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Immanent Critique and Dialogical Critical Theory

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From its inception, critical theory has embraced immanent critique as its principal methodological orientation for analysing capitalism and anti-capitalist political possibilities. Immanent criticism can and should mean many different things. For instance, it may be applied to diverse primary objects of analysis. Historically specific tendencies in systems of production, reproductive labour and life, aesthetic form in art and music, political dynamics of hegemony – all are relevant to critiques of capitalism and efforts to gauge prospects for challenging capitalist domination.

One aspect of immanent criticism holds particular interest for me, although I also see it as indispensable for anti-capitalist theory more broadly. This is the question of how to construe, develop, and sustain critical theory's relations with those people who bear the brunt of capitalist oppression and with the popular discourses they articulate. Albena Azmanova's recent book *Capitalism On Edge* (2020) has triggered lively conversations both regarding its principal theme of 'precarity' and about the means and ends of critical theory more broadly. Here, I shall comment on one aspect of her argument as a way of illustrating the need I see to incorporate active dialogues with working people into the basic procedures of critical theory.

Azmanova contends that present-day capitalism is beset by two basic antinomies that concern the issues of 'surplus employability' and 'acute job dependency.' Most people find themselves depending more and more on working for wages in order to live, even though technological development in principle would enable social existence to be much more de-commodified and even as the major economies are generating decreasing numbers of adequately compensated employment opportunities (Azmanova 2020, 142-151). It is certainly important to show, as Azmanova does, that these contradictions exist and that they can be both observed empirically in institutions' behaviours

and conceptualised theoretically as originating within capital's structural dynamics. Such analysis, in turn, indicates how social policies could be re-configured to ameliorate these antinomic tendencies, for instance by reforming labour market regulations so that working people could initiate and pause their wage-seeking activities more flexibly.

Yet I also wonder: how might critical theorists further elaborate Azmanova's concepts of surplus employability and acute job dependency, and also more firmly grasp their contradictory qualities, if we attend to the reflections of workers regarding their labouring experiences today? How might engaging in such inquiries also help critical theory specify further these ideas' political ramifications? And precisely how, or by what method and with what ethos, should such explorations proceed?

My own recent research with low-wage workers offers some examples of how these kinds of conversations can enrich critical theory and assist theory's efforts to make itself of some political consequence. One arm of research solicits workers' accounts of conditions in the 24/7 warehouse operations pioneered by Amazon and taken up widely in the logistics industry.[1] I am also investigating the motivations and experiences of online tasking in the field known as 'microwork' (also known as 'crowdwork' or 'clickwork') which is a kind of extremely contingent online labour where workers earn pennies per click helping artificial intelligence systems learn or completing marketing surveys. I want to suggest that by listening to what workers say about how they live the antinomies of surplus employability and acute job dependency,

[1] I started these interviews in April 2023 and had finished fourteen (out of twenty-five eventually planned) by the time of writing this essay. Each interview is semi-structured, lasts around an hour, and explores the individual's experiences seeking work and labouring in warehouses as well as how these jobs have affected the worker's personal relationships and life outside work.

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critical theorists gain a basis for more sharply conceptualising those dynamics and their political consequences.

My current interview program with warehouse workers in Southern California's Inland Empire (IE) is revealing interesting things about how these antinomies manifest in workers' experiences. The IE is a vast region east of Los Angeles including Riverside and San Bernardino Counties and extending east into the Coachella Valley desert farmland and south toward the Mexican border. Historically, this was ranching and then citrus growing territory. But the land has been largely taken over by massive warehouse development, led by Amazon and Walmart. A mostly Latino regional working-class population staffs the metastasizing mass of IE warehouses. The latter are no longer simply storage barns but technologically sophisticated, digitally saturated facilities that keep commodities, humans, and machines in perpetual motion, reducing to near-zero the time-lags between production, distribution, and consumption. Containers disgorged from gargantuan cross-ocean ships that dock at the Ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles are taken continuously, throughout day and night, to the IE's warehouses. Workers then unload the goods in the containers, re-pack them, and send them out to retail outlets and consumers.

