

The Origins of Marx's General Intellect

The general intellect of the whole community, male and female, is stunted or perverted in infancy, or more commonly both, by keeping from women the knowledge possessed by men . . . The only and the simple remedy for the evils arising from these almost universal institutions of the domestic slavery of one half the human race, is utterly to eradicate them. Give men and women equal civil and political rights.

William Thompson, *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth*, 1824¹

It is nearly twenty years since the first impulse was given to the general intellect of this country, by the introduction of a new mechanical system for teaching reading and writing, by cheaper and more efficacious methods than those previously in use . . . The public mind has infinitely advanced: in despite of all the sneers at the phrase of the 'march of intellect', the fact is undeniable, that the general intellect of the country has greatly progressed. And one of the first fruits of extended intelligence has been the conviction, now fast becoming

¹ William Thompson, *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness Applied to the Newly Proposed System of Voluntary Equality of Wealth*, London: Longman, 1824, 214.

universal, that our system of law, so far from being the best in the world, is an exceedingly bad one; and stands in the most pressing need of revision and reform.

London Magazine, 1828²

The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a direct force of production, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it.

Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, 1858³

The March of Intellect

An 1828 caricature by cartoonist William Heath from the series 'March of Intellect' depicts a giant automaton advancing with long strides and holding a broom to sweep away a dusty mass of clerks, clergy, and bureaucrats, representing figures of the old order and obsolete laws (see fig. 4.1). The automaton's belly is a steam engine, while its head is made of books of history, philosophy, and (importantly) mechanics. Its crown reads 'London University'. In the background, the goddess of justice lies in ruins, summoning the automaton: 'Oh come and deliver me!!!' While at first the cartoon might seem a paean to democratic ideals and intellectual advance, on closer observation, the caricature is intended to ridicule the belief that the technologies of industrial automation (already resembling robots) might become a true agent of political change and social emancipation under the command of public education. Indeed, Heath's series of satirical engravings was originally commissioned by the Tories to voice their sarcasm regarding a potential democratisation of knowledge and technology across all classes. Nonetheless, by dint of his visionary pen, they became an accidental manifesto for the progressive camp and the invention of the future.⁴

² 'Education of the People', *London Magazine*, April 1828, 1; 'Reforms in the Law, No. I. The History of a Suit', *London Magazine*, June 1828, 309.

³ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, London: Penguin, 1993, 706.

⁴ 'Even though Heath was satirising the movement, his posters include some wonderful future ideas for transport, including a steam horse and a steam coach, a

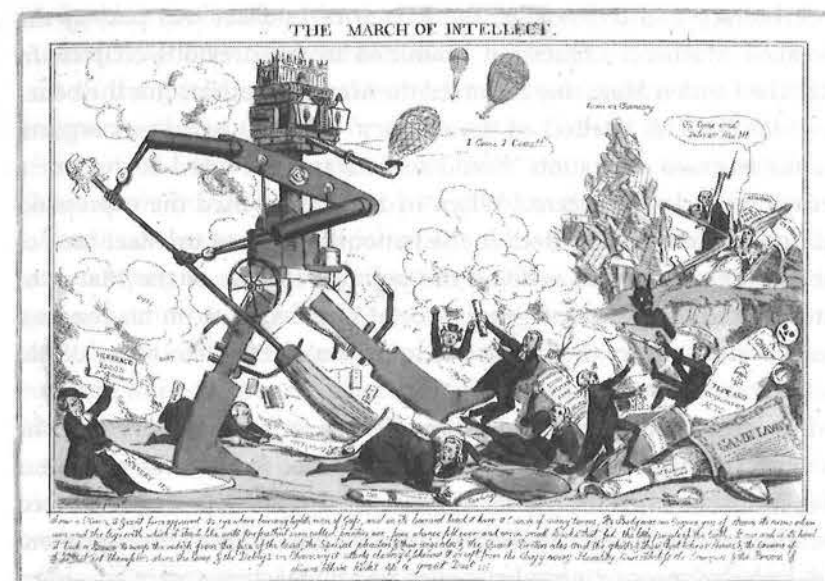


Figure 4.1. William Heath, 'The March of Intellect', ca. 1828, print, British Museum.

Initiated as a campaign in England during the Industrial Revolution, the March of Intellect, or 'March of Mind', demanded the amelioration of society's ills through programmes of public education for the lower classes.⁵ The expression 'March of Intellect' was introduced by the industrialist and utopian socialist Robert Owen in a letter to the *Times* in 1824, remarking that in recent years 'the human mind has made the most rapid and extensive strides in the knowledge of human nature, and in general knowledge'.⁶ The campaign triggered a reactionary and unsurprisingly racist backlash: the *Times* started to mock the ambitions of the working class under sarcastic headlines of the worst colonial mentality such as 'The March of Intellect in Africa'.⁷ As a campaign for progress in

vacuum tube, a bridge to Cape Town, and various forms of flight, including a flying postman.' Mike Ashley, 'Inventing the Future', British Library blog, 15 May 2014, bl.uk.

⁵ See Don Herzog, *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Order*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

⁶ Ashley, 'Inventing the Future'.

⁷ See Michael Hancher, 'Penny Magazine: March of Intellect in the Butchering Line', in *Nineteenth-Century Media and the Construction of Identities*, Laurel Brake, Bill Bell and David Finkelstein, London: Palgrave, 2016, 93.

both literacy and technology, the March of Intellect was part of the so-called Machinery Question examined in the previous chapter. In 1828 the *London Magazine* endorsed the March of Intellect for the benefit of the 'general intellect of the country' – which, its editors argued, thanks to mass education, would understand the need to reform a decaying legislative system.⁸ When in 1858 Marx used the expression (in English) 'general intellect' in the famous 'Fragment on Machines' of the *Grundrisse*, he was echoing the political climate of the March of Intellect and the power of 'general social knowledge' to, in his reading, weaken and subvert the chains of capitalism rather than those of old institutions.⁹

But it was specifically in William Thompson's *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth* (published in 1824, the same year that Owen launched the March of Intellect) that Marx first encountered the idea of the general intellect and, more importantly, the argument that knowledge, once it has been alienated by machines, may become a power inimical to workers.¹⁰ The book contains what is probably the first systematic account of mental labour – followed by Thomas Hodgskin's account in *Popular Political Economy* (1827) and Charles Babbage's project to mechanise mental labour in *On the Economy of Machinery and Manufactures* (1832).¹¹ Afterwards, because of the decline of the Mechanics' Institutes and tactical decisions within the workers' movement, the notion of mental labour encountered a hostile destiny in the Machinery Question.

