grey and Garsten, 2001; Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998; Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996; Barker, 1993). We are interested in exploring an alternative perspective on immaterial labor, by refracting it through Heidegger's celebration of presencing. Presencing is prominent among Heidegger's means to outlining a view of identity as being emergent rather than 'egological'. In so doing, he mounts a major critique of the Enlightenment idea of the self as "a free and rational self-legislator deliberately mapping out an epistemic and ethical course through the world" (Edwards, 1990, p. 1). Going against the modern technological age during which presencing has been forgotten in favor of the orderliness of rational-instrumental know-how (Fielding, 2003), Heidegger sees being human as attending to that space where being is presenced by being confronted with the inadequacy of routines, solutions, resources and representations hitherto relied upon. Using this idea, and in contrast to those singling out the costs of instability and uncertainty (in modern organizations), we want to take time to elaborate the humanizing potential inherent in immaterial labor.

The humanizing potential of immaterial labor is principally underscored by the crisis of representation that Heidegger posits as being immanent in presencing. Representation involves fixing being by subjecting it to past definitions or signs. Put in those terms, representation renders self and others as objects of a person's own subjectivity, as it seeks to control and master both in a static 're-presented' relationship. As Edwards' (1990) puts it:

> When beings become the 'objects' of one's 'representations', one has to make them subordinate to oneself. The representing subject has become a sort of god, setting up before itself the world it ordinarily inhabits. (Edwards 1990, 32)

In contrast to privileging representations that sign the present off to the past, Heidegger considers beings as not fully circumscribable by representations ascribed to them by us or by others. It is through presencing that we encounter beings before they are reduced to the rules and routines of discourse: "[beings] disclose themselves to us as the things they are ... in some context of our practical activity" (Edwards 1990, 32). Harbouring a suspicion of discourse that was to inspire Foucault some years later, Heidegger's concern was that Western cultures are dominated by representational practices that distill being down to discourse: "representing drives everything ... together into the unity of that which is given the character of object" (Heidegger cited in Edwards, 1990, p. 44). Admittedly, discursive processes of representation, whether these be classification, numerification or causal explanation, are a prominent facet of contemporary organizing and managing (see Townley, 1993). That said, Hardt and Negri's arguments suggest that the trend towards informating work and workers to render them calculable, manageable and controllable is not the whole story. Equipped with Heidegger's critique of representation and Hardt and Negri's depiction of immaterial labor, let us now explore how presencing and the crises it incurs are likely to 'affectualize' contemporary work.

The Affectualization of Contemporary Work

Critiques of post-modern organization targeting its potential for identity instability and knowledge uncertainty converge upon one central suspicion: that workers are increasingly subject to emotional or affectual intensities and performativities at work (the term 'affectual' nets in body feelings, emotions as well as socio-personal judgmentality). This suspicion arises from the view that it is not sufficient to regard current patterns of organizational change as involving a 'knowledge' shift (Child and McGrath, 2001), but that this also involves a shift in

the positionings and conducts that implicate the very nature and definition of an individual's and an organization's work and identity (Henwood, 2003). It is clear that, when employees re-orient from their traditional mode of doing the work to an immaterial one, they are not merely engaged in 'gathering more skills'. Crucial to their skill diversification is workers' ability to negotiate new networks of workers and processes, and this puts the onus on them to diversify not just their practices, but their contacts and networks. If they are successful they might become part of multiple organizational and inter-organizational communities of members, in contrast to their previous status as autonomous or isolated operators. With such communities being constituted in communicative interaction, identity performances are more important because more prominent. These identity performances with others within and outside of an organization are necessary, it appears, for new levels of coordination, shared energy and intensified identification to come into being. Central for the purpose of our argument is that "cooperation is completely immanent to the laboring activity itself" (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 294).

While the critiques of these increasingly intense and dialogical kinds of contemporary work present convincing arguments and disturbing case studies (e.g. Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996), an argument can also be put about how the work conditions in post-modern organizations that serve to strip workers (and managers) of set ways of representing work, self and others, enhance presencing. This is because the complexity of workplace change inheres in the multiple and often contradictory ways in which people (are expected to) engage with each other in the course of these practices. Workers' 'being and doing at work', then, extends beyond the instrumental and technical 'be able to do or say or write' to include complex and multi-disciplinary kinds of dialogicality (Rose, 1996) that are emergent rather than pre-defined. This intensified dialogicality is a challenge for most workers because of how it can

put accepted ways of doing and being in crisis and force self-reflexivity (Iedema and Scheeres, 2003). With people's actions being less mapped 'in advance' and more localized in negotiations with others about what is appropriate to do, say and be, their identity also becomes increasingly contingent upon the vicissitudes of interaction at work. As noted earlier, this is made more prominent still by others who are increasingly Other, as a consequence of their social mobility, cross-cultural interaction and inter-occupational/professional networks, and so forth.

The upshot of these new communication processes and practices is 'affectualized work'. The term affect is used to signal that what is happening is not just an emotionalizing of work (Hage and Powers 1992); rather, the changes and communicative intensities confront workers with the limits of their and others' ontologies. An added facet of this is the onus that now bears on people at work to recuperate from these challenged ontologies appropriately interpersonalizing self-displays, or invent new ones on the spot. That is, work is increasingly about engaging with colleagues (and not just managers) who make normative claims about each others' conducts, identities and work practices (Barker, 1993), putting each of these at risk. But at the heart of this risk, we believe, resides not just the crisis of contemporary organization and management, but also the seed for humanizing interaction in the shape of presencing.