One prominent theme in the interviews is the weak and insubstantial attachment to their jobs that most workers express notwithstanding their intense need for the employment opportunities furnished by the warehouses run by Amazon and other companies. Interviewees frequently echoed one worker's emblematic comment that if you are a working-class Latino person in the IE, 'Everyone you know works in a warehouse.' Those with whom I spoke said that people like them generally but only mildly prefer working at Amazon to the other IE warehouses because Amazon pays slightly higher wages: a couple dollars an hour more and another increment on top of that if one is willing

to work a night shift. Compared to other warehouses, which rely more on undocumented workers, Amazon also has a reputation for more orderly work-processes and more responsible management. Yet these advantages do not translate into higher levels of job attachment among the workers, notwithstanding the company's rhetoric about dedicated teamwork and even though the individuals I talked to had mostly been employed by Amazon for a year or more. Amazon relies on a workforce characterised by constant and massive turnover: workers have said unanimously so far that long lines of people applying for jobs form every day, but also that only two or three of the roughly twenty workers hired on a given day stay more than a week.

Dissociation from work while in the midst of work paralleled these individuals' thin, shaky relations to the jobs themselves. The forms of labour that my informants described usually involved either unloading boxes from very large bins and placing boxes in cubbies to organise them or 'picking' packages from the other side of the cubby shelf for repackaging and shipping. All those whom I interviewed characterised these tasks as stultifying to the extreme. The loud din, rapid rhythm, and spatial compartmentalisation of the warehouse interior and the minimal break-time provided mean that workers have little opportunity to break up the boredom by communicating with one another. Some handled the monotony by violating the rule against using phones and listening to podcasts or music, with an earbud hidden beneath a cap or hair. Workers during the night-time hours tended to be particularly uninterested in interacting with fellow workers. Multiple interviewees metaphorised night workers (including themselves) as 'zombies': 'brain-dead,' far beyond exhausted, self-isolated, yet still robotically lifting and sorting boxes. Ama-zombie labour also invariably demanded heavy doses of chemical stimulation, especially guzzling energy drinks but also smoking weed and even using 'hard drugs,' as one worker noted. She added bluntly: 'A

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good majority of people who work nights are on some sort of substance. At all times.'

Amazon's indifferent relationship to workers mirrors workers' inclinations to absent themselves from work even while working, or simply to quit. Retention of a long-term workforce does not appear to be a problem from the managerial perspective, given the normalised character of ultra-high turnover. Most workers also insist that the company shows little regard for individual workers' performance or preferences even though, technologically speaking, Amazon's warehouses are wired for intensive, individualised disciplinary training. Amazon has received much negative publicity for its state-of-the-art digital systems that constantly monitor how well workers adhere to finely gauged standards of high-speed labour (Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese, 2021; Strategic Organizing Center, 2022). A worker might sometimes pause such activity, whether to take a breath or run to a bathroom, often traversing a distance of two or three American football fields inside these enormous facilities to relieve themselves. Regardless, Amazon's computer systems register these brief cessations of effort as 'time off task,' measure their negative effects on the worker's assigned 'rate,' and display the numbers on a continuously updated screen positioned claustrophobically close to the worker's face. To be sure, Amazon routinely threatens workers with serious penalties for not obeying strict protocols about arriving on time, staying within break-time limits, and keeping up with one's rate. Yet while a few workers disagree, the balance of opinion is that although Amazon vigorously enforces its rules about timely arrivals, breaks, and departures, rate-based discipline is infrequent and lax. The company seems much more interested in a collective workforce simply being present and active than in individual workers conducting themselves in optimally productive and efficient ways.

The mutual disregard between Amazon and its warehouse workers manifests further in both the hiring and firing processes. Workers reported being deeply surprised to find out how superficial and hurried the procedures for applying to work at an Amazon warehouse is. An interviewee told me of her chagrin upon arriving dressed in business attire to find the other applicants wearing just t-shirts and jeans, apart from one individual clad in pyjamas. She had wrongly assumed that Amazon would interview her to probe her experience, qualifications, and motivations for the job, judging her in competition with other job seekers. Instead, the 'interview' simply involved legal identity and criminal background checks along with a drug test. Some workers also partly ascribed Amazon's high turnover rates to managers' habit of arbitrarily terminating workers for minor rules violations, but both the capricious character of these decisions and the way in which they were telling. Managers typically removed someone quietly from the floor and sent them out the back door, never to be seen or talked about again. Obviously, the company thereby aimed to foster a diffuse sense of unease and insecurity among the workforce as a whole. Yet dismissal was not meant to make an example of the worker who was let go so that others would modify their individual conduct with regard to a specific standard of behaviour.