Given this backdrop, when twentieth-century authors began to analyse the so-called knowledge society and thought they were discussing for the first time forms of symbolic, informational, and digital labour, they were actually operating in an area of political amnesia. In fact, Marx himself was partly responsible for bringing about this amnesia.¹² While he engaged with Thompson's and

8 *London Magazine*, April and June 1828 issues. See chapter epigraph.

9 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, London: Penguin, 1993, 690–71.

10 Thompson, *Principles of the Distribution of Wealth*.

11 Thomas Hodgskin, *Popular Political Economy: Four Lectures Delivered at the London Mechanics Institution*, London: Tait, 1827; Charles Babbage, *On the Economy of Machinery and Manufactures*, London: Charles Knight, 1832.

12 In *Capital* (493) Marx refers to Wilhelm Schulz's distinction between tool and machine, yet without commenting on Schulz's account of intellectual production

Hodgskin's political economy, he considered their emphasis on mental labour as the celebration of individual creativity – as the cult of the gifted artisan, the ingenious tool-maker, and the brave engineer – *against* labour in common: in *Capital*, Marx intentionally replaced the mental labourer with the 'collective worker' or *Gesamtarbeiter*. Marx's refusal to employ the concept of mental labour was due to the difficulty of mobilising collective knowledge into campaigns on the side of workers. The substance of knowledge and education is such that they can only be summoned for universalist battles (for the 'general intellect of the country') rather than partisan ones on the side the proletariat. Besides, since *The German Ideology*, Hegel's notion of absolute spirit appeared to be the antagonist of Marx's method of historical materialism: Marx transposed his famous anti-Hegelian passage 'life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life' to industrial England, in order to claim that labour is not determined by knowledge, but knowledge by labour.¹³

Traditionally, for Marxism, the distinction between manual and mental labour evaporates in the face of capital insofar as any kind of labour is *abstract labour* – that is, labour measured and monetised for the benefit of producing surplus value. What follows shares this traditional starting point but goes on to depart from orthodox Marxist positions. I wish to consider that any machinic interface with labour is a social relation, as much as capital, and that the machine, as much as money, mediates the relation between labour and capital.¹⁴ Thinking with, as well as beyond, Marx, I want to stress that any technology influences the metrics of abstract labour. For this purpose, this chapter traces

(*geistige Produktion*) from *Die Bewegung der Produktion* (Zurich, 1843). Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, vol. 1, Hamburg: Meissner, 1867; *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes, London: Penguin, 1981. See Walter Grab, *Dr. Wilhelm Schulz aus Darmstadt. Weggefährte von Georg Büchner und Inspirator von Karl Marx*, Frankfurt am Main: Gutenberg, 1987. Thanks to Henning Schmidgen for this reference.

13 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Die deutsche Ideologie* (1846), 1st ed., Moscow: Marx-Engels Institute, 1932; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. C. J. Arthur, New York: International Publishers, 1970.

14 This idea could be termed a *labour theory of value mediated by machinery*. It points to a further problematic in which technology would take over some features of the money form.

the origins of Marx's general intellect in order to reconsider unresolved issues of early political economy, such as the econometrics of knowledge, that are increasingly relevant today.¹⁵ In the current debates on the alienation of collective knowledge into corporate AI, we are, in fact, still hearing the clunky echoes of the nineteenth-century Machinery Question.

The discovery of Marx's 'Fragment on Machines'

Sophisticated notions of mental labour and the knowledge economy were offered at the dawn of the Victorian age, and already then were given radical interpretations. Marx, for example, addressed the economic roles of skill, knowledge, and science in his *Grundrisse*, specifically in the section that has become known as the 'Fragment on Machines.' There Marx explored an unorthodox hypothesis which was not to be reiterated in *Capital*: that because of the accumulation of the general intellect (particularly as scientific and technical knowledge embodied in machinery), labour would become secondary to capitalist accumulation, causing a crisis for the labour theory of value and blowing the foundations of capitalism skywards.¹⁶ After 1989, Marx's 'Fragment on Machines' was revived by Italian *post-operaismo* as a prescient critique of the transition to post-Fordism and the paradigms of a knowledge society and an information economy.¹⁷ Since then,

¹⁵ In the nineteenth century, physiologists and political economists tried to figure out a 'metrology' of 'cerebral labour'; according to Schaffer, the attempts to quantify intelligence with the aid of instruments contributed to the project of artificial intelligence in the following century. See Simon Schaffer, 'OK Computer', in *Ecce Cortex: Beiträge zur Geschichte des modernen Gehirns*, ed. Michael Hagner, Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 1999, 254–85.

¹⁶ This visionary hypothesis did not emerge again in *Capital*, again as a result of historical circumstances. Notebooks 6 and 7 were written in the winter of 1857–58, amid a financial crisis, whereas *Capital* was published after the crisis was over.

¹⁷ The primary sources of the complex debate on Marx's general intellect can be succinctly reconstructed as follows: Paolo Virno, 'Citazioni di fronte al pericolo', *Luogo comune* 1 (November 1990), translated by Cesare Casarino as 'Notes on the General Intellect', in *Marxism beyond Marxism*, ed. Saree Makdisi et al., New York: Routledge, 1996, 265–72; Christian Marazzi, *Il posto dei calzini: La svolta linguistica dell'economia e i suoi effetti sulla politica*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1994, translated by Giuseppina Mecchia as *Capital and Affects: The Politics of the Language Economy*, New York:

many authors – including some outside Marxism – have mobilised this esoteric fragment as a prophecy of different economic crises, especially following the internet bubble and 2000 stock market crash. The way Marx's 'Fragment on Machines' has reached even the debate on artificial intelligence and post-capitalism is a philological adventure that is worth recapitulating.¹⁸