Implications for Being at Work

For the reasons discussed above, the most challenging aspect of being at work is the need to move beyond present accomplishments of successfully identifying with different and changing tasks and positions. That is, people need to engage in and manage speaking

positions not previously sanctioned and defined by their own organizations, occupations, professions or vocations, but ones worked out contingently and in *ad hoc* ways. It is at this juncture that presencing realizes a new visibility. Presencing is at risk in so far as one's work is less predictable and habitual due to it being predicated on how relationships unfold along local, regional, and global time scales. Even when habitual practices and identities revolve around a very strict 'regulatory ideal' (Butler, 1993) or 'exemplar' (ten Bos and Rhodes, 2003) the limits of those models are likely to clash with the contingencies of the here-and-now.

It is evident that workers need to be able to diversify their practical-organizational skills such that they can engage with the constantly changing nature of processes of production and exchange. We have argued that they also need to be able to 'work the social networks', and ensure they remain a member of the evolving community of (inter-)organizational players and stakeholders. A crucial part of this is that all employees are obliged to broaden their relationship with the work through each other. Their central tasks of improvising communicational relationships and displays of self are put into special relief by the presencing these performativities tend to incur.

With presencing likely to 'affectualize' work, moreover, workers' grip on what they can muster in the way of adequate conduct is disrupted, and with that their sense of work and of themselves is disturbed. This in turn bears on the degree and confidence of identification between work and self ('role distance'; cf. Goffman, 1959). Complicating this is that, against the backdrop of presencing and the affectual intensity of immaterial labor, a tension grows between occupational-professional ideals and 'exemplarities' into which people are actively socialized (ten Bos and Rhodes, 2003) and the exigencies of the more dialogic ways of being,

doing and saying that lack firm definition. Ironically, exacerbating this tension is the ethos of contemporary organizing and managing that sees the *raison d'être* of management as being organizational change, and that situates the locus of marketable knowing, deciding, doing, saying and being as always emergent in and from the *here-and-now*. Anchoring itself in emergence and change, contemporary management helps multiply the opportunities for presencing, for both workers and managers. It is here therefore that we can locate the crux of contemporary organization: change management and immaterial labor are two sides of the same coin. That is, change management and immaterial labor share a need to stay up to date by constantly *re*-discursifying or 're-semiotizing' (Iedema, 2003) organizational, transactional, social, interpersonal, communicational and technological resources. However, by elevating the constant re-semiotization of knowledge, communication, information and technology as the key to (ontological) advantage, contemporary organization runs the risk of bypassing the radical potential of presencing that constant re-semiotizing may incur.

In fact, contemporary organization's tendency towards 'colonizing the future' (Giddens, 1991) translates into destabilizing the past through this quest for new regimes of representation and production. Seen thus, our concern to colonize the future and delegitimize the past is the logical obverse of the increasing dialogical gravity of the here-and-now. As people's accepted truths and conventional practices are challenged, the pace of reinvention as immaterial laborers and change managers is no doubt also proportional to the rise in what there is to know (say, do, and be). This 'ontological inflation' can lead to competing regimes of conduct being put into play simultaneously. This is likely not just to exacerbate such regimes' inadequacy, but also to raise workers' and managers' dependence on situated negotiations in the search for temporary outcomes.

15

A final facet of the informationalized economy is that "[i]mmaterial property ... such as an idea or an image or a form of communication, is infinitely reproducible" (Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 311). With organized work being at the forefront of informationalizing human sociality, organization and hence management project not just an ethos which is reflective of action (requiring data and information) – they also require reflexivity of self, and of relationships between self and other. The personalizing and localizing effect of this reflexivity, or its *presencing*, exceeds that seen in most other circumstances in social life, potentially rendering organizations the centre of incipient social reconfiguration *par excellence*.

Ironically then, contemporary organization and management are sites where people are confronted with the limits of the past, and where they increasingly run the risk of encountering self and other as presence in the here-and-now. In promoting this line of argument, we distance ourselves from accounts which critique contemporary organization and management for the way that they dupe workers into identifying with organizational and managerial norms and values (e.g. Barker, 1993; Knights and McCabe, 2003). We also distance ourselves from those who advocate that 'being involved at work' leads to empowerment (Peters 1992), in that we refuse to downplay the crisis inherent in the confrontation between the routines of self and work and the dialogicality that puts those routines in crisis through presencing (Fielding, 2003).

Conclusion

Our thesis is that the impact of organizational and managerial change, and of the new ways of doing and saying that contemporary work requires, is registered as *presencing*. The changes

we are witnessing are not about replacing one workplace identity with another, or about accumulating identities. Rather, the spirit of contemporary change is about exposing people (and their work) to themselves (and to itself). Seen in these terms, immaterial labor obliges us to institute "a sort of permanent political relationship between self and self" (Foucault, 1983). At work, this 'political relationship' reconfigures self from natural and necessary essence into a dynamically managed outcome on the edge of presencing.

Finally, we manage self and work through constant and increasingly speedy reconstitution or re-semiotization of meaning and identity. This requires increasingly rapid cycles of identification and disidentification – a dialectic that is challenging not least for its discursive and interactive implications, but also for its reorientation of identity from either stability or dynamicity, towards a complex of both (Iedema 2003). With the concentration of decisions about definitions of work and identity into the here-and-now, *presencing* peels away taken-as-given avenues for action and routinized strategies for achieving consensus, inviting new ones increasingly rapidly into being. In this new context, people in organizations are called on 'to presence' not just knowledges and selves, but sensibilities to what it means to be human, while at the same time negotiating the traces of older bureaucratic power structures. Most affirmatively, what might emerge is a worker identity emerging somehow between the "the misery of power [and] the joy of being" (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 413).

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