

On the commodification of living knowledge in 'Empire': a view from the Global North

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Introduction

Empire is still materialising before our very eyes twenty years on, as it navigates in and out of increasingly deeper political and economic crises. Doing so, our entire life is increasingly subsumed into the logics of global capitalism, as the global society of control increasingly finds new ways to manage our way of becoming. In this situation, the nation-states are in left in turmoil, finding themselves increasingly in fierce competition against each other for lucrative positions in the international hierarchy. In the deindustrialised countries of the Global North, this has for the past two decades resulted in great changes to the states functioning, further expanding and manifested the relationship between capital and the state. In this essay, I discuss how the state – and in particular the welfare state – acts as a political medium for the extractive characteristics of global capitalism. Doing so, I discuss how the very intimate relationships between human beings living in the social institutions of the nation-state is enclosed in global capital's process of valorisation.

As evident from the opening paragraphs, this discussion situates itself within the post-workerist literature, especially referring to twenty-year-old publication of the literat Michael Hardt and philosopher Antonio Negri's magnum opus *Empire* (2000). Since its publication, *Empire* has been a centrepiece in a vast amount theorization happening within the post-workerist movement of thought from which this essay departs. Having the discussion on *Empire* twenty years on as my point of departure, I highlight how the governmental construction of 'the welfare state' is reconfigured in yet a new-sophisticated way 'to stay competitive'. While this has happened and still happens directly through the privatisation of welfare and cutting back on funding for welfare globally, it is also displayed in the changing social logic of the welfare state itself. The aim of this essay is, thus, to discuss this change of logic through a hypothesis that I labelled 'the commodification of living knowledge'. This hypothesis sheds light on contemporary capitalism's attempt to capture knowledge produced by living labour within the institutions of the welfare

state in its process of valorisation, which provides another perspective on how 'the welfare state' transforms into 'the competitive state'.

I discuss this commodification of living knowledge as a concrete example of how capitalism re-appropriates public goods, which shows, according to Hardt and Negri how capital expropriates the common to private property (Hardt and Negri 2000). Put in other terms, the commodification of living knowledge denotes the process in which our perceptions, imaginaries and social practices is extracted and captured by capital. I therefore seek to expand the highly complex relationship between the contemporary capitalist state and the extractive operations of global capital illustrates a new metamorphosis of Empire twenty years on (Hardt and Negri 2017, 2019; Mezzadra and Neilson 2015, 2017, 2019).

My discussion situates itself in the context of the Nordic welfare state that is known for its extensive and universal welfare coverage and infrastructure all around the world; named, for example, 'the next supermodel' by *The Economist* in 2013. In the following, I discuss how the recomposition of the contemporary Nordic welfare state is an archetypal illustration of how the contemporary regime of capitalist accumulation reconfigures the state of capitalist globalization (Mezzadra and Neilson 2014). With some of the key tenets found in *Empire*, this essay, thus,

explores one possible way in which the social reproductive institutions of the welfare state moves to the forefront of today's capitalist regime accumulation from the perspective of the Nordic region territorially situated firmly in the Global North.(1)

First, I lay out the main features of Empire as described by Hardt and Negri. Here, I briefly describe the two passages, which constitute Empire, namely the passage of sovereignty and production. Second, I move on to discuss how the welfare state has to slough its skin due to the transition from Fordism to cognitive capitalism. Third, I discuss the implications attached to capital's attempt to capture the common in a new and sophisticated way by colonizing the institutions of the contemporary welfare state with the notion of 'welfare export'. Together, these three discussions touches on preliminary thoughts on the commodification of living knowledge.

Living in the Mixed Constitution of Empire

Twenty years have passed since its publication, yet the *Empire* still present the reader with an alternative interpretation of processes enacted by the economic globalisation in the midst of the last century. Moreover, I argue, the framework allows us to see the welfare-state construction in a new light, as the political sovereignty of the nation-state changes completely with the mixed constitution of the

ontological body labelled Empire. In the following two sections, we briefly revisit the main features presented in the *Empire*.

