Cognitive Capitalism, Education, and Digital Labor

Reviewed by Masood Ashraf Raja


I became aware of this book while compiling a collected volume of essays on world literature and critical pedagogy. To say that reading this book was indispensable in enhancing the conceptual depth of my own work would be an understatement. This book, without a doubt, has not only augmented my understanding of the current state of capital but has also provided me with certain new lines of thought and lines of flight in imagining and materializing future solidarities with others like me who hope to do critical work in this new age of capital.

The editors of this book have not only provided us, in one volume, a sophisticated, comprehensible, and wide-ranging understanding of the conceptual varieties of the terms invoked in their title but also the originary and revisionary narratives that construct, transform, and, at times, mask these terms for us. While the preface by Antonio Negri provides a conceptual grounding for a better understanding of biopolitics, the subsumptive power of capital, and the rise of the new multitude, the opening chapter by Timothy Brennan gives the volume the very self-reflexive and critical tone that other chapters only enhance further.

Brennan poses the most important question about the nature of our work and explores the “intellectual’s role in the [current] division of labor” (1) by suggesting that the realm of intellectual work is divided between the prolegomenous theorists” and the “situated theorists” (14). While the situated scholars are perpetually in contest with the changing realities of the world, the prolegomenous critics can take their field of work as stable without worrying much about the exigencies of life, busy producing complex works for the sake of complexity while the world, increasingly, becomes a more intolerant and inhabitable place for majority of its denizens. This chapter, an opening salvo, prepares the reader to expect more than just a pastiche of leftist critique and opens the book to a layered and reflective reading.

In the second chapter George Caffentzis places the very concept of cognitive labor under erasure. Plotted along the trajectory of Marx ‘s own theorization of “piece work” and later appropriation of the “putting out” system by the industrial capitalism, Caffentzis asks the most pertinent questions about the very arrival or potential of something called the cognitariat. The conclusion is
enlightening as by the time one finishes the chapter, one realizes that offering the cognitariat as the ultimate revolutionary class of the modern capital fails to acknowledge that it is not the knowledge workers but the “indigenous people, the campesinos, the unemployed. . . and the immigrant workers . . .” (54) who are actually challenging the current appropriative drive of global capital.

In another brilliant chapter, Christian Fuchs not only discusses as to why, in his view, “informational capitalism” is a better term than Cognitive capitalism, but during his discussion we also get a focused discussion of the works of all the major post-Fordist Marxists including Franco Beradi, Christian Marazzi, and Paulo Virno. Thus the book, besides offering new insights about various aspects of cognitive capital also becomes a didactic tool in informing the reader about the major debates of this interesting subject and the main variants and conceptual contours this new form of capitalism. Throughout the book, in chapters written by prominent scholars in the fields of digital labor, humanities, and education concepts and material realities are discussed in a nuanced and comprehensive manner. Resultantly, one does not only get a surface introduction to all these important concepts: one gets a grainy and textured genealogy and archeology of concepts such as the cognitariat, digital labor, precarity, cognitive capital and their relationship to critical pedagogy.

There is not enough space here to discuss all the chapters, and the reader would probably benefit more without a summary provided in this review, but over all the book offers in one volume debates not only about the nature of cognitive capital but also the details about how it is constructed, constituted, and sold to us and how, increasingly, education and modes of pedagogy are “reformed” or tweaked to create the kind of subjectivities that would be most ideal for the economic superstructure that shapes our souls and trains our bodies. In this regard Michael Peters's chapter is exceptionally important as it connects the dumbfication of education with the “Googalization of Education” (255) producing a kind of knowledge that, in Peters’s words “works on the basis of arrhythmic logics to expand a universe of information accessibility while . . . creating giant global info-utilities that make their profits off the back of the creative endeavors of others. . .” (257).

In this changing world where capital and those who own the new modes of production, new modes of subjectivization, governmentality, and disciplinarit there is constantly a need to attempt to create new modes of flight and resistance and to also question the new knowledge and the signs that attempt to carry them and Cognitive Capital does that. It is a book that deals with today's realities but without taking the terms of its own discourse as granted or natural. Thus, while it constantly educates us about the new vocabularies of a different mode of production, it also questions the very vocabularies that it employs in the process.
Resultantly, it teaches us that while the world order might appear to have changed and while the cognitariat might be a new class, it does not necessarily mean that our struggles are over or that there is no material labor. What it teaches us is that those of us who might be engaged in what is now being termed immaterial labor or the cognitariat must also remember that while we buy in to these seductive concepts, the global proletariat continues to increase and that we all still thrive on the labors of those whose job in this so called cognitive capital has now been reduced to producing cheap commodities so that capital can exploit on both levels: the cognitive and the material.