

The 'General Intellect' in the *Grundrisse* and Beyond

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The development of fixed capital shows the degree to which society's general science, KNOWLEDGE, has become an *immediate productive force*, and hence the degree to which the conditions of the social life process itself have been brought under the control of the GENERAL INTELLECT and remoulded according to it.¹

Many Italian Marxists have long insisted on the importance of the section in the *Grundrisse* generally known as the 'Fragment on machines', and in particular the concept of the 'general intellect' introduced in the above passage.² This chapter examines recently translated essays on the general intellect by Paolo Virno and Carlo Vercellone, both of whom attempt to assess the contemporary theoretical and practical import of the *Grundrisse*.³

Virno and Vercellone on the 'general intellect' in history and theory

In the 'Fragment on machines' Marx outlines a historical reconstruction of the main stages of capitalist

1. Marx 1987, p. 92; block words originally in English.

2. Dyer-Witheford 1999, Chapters Four and Nine; Turchetto 2008; Toscano 2007. In the *Marx – Engels Collected Works* (Marx and Engels 1975–2005) the editors assign a different title to this section: '[Fixed Capital and the Development of the Productive Forces of Society]'

3. Space-limitations preclude a comparison of these papers with earlier writings on the general intellect (for example, Negri 1991). An investigation of the relationship between these essays and social movements in Italy would also require a separate study (see Wright 2005).

work-relations in Europe, beginning with a period characterised by what he elsewhere terms the *formal subsumption* of workers under capital. In this era wage-labourers were hired as capital by capital, to produce a product owned by capital, while overseen by capital's representatives. Surplus-value was extracted from living labour through an enforced extension of the working day (absolute surplus-value), although the labour-process itself (most importantly, the use of tools) remained under workers' direct control.

When the limits of the working day were reached, capital turned to the *real subsumption* of labour, and the extraction of relative surplus-value through productivity-advances that reduced the portion of the workday devoted to necessary labour, that is, to the production of 'the quantity of products necessary for the maintenance of the living labour capacity'.⁴ This initially was accomplished through a fragmentation of the labour-process ('detail labour'). Later, when scientific-technological knowledge – the fruit of the general intellect – advanced sufficiently, systems of machinery were introduced.⁵ Living labour was then reduced to being a mere 'accessory' of these systems: 'In machinery, objectified labour confronts living labour in the labour process itself as the power which dominates it, a power which, in terms of its form, as the appropriation of living labour, is capital. The incorporation of the labour process into the valorization process of capital as merely one of its moments is also posited materially by the transformation of the means of labour into machinery, and of living labour into a mere living accessory of this machinery, as the means of its action'.⁶

When Marx wrote the *Grundrisse* he expected industrial capitalism to be replaced by communism in the not too distant future. His argument in the 'Fragment on machines' can be roughly summarised as follows:

- 1) Capital necessarily tends to seek productivity-advances.
- 2) Productivity-advances are based on the general intellect.
- 3) The more social agents enjoy free time for creative learning and experimentation, the more the general intellect will flourish.⁷

4. Marx 1987, p. 87.

5. '(T)he development of machinery takes this course only when... all the sciences have been forced into the service of capital... At this point invention becomes a business, and the application of science to immediate production itself becomes a factor determining and soliciting science' (Marx 1987, pp. 89–90).

6. Marx 1987, p. 83.

7. '(I)t is neither the immediate labour performed by man himself, nor the time for which he works, but the appropriation of his own general productive power, his comprehension of Nature and domination of it by virtue of his being a social entity – in a word, the development of the social individual – that appears as the cornerstone of production and wealth' (Marx 1987, p. 91).