The Passage of Sovereignty

Over the course of some 400 pages, Hardt and Negri present the concept of Empire as a way to describe the current capitalist global world order in which we are currently breath. In their own sci-fi manner, the theoretical concept of Empire grants a different view on the power relations between nation-states, multinational and global corporations in the present state of globalization. Empire rests on the fact of a world order operating according to an overarching universal standard: A decentred capitalist global network of power with no outside to it. In *Empire*, there is no Rome, as Hardt and Negri beautifully paint the picture (Hardt and Negri 2000, 317).

The old notion imperialism, according to Hardt and Negri, was characterized by the expansion of the European nation-state beyond its boundaries: It was a way to divide the entire world into different geographical fragments (think of the classic example of the borderlines in Africa) hereby extending the sovereignty of each nation-state. Empire, instead and by contrast, as they wrote in 2000, "is presented as a global concert under the direction of a single conductor, a unitary power that maintains the social peace and produces its ethical truths" (Hardt and Negri 2000, 10).

Illustrating this global concert,

the concept of Empire denotes a particular passage of sovereignty. There is no longer any nation-state at the centre of the world order (e.g. as we witnessed with the hegemony of the United States after 1989). "No nation-state", as Hardt and Negri writes in 'Empire, Twenty Years On' (2019, 71), "is able to organize and command the global order unilaterally." Rather, they argue that every nation-state integrates into the global capitalist power network, where the autonomy of politics fades and converges with the economy. A global network of power, which is constituted as a mixture of three-levels: the monarchical level (emptying out the centre of the bomb, the dollar and the network), aristocratic level, or, 'the rule of the few' (major corporations, dominant nation-states and supranational institutions) and 'the rule of the many' (broadcast and social media, NGOs, religions associations). Together, these different levels constitute and reproduce the global order of capitalism.

To me, the finest illustration of such a mixture is the way Head of States, officials and leaders meet in different settings discussing the 'future of capitalism' together with prominent CEOs of multinational companies at events such as at the World Economic Forum. An event, which has not declined but rather grown in size throughout the last two decades since the publication of *Empire*. Or, the various economic indexes provided by regulatory apparatuses of the global

economy such as the International organizations such as the IMF, World Bank or OECD. All of these actors change the sovereignty of the classical nation-state and reterritorializes its boundaries and borders, which it so desperately struggles to manifest (Hardt and Negri 2000, 45). One of the ways in which the nation-state then defines its borders is through the regime of producing differences and identity with locality as the signifier in global flows of capital.

The Exodus of Living Knowledge in Empire

Producing such differences and identities of locality is closely related to the passage of production, which constitutes the global power network of Empire. The passage of production denotes the changing modes of production accompanied by the development of the global-governance structures. As Hardt and Negri argue twenty years on: “Just as national capital needed the nation-state to guarantee its collective and long-term interests, so too global capital today requires a complex global-governance structures” (Hardt and Negri 2019, 78). In the following, I briefly review the characteristics of this passage.

The Passage of Production

No longer bound in the factory, production and the creation of value can now be found in every space of the social field. “Capital has”, as Hardt and Negri argue, “increasingly become an

apparatus of capture that preys on the common, extracting the values produced there, and creating myriad forms of suffering and destruction in the process” (Hardt and Negri 2019, 83). The passage of production that has led to Empire, thus, rests on the exodus of living knowledge from the factories and into the society, which is encapsulated in the concept of ‘the social factory’ (Tronti 2019).

In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri argue that today’s capitalist modes of production have informationalized, most predominantly illustrated in the expansion of services in the economy. Production, thus, becomes decentred compared to the industrial modes of production. With the workerist heritage, the starting point for this analysis takes the perspective of labour with the introduction of immaterial labour.

Following Hardt and Negri, immaterial labour signifies how the predominant product of the labour process is increasingly resting on “services, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 290).⁽²⁾ Hence, the basic argument is, as Hardt and Negri expanded in *Multitude*, is the general transformation from labour as the ‘mute’ factory labour to the ‘loquacious and gregarious’ enterprise labour (Hardt and Negri 2004, 203). In this setting, communication, social cooperation, and knowledge become predominant in the contemporary modes of productions. During the predominant industrial capitalism, “all

forms of labor and society itself has to industrialize, today labor and society have to informationalize, become intelligent, become communicative, become affective" (Hardt and Negri 2004, 109).