The *Grundrisse* is 'a series of seven notebooks rough-drafted by Marx, chiefly with the purpose of self-clarification, during the winter of 1857–8'.¹⁹ Indeed, the notebooks frequently reveal the method of inquiry and subtext of *Capital*, published a decade later. Yet the *Grundrisse* remained unpublished until the twentieth century – in Moscow in 1939 and Berlin in 1953 – which means that its reception entered Marxist debates almost a century after the publication of *Capital*. While a partial Italian translation started to circulate in 1956, a complete English translation was to become available only in 1973.²⁰ The denomination 'Fragment on Machines' to define specifically notebooks 6 and 7 of the *Grundrisse* became canonical due to the editorial choice of Raniero Panzieri, who published their translation under the title 'Frammento sulle macchine' in the 1964 issue of *Quaderni Rossi*, the journal of Italian *operaismo*.²¹ In

Semiotext(e), 2011; Maurizio Lazzarato and Antonio Negri, 'Travail immatériel et subjectivité', *Futur antérieur* 6 (1991): 86–99; Paolo Virno, *Grammatica della Multitudine*, Rome: Derive Approdi, 2002, translated by Isabella Bertolotti et al. as *A Grammar of the Multitude*, New York: Semiotext(e), 2004; Carlo Vercellone, 'From Formal Subsumption to General Intellect: Elements for a Marxist Reading of the Thesis of Cognitive Capitalism', *Historical Materialism* 15, no. 1 (2007): 13–36. Probably the first reception of this debate in English is Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism*, Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000. For a critique of *operaismo*'s interpretation, see Michael Heinrich, 'The Fragment on Machines: A Marxian Misconception in the *Grundrisse* and Its Overcoming in *Capital*', and Tony Smith, 'The General Intellect in the *Grundrisse* and Beyond', in *Marx's Laboratory: Critical Interpretations of the Grundrisse*, ed. Riccardo Bellofiore et al., Leiden: Brill, 2013, 195–212, 213–31.

¹⁸ See Paul Mason, 'The End of Capitalism Has Begun', *Guardian*, 17 July 2015; and Paul Mason, *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future*, London: Macmillan, 2016. See also MacKenzie Wark, *General Intellects*, London: Verso, 2017.

¹⁹ Martin Nicolaus, 'Foreword', in Marx, *Grundrisse*, 7.

²⁰ Marcello Musto, 'Dissemination and Reception of the *Grundrisse* in the World', in *Karl Marx's Grundrisse*, ed. Marcello Musto, London: Routledge, 2008, 207–16.

²¹ Karl Marx, 'Frammento sulle macchine', trans. Renato Solmi, *Quaderni Rossi* 4 (1964).

the same year, the German philosopher Herbert Marcuse drew upon notebooks 6 and 7 in his *One-Dimensional Man*, while discussing the emancipatory potential of automation.²² In 1972, in a footnote in *Anti-Oedipus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari also refer to them as the 'chapter on automation'.²³ That same year, they were partially published in English as 'Notes on Machines' in the journal *Economy and Society*.²⁴ In 1978 Antonio Negri gave an extended commentary on the 'chapter on machines' in his *Marx Beyond Marx* seminar in Paris (at the invitation of Louis Althusser), reading it against the background of the social antagonism of the preceding decade. But it was only after the fall of the Berlin Wall that Italian *post-operaismo* rediscovered and promoted the 'Fragment on Machines'. In 1990 the philosopher Paolo Virno drew attention to the notion of general intellect in the journal *Luogo comune*. Paying ironic tribute to the Spaghetti Western, he was already warning about the cycles of the concept's revival:

Often in westerns the hero, when faced by the most concrete of dilemmas, cites a passage from the Old Testament . . . This is how Karl Marx's 'Fragment on machines' has been read and cited from the early 1960s onwards. We have referred back many times to these pages . . . in order to make some sense out of the unprecedented quality of workers' strikes, of the introduction of robots into the assembly lines and computers into the offices, and of certain kinds of youth behavior. The history of the 'Fragment's' successive interpretations is a history of crises and of new beginnings.²⁵

Virno explained that the 'Fragment' was quoted in the 1960s to question the supposed neutrality of science in industrial production, in the 1970s as a critique of the ideology of labour in state socialism, and, finally, in the 1980s as a recognition of the tendencies of post-Fordism, yet without any emancipatory or conflictual reversal, as Marx would

²² Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1964, 39.

²³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley et al., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, 232n76. See also Matteo Pasquinelli, 'Italian Operaismo and the Information Machine', *Theory, Culture and Society* 32, no. 3 (2015).

²⁴ Karl Marx, 'Notes on Machines', *Economy and Society* 1, no. 3 (1972).

²⁵ Virno, 'Notes'.

have wished. While Marxist scholars aimed for greater philological rigour in their reading of the general intellect, militants updated its interpretation in the context of current social transformations and struggles.²⁶ *Post-operaismo* famously forged new antagonistic concepts out of Marx's general intellect, such as 'immaterial labour', 'mass intellectuality', and 'cognitive capitalism', stressing the autonomy of 'living knowledge' against capital. A lesson worth recalling from the Machinery Question discussed in the previous chapter, however, is that the issue of collective knowledge should never be separated from its embodiment in machines, instruments of measurement, and *Kulturtechniken*. Indeed, the employment of artificial intelligence in the twentieth century has abruptly reminded everyone that knowledge can be analysed, measured, and automated as successfully as manual labour.

Scholars have wondered where the expression 'general intellect' came from, as it appears only once, in English, in the *Grundrisse*. Virno thought he detected the echo of Aristotle's *nous poietikos* and Rousseau's *volonté générale*.²⁷ As the 'Fragment' follows strains of argumentation that are similar to chapters 14 and 15 of *Capital* on the division of labour and machinery, it is not surprising that the missing sources can be found in the footnotes to these chapters of *Capital*. These common strains of argumentation echo, fundamentally, Babbage's theory of machinery, and it is by following Marx's reading of Babbage in chapter 14 of *Capital* that the notion of general intellect can be reliably traced back to William Thompson's notion of 'knowledge labour'.

Marx's interpretation of Babbage

In 1832, Babbage advised his fellow industrialists, 'The workshops of [England] contain within them a rich mine of knowledge, too generally

²⁶ Wolfgang Fritz Haug warned that the nebulous origins of the general intellect contributed to a sloganistic use 'at the cost of theoretical arbitrariness'. The general intellect belongs, Haug asserts, to a galaxy of similar Marxian terms to be taken in consideration, such as 'general social labour', 'general scientific labour', 'accumulation of knowledge and of skill, the general productive forces of the human brain', 'general progress', 'development of the general powers of the human head', 'general social knowledge', 'social intellect'. Wolfgang Fritz Haug, 'Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism: General Intellect', *Historical Materialism* 18, no. 2 (2010).

²⁷ Virno, 'Notes'.

neglected by the wealthier classes.²⁸ Following this invitation to the industrial workshops as 'mundane places of intelligence', Simon Schaffer finds that 'Babbage's most penetrating London reader' was Marx.²⁹ Indeed, Marx had already quoted Babbage in *The Poverty of Philosophy* during his exile in Brussels in 1847 and, since then, adopted two analytical principles that were to become pivotal in *Capital* in drawing a robust theory of the machine and in grounding the theory of relative surplus value.

The first is the *labour theory of the machine*, which states that a new machine comes to imitate and replace a previous division of labour. As examined previously, this is an idea already formulated by Adam Smith, but better articulated by Babbage due to his greater technical experience. The second analytical principle is the 'Babbage principle', also discussed earlier, which has been renamed here the *principle of labour calculation*. It states that the organisation of a production process in small tasks (division of labour) allows exactly the necessary quantity of labour to be purchased for each task (division of value). In this respect, the division of labour provides not only the design of machinery but also an economic configuration to calibrate and calculate surplus labour extraction. In complex forms of management such as Taylorism, the principle of surplus labour modulation opens onto a clockwork view of labour, which can be further subdivided and recomposed into algorithmic assemblages. The synthesis of both analytical principles ideally describes the machine as an apparatus that actively projects back a new articulation and metrics of labour. In the pages of *Capital*, the industrial machine appears to be not just a regulator to discipline labour but also a calculator to measure relative surplus value, echoing the numerical exactitude of Babbage's calculating engines.

Here, I will read the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* through the lens of Babbage's two analytical principles. We will see how Babbage's labour theory of the machine is used by Marx to raise the figure of the collective worker as a sort of reincarnation of the general intellect and, furthermore, how Babbage's principle of modulation of surplus labour is used to sketch the idea of relative surplus value. Taken together, Babbage's

28 Babbage, *On the Economy of Machinery*, vi.

29 Simon Schaffer, 'Babbage's Intelligence: Calculating Engines and the Factory System', *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (1994), 204.

two principles show that the general intellect of the *Grundrisse* evolves in *Capital* into a machinic collective worker, almost with the features of a proto-cybernetic organism, and the industrial machine becomes a calculator of the relative surplus value that this cyborg produces.

In discussing the relation between labour and machinery, knowledge and capital, Marx found himself embedded in a hybrid dialectics between German idealism and British political economy. The similar argumentation in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* in the sections on machinery and division of labour follows four movements, to which I will now turn: (1) the invention of machinery through the division of labour, (2) the alienation of knowledge by machinery, (3) the devaluation of capital by knowledge accumulation, and (4) the rise of the collective worker.

The invention of machinery through the division of labour

Who is the inventor of the machine? The worker, the engineer, or the factory's master? Science, cunning, or labour? As a fellow of the Royal Society, Babbage publicly praised the gifts of science, but theoretically maintained that machinery emerges as a replacement of the division of labour. As already discussed, Babbage was committed to a *labour theory of the machine*, since, for him, the design of a new machine always imitates the design of a previous division of labour. In *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), Marx already mobilised Babbage against Proudhon, who thought that machinery is the *antithesis* of the division of labour. Marx argued the opposite, that machinery emerges as the *synthesis of the division of labour*: 'When, by the division of labour, each particular operation has been simplified to the use of a single instrument, the linking up of all these instruments, set in motion by a single engine, constitutes – a machine.'³⁰ Later, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx kept on drawing on Babbage to remark that technology is not created by the 'analysis' of nature by science but by the 'analysis' of labour:

It is, firstly, the analysis [*Analyse*] and application of mechanical and chemical laws, arising directly out of science, which enables

30 Babbage, *On the Economy of Machinery*, as quoted in Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1955, 121.

the machine to perform the same labour as that previously performed by the worker. However, the development of machinery along this path occurs only when large industry has already reached a higher stage, and all the sciences have been pressed into the service of capital . . . Invention then becomes a business, and the application of science to direct production itself becomes a prospect which determines and solicits it. But this is not the road along which machinery, by and large, arose, and even less the road on which it progresses in detail. This road is, rather, dissection [*Analyse*] – through the division of labour, which gradually transforms the workers' operations into more and more mechanical ones, so that at a certain point a mechanism can step into their places.³¹

Marx also adopted Babbage's theory methodologically, including in *Capital*, where the chapter on machinery follows the chapter on the division of labour. There exists a structural homology between the design of machinery, and the division of labour, as Marx's argument highlights: 'The machine is a mechanism that, after being set in motion, performs with its tools the same operations as the worker formerly did with similar tools.'³² In a footnote, he refers to Babbage's synthetic definition of machine ('The union of all these simple instruments, set in motion by a motor, constitutes a machine') and offers his own paraphrase:

The machine, which is the starting-point of the industrial revolution, replaces the worker, who handles a single tool, by a mechanism operating with a number of similar tools and set in motion by a single motive power, whatever the form of that power.³³

It is at this point of *Capital* that Marx advances a further analytical principle that would go on to have an enormous influence on the methodology of the history of science and technology in the

31 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 704.

32 Marx, *Capital*, 495.

33 Ibid., 497.

twentieth century.³⁴ After challenging the belief that science, rather than labour, is the origin of the machine, Marx reverses the perception of the steam engine as the prime catalyst of the Industrial Revolution. Instead, he contends that it is the growth of the division of labour, its tools and 'tooling machines', that 'requires a mightier moving power than that of man', a source of energy that will be found in steam.³⁵ It was not the invention of the steam engine (*means of production*) that triggered the Industrial Revolution (as it is popular to theorize in the ecological discourse), but rather the developments of capital and labour (*relations of production*) demanding a more powerful source of energy:³⁶

The steam-engine itself, such as it was at its invention during the manufacturing period at the close of the seventeenth century, and such as it continued to be down to 1780, did not give rise to any industrial revolution. It was, on the contrary, the invention of [tooling] machines [*Werkzeugmaschinen*] that made a revolution in the form of steam-engines necessary.³⁷

The 'mechanical monster' of the industrial factory was summoned first by labour and then accelerated by steam power, not the other way around.³⁸ Marx was clear: the genesis of technology is an *emergent process* driven by the division of labour. It is from the materiality of collective labour, from conscious and unconscious forms of

34 See Gideon Freudenthal and Peter McLaughlin (eds), *The Social and Economic Roots of the Scientific Revolution: Texts by Boris Hessen and Henryk Grossmann*, Berlin: Springer, 2009.