Since the publication of *Empire*, much of the critique has targeted this concept, as commentators found it highly ambiguous. Answering this critique, Hardt and Negri, first, explained that the 'immaterial' connotation refers to the *product* of the labour process and second, formulated the concept of 'biopolitical labour' that both encapsulates the immaterial and affective dimensions in its wording (Hardt and Negri 2004, 2009). What is often missed in the interpretation of the immaterial labour thesis, however, is the tendential nature of the concept. Focusing on how this tendential nature affects different sectors of the contemporary organisation of capitalist production has been explored in various studies touching on labour in areas such as call centres, modelling, gold farming and so on (e.g. Brophy 2015; Carls 2007; Dowling 2007; Gill and Pratt 2008; Toscano 2007; Wissinger 2007; Woodcock 2017).

An important aspect about immaterial labour, however, is that value creation is no longer dictated by capital as the material product produced on the assembly line during the predominant industrial modes of production. Rather, production is today more often than not an expropriation of what Hardt and Negri refer to as the

common. The common refers to the knowledge, water, air, earth etc. that are common in society. "What strikes us most strongly in analyses of recent capitalist developments," as they, however, write twenty years on, "is the central role played by *the common* in its various guises, from natural resource to cultural product, biometric data to social cooperation" (Hardt and Negri 2019, 81). Such an understanding of the common, thus, opens up for a nuanced perspective on the relationship between the State and capitalism that does not reproduce the mainstream category of 'civil society' but rather help to show how the boundary between the 'private' and the 'public' blurs.

The Reappropriation of the Nordic Welfare State in Empire

The extensive description of the reproductive nature of global capital through the global political network of power – which is not entirely replicable in this short account – extends well beyond the powers of the nation-state. However, it also reconfigures the nation-state in order to respond to the insurgencies of the multitude below. One such response on a smaller scale is the reconfiguration of the welfare state, which I believe can be seen as an interesting interlink of the two passages that have constituted Empire, impact the common in society.

The welfare state was politically constructed during the heyday of Fordism. Historically,

'welfare' is inextricably linked typically to the nation-state as it is set up through a political coalition between the capitalist class and working class to secure a level of social security for its citizens by granting certain individuals with social rights. However, with the crisis of Fordism in the late 1960s, the passage of sovereignty and production as formulated in Empire has drastically changed the welfare state (Vercellone 2007). The welfare states in countries of the Global North has transformed into so-called 'competitive states' (Cerny 1997), which no longer solely safeguards its citizens from the exploitation of capitalism. Instead, it denotes a reconfiguration of the welfare state construction that relies on the intensive mobilisation of the citizens' capabilities. The state, then, figure as a social reproductive machine of labour-power in order to stay competitive and progressive within the global capitalist system. The expansion and development of the welfare state are most evident in the Nordic countries.

The universal welfare state in the Nordic countries is exemplary illustrations of the most widespread governmental institutionalisation of welfare organisation. As the large-scale factories so dominating in the economy in Western Europe throughout the 1950s and 1960s have been "deconstructed screw by screw, brick by brick, only to be built again up to ten thousand kilometres further east" (Raunig 2013, 61), the welfare state has been reconfigured accordingly. No

longer solely responsible for the social security of its citizens, the welfare state is instead an economic actor in the complex nexus of the global capitalist order that emerged with Empire. In some sense, the welfare state acts as a large corporation, which, as Fumagalli argues is "dependent not on internal economics but on external ones, that is, on the ability to capture productive surpluses that result from a territory's cognitive resources" (Fumagalli 2013, 61). The welfare state in itself, in other words, has informationalized.

Mobilizing and capturing these cognitive resources has shown itself through the interesting development occurring with the Nordic welfare states in the last couple of decades is the attempt to commodity knowledge on *how to* organise such a governing technique, which allows for the capture of the cognitive resources produced by its citizens. Hence, an increasing amount of governing initiatives has been put in place in order to dictate the role of the Nordic welfare state as a small, competitive state. From a Danish perspective, for example, councils such as 'the Council of Innovation (*Innovaionsrådet*) formed in 2003 and the Council of Globalization (*Globaliseringrådet*) formed in 2005 was highly influential during the 2000s in re-articulating the governing techniques of the welfare state.