35 'An increase in the size of the machine and the number of its working tools calls for a more massive mechanism to drive it; and this mechanism, in order to overcome its own inertia, requires a mightier moving power than that of man.' Marx, *Capital*, 497.

36 Marx is mistakenly considered a *techno-determinist* for the prominence he grants to machinery in capitalism, but if he is determinist at all, he is a determinist of the *relations of production* and not of the *means of production*, as the division of labour, and not technology, is the driving force of capital. 'The inclusion of labor power as a force of production thus admits conscious human agency as a determinant of history: it is people, as much as or more than the machine, that make history.' Donald MacKenzie, 'Marx and Machine', *Knowing Machines*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998, 26.

37 Marx, *Capital*, 496.

38 Ibid., 507.

cooperation, that extended apparatuses of machines emerge. Here, intelligence resides in the ramifications of human cooperation rather than in individual mental labour. Machine intelligence mirrors, embodies, and amplifies the analytical intelligence of collective labour.³⁹

The alienation of knowledge by machinery

'What distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax.'⁴⁰ This is Marx's recognition, in *Capital*, of labour as a mental and individual activity. The collective division of labour, or labour in common, however, remains the *political inventor* of the machine.⁴¹ A process of alienation of skill and knowledge starts as soon as machinery appears in front and in place of labour. Tools pass from the hands of the worker to the hands of the machine, and the same process happens to workers' knowledge: 'Along with the tool, the skill of the worker in handling it passes over to the machine.'⁴² As such, the machine is but a crystallisation of collective knowledge. Marx condemns this alienation of the human mind, seconding Owen:

Since the general introduction of soulless mechanisms in British manufactures, people have with rare exceptions been treated as a secondary and subordinate machine, and far more attention has been given to the perfection of the raw materials of wood and metals than to those of body and spirit.⁴³

The introduction of machinery marks a dramatic dialectical turn in the history of labour, whereby the worker ceases to be the *subject* of the machine and becomes the *object* of capital: 'The hand tool makes the worker independent – posits him as proprietor. Machinery – as fixed

39 For the idea of analytical intelligence, see Lorraine Daston, 'Calculation and the Division of Labour, 1750–1950', *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute* 62 (Spring 2018): 9–30.

40 Marx, *Capital*, 284.

41 Hodgskin gave great importance to observation (i.e., mental design) in the invention of machinery.

42 Marx, *Capital*, 545.

43 Robert Owen, 'Essays on the Formation of the Human Character' (1840), as quoted in Marx, *Grundrisse*, 711.

capital – posits him as dependent, posits him as appropriated.'⁴⁴ This shift in power between human and machine in the Victorian age is also the inception of a new imagery, in which machines acquire features of the living and the workers those of automata:⁴⁵

[It] is the machine which possesses skill and strength in place of the worker, is itself the virtuoso, with a soul of its own in the mechanical laws acting through it . . . The worker's activity, reduced to a mere abstraction of activity, is determined and regulated on all sides by the movement of the machinery, and not the opposite. The science which compels the inanimate limbs of the machinery, by their construction, to act purposefully, as an automaton, does not exist in the worker's consciousness, but rather acts upon him through the machine as an alien power, as the power of the machine itself.⁴⁶

The reflection on the alienation of knowledge from workers continues in *Capital*, where Marx has the process of knowledge extraction culminate in the full separation of science as a productive agent from labour:

The knowledge, judgement and will which, even though to a small extent, are exercised by the independent peasant or handicraftsman, in the same way as the savage makes the whole art of war consist in the exercise of his personal cunning, are faculties now required only for the workshop as a whole. The possibility of an intelligent direction of production expands in one direction, because it vanishes in many others. What is lost by the specialized workers is concentrated in the capital which confronts them. It is a result of the division of labour in manufacture that the worker is brought face to face with the intellectual potentialities [*geistige Potenzen*] of the material process of production as the property of another and as a power which rules

44 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 702. Marx also quotes Hodgskin at 709: 'As soon as the division of labour is developed, almost every piece of work done by a single individual is a part of a whole, having no value or utility of itself. There is nothing on which the labourer can seize: this is my produce, this I will keep to myself.'

45 Simon Schaffer, 'Babbage's Dancer and the Impresarios of Mechanism', in *Cultural Babbage*, ed. Francis Spufford and Jenny Uglow, London: Faber & Faber, 1997, 53–80.

46 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 692–3.

over him. This process of separation starts in simple co-operation, where the capitalist represents to the individual workers the unity and the will of the whole body of social labour. It is developed in manufacture, which mutilates the worker, turning him into a fragment of himself. It is completed in large-scale industry, which makes science a potentiality for production which is distinct from labour and presses it into the service of capital.⁴⁷

Marx comments upon the latter passage from *Capital* with a footnote to Thompson's *Inquiry into the Principles of the Distribution of Wealth* which is necessary to repeat:

'The man of knowledge and the productive labourer come to be widely divided from each other, and knowledge, instead of remaining the handmaid of labour in the hand of the labourer to increase his productive powers . . . has almost everywhere arrayed itself against labour.' 'Knowledge' becomes 'an instrument, capable of being detached from labour and opposed to it.'⁴⁸

Thompson provides a definition of knowledge labour that predates the twentieth-century theorists of the knowledge society and cognitive labour. As seen in the previous chapter, Thompson always included in the definition of labour 'the quantity of knowledge requisite for its direction' without which labour 'would be no more than brute force'.⁴⁹ In a polemic typical of Owenism, Thompson described machinery humiliating the 'general intellectual powers' of the workers, who were reduced to 'drilled automata'. Accordingly, the factory is an apparatus to keep the workers 'ignorant of the secret springs which regulated the machine and to repress the general powers of their minds' so 'that the fruits of their own labors were by a hundred contrivances taken away from them'.⁵⁰ In different passages, Thompson used the expressions 'general intellect', 'general intellectual power', 'general knowledge', and 'general power of the minds' in direct resonance with identical or equivalent terms used