Together, the purpose of these councils was primarily to investigate the current position of Denmark in globalization and furthermore layout, which direction this "small country"

should head for in “the never-ending quest for economic growth as a small state in the global knowledge economy.” The reports published by these councils carried titles such as *Den Danske Strategi – Danmarks muligheder i det globale videnssamfund* (The Danish Strategy – Denmark’s opportunities in the global knowledge society) or *Fremgang, Fornyelse og Tryghed – Strategi for Danmark i den globale økonomi* (Prosperity, Renewal and Safety – Strategy for Denmark in the global economy). These reports recognised both the new global division of labour and the need to change Denmark’s role in the global capitalist system. As listed in one of the reports, “this does not mean to compete with newly industrialised countries but instead focus on one’s own conditions and og competences” (The Council of Innovation 2004).

For instance, this was also evident in a report in 2007 released by the Danish government titled *Offensiv Global Markedsføring af Danmark* (Offensive Global Marketing of Denmark), which specifically focused on the way in which it would be possible to ‘brand’ Denmark to the outside world by headlining themes such as ‘creativity’ and ‘education’. With phrases such as how “Denmark’s opportunities in the global knowledge society”, “we need to research more and get more out of our knowledge”, or, “there is a need for strengthening and further modernization of it Danish export efforts”, it is evident that the welfare state attempts to set up “new

apparatuses of extraction” for global capital (Marazzi 2011).

Welfare as Living Knowledge in the Nordic Welfare State

At this point, it is clear the welfare state attempts to capture the production of living knowledge, which happens autonomously within its spaces (Andersen 2020). The welfare state is nothing more than managing living knowledge to the favour of global capital. This is part of the effort to show how the competition that the state now engages in globally, is not so much “to have knowledge” but to “acquire and apply knowledge” (The Council of Innovation 2004). The ‘export’ of ‘welfare knowledge’ is one outcome of the logic promoted in the various reports throughout the 2000s as a commodity substituting ‘bacon’, which is one of the largest goods exported from Denmark to the World (Schmidt 2014). In short, ‘welfare export’ is an immaterial product that imprints specific ways of organising welfare practices.

This entails a new way of managing knowledge from the perspective of the State where, especially, educational institutions are turned into what might be labelled as knowledge factories that engage in the global capitalist network (Raunig 2013). Besides the classic analysis transforming academic work, ‘welfare export’ touches on an interesting side effect of the transformation of public educational institutions.

As the economy informationalizes, the importance of capital becomes to translate the *living knowledge* produced by the autonomous immaterial labour, as philosopher Gigi Roggero points out in *The Production of Living Knowledge* (2011), into *dead knowledge* in order to extract value from the contemporary labour process. The ‘export of welfare’ or rather ‘export of knowledge on welfare’ thus provides an empirical illustration on this process, showing how the management of knowledge is an attempt to subsume life (*bios*) into the capitalist production cycle (Fumagalli et al. 2019). This process of subsumption happens through the production of specific kinds of abstract knowledge on *how to* conduct life that turns every human being into an economic subject. In short, following philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato’s critique of cognitive capitalism argues that “[w]hat is required, and cuts across the economy and modern-day society, is not knowledge but the injunction to become an economic ‘subject’ (Lazzarato 2012, 50). Thus, this entails knowledge that, on the one hand, is immaterial and affective in nature and, on the other hand, seeks to direct the nature of social reproductive institutions such as educational institutions. In other words, knowledge is turned into a means rather than the goal for the economic system, managing knowledge in order to produce subjects that fit the current economic imperative. This is not a process of producing itself but capital

rather takes on the “position of exteriority in respect of the production process” (Vercellone 2010). ‘Welfare export’ thus shows how political construction of the State becomes intertwined with capital’s valorisation.

The ‘export of knowledge on welfare’, thus, is an extraction of our ‘common’ to which the welfare state (public) is merely trying to capture (privatize) the living knowledge in downstream. Capture in downstream refers to, as Roggero suggests “the organization of capitalist capture of social cooperation that exists in a partial autonomy of capitalist relations” (Roggero 2010, 359). This denotes a particular process of commodification of living knowledge where ‘welfare export’ is thus a process of extracting the ‘common’ in a given society, which in this instance is the Nordic countries, and turning this *common* into a *commodity*.