47 Marx, *Capital*, 482.

48 Ibid., 483. Thompson, *Principles of the Distribution of Wealth*, 274.

49 Thompson, *Principles of the Distribution of Wealth*, 272.

50 Ibid., 292.

by Marx in the *Grundrisse*, such as 'general social labour', 'general scientific labour', 'general productive forces of the human brain', 'general social knowledge', and 'social intellect'.⁵¹ Importantly, as indicated in the opening epigraph to this chapter, Thompson drew a direct link between the construction of a primarily white male general intellect and issues of gendered and racial discrimination. In Thompson's view, people are racist and chauvinist due to the lack of proper knowledge and education:

Why also, it may be asked in reply, has the slavery of the blacks, and of women, been established? Because the whites in the one case, because the men in the other, made the laws: because knowledge had not been obtained on these subjects, the whites and the men erroneously conceiving it to be their interest to oppress blacks and women.⁵²

Marx, for his part, also recognised the psychopathologies of industrial labour and the tactics to keep the workforce as illiterate as possible. He quoted Adam Smith's mentor, the Scottish philosopher Adam Ferguson, who had reached this conclusion a century earlier:

Ignorance is the mother of industry as well as of superstition. Reflection and fancy are subject to err; but a habit of moving the hand or the foot is independent of either. Manufactures, accordingly, prosper most where the mind is least consulted, and where the workshop may . . . be considered as an engine, the parts of which are men.⁵³

This should serve to remind us that the public mythology of artificial intelligence has always operated on the side of capital together with a hidden agenda to foster human stupidity, including the promulgation of racist and sexist ideologies.

51 Ibid., 272–362.

52 Ibid., 303.

53 Adam Ferguson, as quoted by Marx in *Capital*, 483. Marx cites Ferguson also for recognising as early as 1767 that 'thinking itself, in this age of separations, may become a peculiar craft'. Marx, *Capital*, 484.

The devaluation of capital by knowledge accumulation

What is the economic value of knowledge and science? What role do they play in capitalist accumulation? Marx explored these questions in an age that was flourishing with mechanical ingenuity, technical intelligence, and large infrastructures, such as railway and telegraph networks. In the passage on the general intellect, Marx considered knowledge in three ways: first, as a 'direct force of production' (*unmittelbaren Produktivkraft*); second, under the form of the 'social forces of production' (*gesellschaftlichen Produktivkräfte*); and third, as social practice (*gesellschaftlichen Praxis*), which is not abstract knowledge per se:

Nature builds no machines, no locomotives, railways, *electric telegraphs*, *self-acting mules* etc. These are products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature, or of human participation in nature. They are *organs of the human brain, created by the human hand*; the power of knowledge, objectified. The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social *knowledge* has become a *direct force of production*, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the *general intellect* and been transformed in accordance with it. To what degree the powers of social production have been produced, not only in the form of knowledge, but also as immediate organs of social practice, of the real life process.⁵⁴

The general intellect becomes a transformative agent of society in a way that clearly echoes Thompson's optimism about the 'distribution of knowledge' as conducive to 'voluntary equality in the distribution of wealth'. The 'Fragment on Machines' contains an unresolved tension between *knowledge objectified in machinery* (as 'development of fixed capital') and *knowledge expressed by social production* (as 'development of the social individual'). Marx considers the primacy of knowledge in the production process and, then, the primacy of praxis over knowledge itself. The same thesis emerges in *Capital*, where Marx registers the stress of industrial labour on the workers' nervous system. Marx

⁵⁴ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 706. The terms marked by asterisks appear in English in the original manuscript.

compares the economic value of individual skill against that of science. A realistic competition between the two is unlikely, since after a long process of 'separation of the intellectual faculties', the special skills of the worker vanish before the magnitude of the science, natural energy, and social labour that animates machinery:

The separation of the intellectual faculties of the production process from manual labour, and the transformation of those faculties into powers exercised by capital over labour, is . . . finally completed by large-scale industry erected on the foundation of machinery. The special skill of each individual machine-operator, who has now been deprived of all significance, vanishes as an infinitesimal quantity in the face of the science, the gigantic natural forces, and the mass of social labour embodied in the system of machinery, which, together with those three forces, constitutes the power of the 'master'.⁵⁵

In the 'Fragment', we have not only the recognition of knowledge as an alien power embodied in machinery (as found in Thompson) but also the attempt to assess the magnitude of its valorisation (which is missing in the latter). Here, Marx uses a criterion to assess knowledge accumulation that derives from the work of Thomas Hodgskin – a Ricardian socialist introduced in the previous chapter – often quoting his book *Popular Political Economy* (1827) and also praising his *Labour Defended against the Claims of Capital* (1825). Hodgskin pitted a positive emphasis on fixed capital as a concrete accumulation of past labour, knowledge, and science against the 'fiction' of circulating capital. In the *Grundrisse*, there is an echo of Hodgskin's ideas in Marx's claim that machinery is the 'most adequate form of fixed capital':

The accumulation of knowledge and of skill, of the general productive forces of the social brain, is thus absorbed into capital, as opposed to labour, and hence appears as an attribute of capital, and more specifically of fixed capital, in so far as it enters into the production process as a means of production proper. Machinery appears, then, as the

⁵⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 549.

most adequate form of fixed capital, and fixed capital . . . appears as the most adequate form of capital as such.⁵⁶

Modernising the Baconian motto 'Knowledge is power', authors of the industrial age such as Babbage, Thompson, and Hodgskin argued that knowledge is, without doubt, a productive and economic force. For Hodgskin, as much as for Thompson, it should be repeated, labour is primarily mental labour – that is, knowledge. 'Mental labour' is

the labour of observing and ascertaining by what means the material world will give us the most wealth . . . Unless there be mental labour, there can be no manual dexterity; and no capability of inventing machines. It therefore is essential to production.⁵⁷

Importantly, for Hodgskin, there are neither intellectual hierarchies, nor division of hand and mind, nor a labour aristocracy in need of promotion: 'both mental and bodily labour are practised by almost every individual.'⁵⁸ In fact, Marx quotes Hodgskin in *Capital* to stress that skill is a common resource which is shared among workers and passes from one generation to the next.⁵⁹ Here, knowledge is a power that is collectively produced and shared, and this power constitutes (together with machinery and infrastructures) the core of fixed capital that must be reappropriated by workers (against the 'fiction' of circulating capital).⁶⁰

The most visionary passages of the *Grundrisse* refer to the crisis of capitalism due to the crisis of the centrality of labour, and therefore of the labour theory of value – which is to say, due to the fact that 'direct labour and its quantity disappear as the determinant principle of production . . . compared to general scientific labour, technological application of natural sciences . . . and to the general productive force arising from social combination [*Gliederung*].'⁶¹ Further, says Marx:

⁵⁶ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 694.

⁵⁷ Hodgskin, *Popular Political Economy*, 45, 47.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵⁹ 'Easy labour is transmitted skill.' *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶⁰ 'Hodgskin called circulating capital a "fiction". Fixed capital was the stored-up skill of past labour.' Maxine Berg, *The Machinery Question and the Making of Political Economy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, 274.

⁶¹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 700.

Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labour time to a minimum, while it posits labour time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth . . . On the one side, then, it calls to life all the powers of science and of nature, as of social combination and of social intercourse, in order to make the creation of wealth independent (relatively) of the labour time employed on it. On the other side, it wants to use labour time as the measuring rod for the giant social forces thereby created, and to confine them within the limits required to maintain the already created value as value. Forces of production and social relations – two different sides of the development of the social individual – appear to capital as mere means, and are merely means for it to produce on its limited foundation. In fact, however, they are the material conditions to blow this foundation sky-high.⁶²

What looks like a contradiction in Marx's system (the obliteration of the political centrality of labour) is in fact the consequence of such centrality. Everywhere in the world, workers have been working enough! They have been producing so much and for so long that their past accumulated labour (under the forms of machinery, infrastructures, and collective knowledge) affects the rate of profit and slows down the economy. This is the thesis of the productivity of labour pitted against the unproductivity of capital, found in Hodgskin's *Labour Defended against Capital*. Marx, for his part, tries to prove that the accumulation of fixed capital (as machinery, infrastructures, collective knowledge, and science) could have profound side effects on the side of circulating capital (beside the chance of an overproduction crisis). In the *Grundrisse*, he accordingly explores the hypothesis that a growth of collective and technical knowledge could undermine capital's dominance, as Thompson and Hodgskin envisioned. Ultimately, in *Capital*, the utopian enthusiasms of the *Grundrisse* are reabsorbed by a realistic calculation of relative surplus value, which is adopted as the metrics of machinery and implicit metrics of knowledge value as well.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 706.

The rise of the collective worker

In *Capital*, Marx replies to the Machinery Question by casting an extended social actor, the collective worker (*Gesamtarbeiter*), at the centre of the industrial theatre, whereas, for the bourgeoisie, it was an engineer with a steam engine. The figure of the collective worker replaces the personality cult of the inventor (individual mental labour) but also the idea of the general intellect (collective mental labour). Drawing on Babbage's labour theory of the machine, which explains the machine as the embodiment of the division of labour, Marx asserts the collective worker as the true *political inventor* of technology. The ambiguous hypothesis of the *knowledge theory of value* of the *Grundrisse* is thus finally grounded on an empirical basis: intelligence is logically materialised in the ramifications of the division of labour. The collective worker is a personification of the general intellect and, precisely, of its mechanisation.

Marx follows closely Babbage's labour theory of the machine in both the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, but only in the latter does he make use of Babbage's principle of surplus labour modulation, which helps him to sketch the concept of relative surplus value and to measure the productivity of labour and machinery. Babbage's principle as quoted by Marx is as follows:

The master manufacturer, by dividing the work to be executed into different processes, each requiring different degrees of skill or of force, can purchase exactly that precise quantity of both which is necessary for each process; whereas, if the whole work were executed by one workman, that person must possess sufficient skill to perform the most difficult, and sufficient strength to execute the most laborious of the operations into which the art is divided.⁶³

Marx reverses the mystification of 'the master manufacturer' by restoring to the centre of the Babbage principle the collective worker who, needless to say, becomes now the main actor of the division of labour. The collective worker acquires features of a super-organism:

⁶³ Marx, *Capital*, 469. The Penguin edition wrongly says 'Ch. 19, pp. 175' of Babbage's book: it is chapter 18, page 137.

The collective worker, formed out of the combination of a number of individual specialized workers, is the item of machinery specifically characteristic of the manufacturing period . . . In one operation he must exert more strength, in another more skill, in another more attention; and the same individual does not possess all these qualities in an equal degree . . . After the various operations have been separated, made independent and isolated, the workers are divided, classified and grouped according to their predominant qualities . . . The collective worker now possesses all the qualities necessary for production in an equal degree of excellence, and expends them in the most economical way by exclusively employing all his organs, individualized in particular workers or groups of workers, in performing their special functions.⁶⁴

In Marx's language, the collective worker becomes an 'item of machinery', a 'social mechanism', a 'collective working organism'.⁶⁵ Vivid machinic metaphors accompany the reincarnation of the general intellect as collective worker. The prehistory of the cyborg can be read between the lines of *Capital*:

The social mechanism of production, which is made up of numerous individual specialized workers, belongs to the capitalist . . . Not only is the specialized work distributed among the different individuals, but the individual himself is divided up, and transformed into the automatic motor of a detail operation.⁶⁶

The 'Fragment on Machines' emphasised not only the growing economic role of knowledge and science but also the role of social cooperation – that is, the growing role of the *general machinery* of social relations beyond the factory system. In a movement that resembles that of the construction of the *Gesamtarbeiter* within the factory, in the *Grundrisse* Marx sets 'the social individual . . . as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth' in the society to come:

⁶⁴ Marx, *Capital*, 468–9.

⁶⁵ See Henning Schmidgen, '1818: Der Frankenstein-Komplex', afterword to Bruno Latour, *Aramis: oder Die Liebe zur Technik*, trans. Gustav Roßler, Heidelberg: Mohr Siebeck, 2018, 303–19.

⁶⁶ Marx, *Capital*, 481.