The common that is commodified is therefore largely rooted in institutions with a particular historical context, which has emphasized coverage for all its citizens. Paradoxically, the knowledge commodified has usually been thought to have a ‘decommodifying’ effect on its citizens. The contradictions that normally happen in the sphere of production are found internally in the institutions of the welfare state, i.e. in the sphere of reproduction. The very idea of ‘welfare export’ thus shows how we, as Tronti observed already in the late 1960s, “no longer have a bourgeois state *over* a capitalist society

but directly, capitalist society's own state" (Tronti [1966] 2019:247). With this in mind, the challenge to examine the downstream of such living knowledge entails looking at how the production of knowledge is used to deepen the capitalist logics in social relations using the political spheres as its medium in the process of commodification.

Conclusion: On the Commodification of Living Knowledge

The commodification of living knowledge takes its point of departure in the particularity of the welfare state's emergence as a politico-economic actor. It denotes a recomposition of the nation-state as it attempts to produce a particular locality of itself by commodifying the knowledge produced in institutions that is common in society but now available on the global market for everyone to buy.

In this essay, I have provided another picture of a new site for political struggle from the perspective of countries of the 'Global North'. I highlighted how the Nordic welfare state is increasingly attempting to capture the living knowledge of labour conducted within its institutions in order to compete on yet another scale in the global capitalist system. The re-configuration of the welfare state therefore presents us with a new sight of political struggle which touches on very fundamental questions about our social being: What is welfare? How

should it be organised? What is the purpose of welfare? While 'Welfare export' forces us to critically reflect on the fact that capital tries to capture and commodify specific perspectives on the organisation of life (*bios*), we are also presented with the opportunity to revitalise this caring social practice on the basis of the commons in order to evade the fetters of Empire.

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Notes

(1) I recognise that I apply the word 'institution' in the conventional way compared to the conceptualization by Hardt and Negri (see Agustín 2013).

(2) Throughout a majority of the post-workerist literature, the thesis of immaterial labour figures in one way or another through their reading of a specific section in Marx' *Grundrisse* labelled 'Fragments on Machines' (Marx 1973).

Abstract

This essay discusses the hypothesis of 'the commodification of living knowledge'. This hypothesis sheds light on contemporary capitalism's attempt to capture knowledge produced by living labour within the institutions of the welfare state in its process of valorisation, which provides another perspective on how 'the welfare state' transforms into 'the competitive state'. This discussion situates itself within the post-workerist literature, especially referring to twenty-year-old publication of the literat Michael Hardt and philosopher Antonio Negri's magnum opus *Empire* (2000). Focusing on the Nordic welfare state, the aim of the essay is to show how capital attempts to commodify living knowledge produced this setting. This is particularly exemplified through the phenomenon of 'welfare export' reflecting how the common is commodified. Through the discussion of how the Nordic welfare state is re-configured, the essay concludes by locating a new site of political struggle, as phenomenon such as 'welfare export' forces us to critically reflect on the purpose of welfare and the role of the welfare state as such in *Empire*.

Keywords: Imperial sovereignty; national sovereignty; multitude; the people ; multi-scalar; intersectionality.

Resumen

Este ensayo analiza la hipótesis de "la mercantilización del conocimiento vivo". Esta hipótesis arroja luz sobre el intento del capitalismo contemporáneo de capturar el conocimiento producido por el trabajo vivo dentro de las instituciones del estado de bienestar en su proceso de valorización, lo que proporciona otra perspectiva sobre cómo "el estado de bienestar" se transforma en "el estado competitivo". Esta discusión se sitúa dentro de la literatura postobrerista, especialmente en referencia a la publicación de hace veinte años del literato Michael Hardt y la obra magna *Empire* (2000) del filósofo Antonio Negri. Centrándose en el estado de bienestar nórdico, el objetivo del ensayo es mostrar cómo los intentos del capital de mercantilizar el conocimiento vivo produjeron este escenario. Esto se ejemplifica particularmente a través del fenómeno de la "exportación de bienestar" que refleja cómo se mercantiliza lo común. A través de la discusión sobre cómo se reconfigura el estado de bienestar nórdico, el ensayo concluye ubicando un nuevo lugar de lucha política, ya que un fenómeno como la 'exportación de bienestar' nos obliga a reflexionar críticamente sobre el propósito del bienestar y el papel del bienestar. estado como tal en *Empire*.

Palabras clave: Soberanía imperial; soberanía nacional; multitud; el pueblo ; multiescalar; interseccionalidad