[The worker] steps to the side of the production process instead of being its chief actor. In this transformation, it is neither the direct human labour he himself performs, nor the time during which he works, but rather the appropriation of his own general productive power, his understanding of nature and his mastery over it by virtue of his presence as a social body – it is, in a word, the development of the social individual which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and of wealth.⁶⁷

It seems that, with the transmutation of the general intellect into the collective worker, Marx also abandons the theory of capitalism's implosion due to the overproduction of knowledge as fixed capital. Capitalism will no longer collapse due to the accumulation of knowledge, because knowledge itself helps new apparatuses to improve the extraction of surplus value. Marxist scholar Michael Heinrich has noted that in *Capital*, 'when dealing with the production of relative surplus value, we can find an implicit critique of the "Fragment on machines"'.⁶⁸ Here, Marx appears to employ Babbage's principle of the modulation of surplus labour to design a theory of relative surplus value that recognises capitalism's capacity to maintain exploitation in equilibrium. According to Marx, surplus value can be augmented not just by reducing wages and material costs but also by increasing the productivity of labour in general – that is, by redesigning the division of labour and machines. If, according to Babbage's principle, the division of labour is an apparatus to modulate regimes of skill and therefore different regimes of salary according to skill, the division of labour becomes a modulation of relative surplus value. Being itself an embodiment of the division of labour, the machine then becomes the apparatus to discipline labour and regulate the extraction of relative surplus value.⁶⁹ As in Babbage's vision, the machine becomes a calculating engine – in this case, an instrument for the measurement of surplus value.

67 Marx, *Grundrisse*, 705.

68 Heinrich, 'Fragment on Machines', 197.

69 'One great advantage which we may derive from machinery is from the check which it affords against the inattention, the idleness, or the dishonesty of human agents.' Babbage, *On the Economy of Machinery*, 54.

The machine is a social relation, not a thing

In the twentieth century, Harry Braverman was probably the first Marxist to rediscover Babbage's pioneering experiments in computation and influence on Marx's theory of the division of labour.⁷⁰ While Marx read Thompson, Hodgskin, and Babbage, he never employed the notion of mental labour, probably in order to avoid supporting a labour aristocracy of skilled artisans as a political subject separate from the working class. For Marx, labour is always collective: there is no individual labour that is more prestigious than others, and, therefore, mental labour is always general; the mind is by definition social. Rather than a *knowledge theory of labour* that grants primacy to conscious activity, like the one in Thompson and Hodgskin, Marx maintains a *labour theory of knowledge* that recognises the cognitive import of forms of labour that are social, distributed, spontaneous, and unconscious. Intelligence emerges from the abstract assemblage of workers' simple gestures and micro-decisions, even and especially those which are unconscious.⁷¹ In the general intellect studies and the history of technology, these are the in-between worlds of collective intelligence and unconscious cooperation, but also those of 'mechanised knowledge' and 'mindful mechanics'.⁷² It ends up being Babbage who provides Marx with an operative paradigm to overcome Hegel's *Geist* and imbricate knowledge, science, and the general intellect into production.

As already stressed, the distinction between manual and mental labour disappears in Marxism because, from the abstract point of view of capital, all waged labour, without distinction, produces surplus value; all labour is abstract labour. However, the abstract eye of capital that regulates the labour theory of value employs a specific instrument to measure labour: the clock. In this way, what looks like a universal law

70 Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974.

71 For the notion of the micro-decision, see Romano Alquati, 'Composizione organica del capitale e forza-lavoro alla Olivetti', part 2, *Quaderni Rossi* 3 (1963). Partially translated in Matteo Pasquinelli, 'Italian Operaismo and the Information Machine', *Theory, Culture, and Society* 32, no. 3 (2015): 55.

72 What in the following century will become the core of operationalism: management, logistics, and computer science. See Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *The Politics of Operations: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019.

has to deal with the metrics of a very mundane technology; after all, clocks are not universal.⁷³ Machines can impose a metrics of labour other than time, as has recently happened with social data analytics. As much as new instruments define new domains of science, likewise they define new domains of labour after being invented by labour itself.⁷⁴ Any new machine is a new configuration of space, time, and social relations, and it projects new metrics of such diagrams.⁷⁵ In the Victorian age, a metrology of mental labour existed only in an embryonic state. A rudimentary econometrics of knowledge begins to emerge only in the twentieth century with the first theory of information. The thesis of this chapter is that Marx's labour theory of value did not resolve the metrics for the domains of knowledge and intelligence, which had to be explored in the articulation of the machine design and in the Babbage principle.

Following Braverman and Schaffer, one could add that Babbage provided not just a labour theory of the machine but a *labour theory of machine intelligence*.⁷⁶ Indeed, Babbage's calculating engines ('intelligent machines' of their age) were an implementation of the analytical eye of the factory's master. Cousins of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, they were instruments, simultaneously, of surveillance and measurement of labour. It is this idea that we should consider and apply to the age of artificial intelligence and its political critique, although reversing its polarisation, in order to declare computing infrastructures a concretion of labour in common.⁷⁷

73 See Antonio Negri, *Time for Revolution*, London: Continuum, 2003, 27.

74 See Peter Damerow and Wolfgang Lefèvre, 'Tools of Science', in *Abstraction and Representation: Essays on the Cultural Evolution of Thinking*, ed. Peter Damerow, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1996, 395–404.

75 The idea that each machine establishes its own labour unit of measure constitutes a *machine theory of labour*, which cannot be expanded on here.

76 See Schaffer, 'Babbage's Intelligence'.

77 See Antonio Negri, 'The Re-Appropriation of Fixed Capital: A Metaphor?', in *Digital Objects, Digital Subjects*, ed. David Chandler and Christian Fuchs, London: University of Westminster Press, 2019, 205–14; Frederic Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, London: Verso, 2016.

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The Abstraction of Labour

Cybernetics recomposes globally and organically the functions of the general worker that are pulverized into individual micro-decisions: the 'bit' links up the atomized worker to the 'figures' of the 'Plan'.

Romano Alquati, 1963¹

The bifurcation of energy and information

With unusual insight, the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon once challenged the common understanding of the industrial age. He wrote: 'The industrial modality appears when the source of information and the source of energy separate, namely when the Human Being is merely the source of information, and Nature is required to furnish the energy. The machine is different from the tool in that it is a relay: it has two different entry points, that of energy and that of information.'² After all, the appearance of a modern notion of information is usually associated

1 'La cibernetica ricomponne globalmente e organicamente le funzioni dell'operaio complessivo polverizzate nelle microdecisioni individuali: il "bit" salda l'atomo operaio alle "cifre" del "Piano".' Romano Alquati, 'Composizione organica del capitale e forza-lavoro alla Olivetti', part 2, *Quaderni Rossi* 3 (1963): 134, my translation.

2 Gilbert Simondon, 'Technical Mentality', *Parrhesia* 7 (2009): 20, originally published as 'Mentalité technique', *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 131, no. 3 (2006): 343–57.