In short, Amazon's IE warehouse workers experience and actively live 'acute job dependency' by cultivating a subjective disposition of *extreme job dissociation*. I see this subjective formation as mode of lived precarity which is related to, but distinct from, the problems of employment 'insecurity' and 'uncertainty' and the psychological 'incapacity to cope' on which Azmanova focusses. To begin with, employment at the warehouses involves little uncertainty because these jobs are so easily and readily available. More importantly, however, the interviews tell us critical things about the kinds of desires that animate

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working subjects prone to acute job dependency, above all that they invest such minimal desire in their work-activities and even, ironically, in the very job that they so desperately need. And when workers do attach positive desires to warehouse labour, they tend to do this in a way that reinforces the theme of dissociation. They speak of taking a vague pleasure in aspects of the work-process or rituals for securing shifts that workers say feel like playing games. For instance, there is the game of opening your app at precisely the right time of day to see the newly released list of that day's available job assignments and trying to beat out your competition – that is, the other workers – to get the best spots. Amazon has also quite literally gamified certain work-processes through video displays that incite workers to arrange boxes as a kind of Tetris-play or to race against fellow labourers in contests of speed-at work.

This relation between company and worker of being mutually non-plussed also characterises labour in another major component of Amazon's operations: microwork jobs accessed via the Amazon Mechanical Turk platform. The startling thing about our interviews with microworkers is the extent to which these individuals resist the idea that they are doing 'work,' not to mention 'wage labour.' They perform waged tasks that generate a massive human data-processing infrastructure that is crucial to expanding the technological capabilities and profits of the digital industries. Yet workers largely seem not to mind that, in the UK, they make on average only £4 per hour when they are actively working – or that they spend a third of each hour that they are engaged with microworking on unpaid activities to scroll through and find the jobs, or to start jobs that they are then suddenly blocked from completing, with no compensation for time already spent doing those jobs. Most instead see microwork as a somewhat enjoyable thing to do when one gets tired of watching YouTube or TikTok videos, something that even feels like stress relief or playing a computer game. It usually requires little affective

involvement and no responsibility on either side of the wage relation toward the other party.[2]

Again: acute job dependency, lived as extreme job dissociation.

Now, what about 'surplus employability'? What might listening to Amazon warehouse workers suggest about the lived experiences and subjective orientations associated with the circumstance that global human needs could still be generously met if everyone worked significantly fewer hours? This is largely a question of the ways that modern technologies have yielded historically unprecedented capacities for producing the means of life with greater efficiency and in massive volumes. Amazon's warehouses, however, offer textbook cases of how capitalist technological development has moved in directions guided by the imperative of valorising value rather than the goal of creating greater abundance for satisfying human needs and desires.

In Marx's terms, the warehouses show how the 'real subsumption' of production processes poses serious practical problems for realising the utopian potential contained in the contradiction between ever more extensively commodified labour and expanded material prospects for de-commodification. Real subsumption refers to the way that capitalism creates innumerable new human skills, coordinated activities, technologies and products, which are shaped through and through by capital's needs and tailored to a specifically capitalist society. As Søren Mau (2023, 233-240) argues, when our built environments and bodily capabilities are composed in these ways, it becomes more and more difficult for societies to detach from the interdependent processes into

[2] See James Muldoon and Paul Apostolidis, '"Neither Work nor Leisure": Motivations of Microworkers in the United Kingdom on Three Digital Platforms,' *New Media & Society* 2023. DOI 10.1177/14614448231183942.

which these elements all feed. Along these lines, Amazon warehouse workers stress how specialised and non-translatable, even to other warehouses, the tasks, equipment, facilities and terminologies are, which govern the work of unloading containers, sorting boxes, and picking items to fulfil shipping orders. One worker put the situation especially starkly, saying: 'These warehouses aren't meant for humans.'

Nantina Vgontzas (2022, 64) boldly argues that Amazon's global logistics network should be brought under 'direct public oversight and ownership' so that it can serve 'the interests of the working class.' She speculates that if Amazon's intrusive and harmful worker surveillance systems were simply abolished and control of the warehouses shifted to the state, this enormous distributional apparatus could then enable human need satisfaction in emancipated ways. Yet this ignores how the warehouses' architecture, the specialised machinery, and the arcane abilities needed to coordinate human and robotic action (and master Amazon's esoteric lingo of labour) all embody at their core the goals of profit maximisation and success in market competition. All these structural features of the labour process and work environment manifest tendencies toward disfiguring the bodies and minds of workers within them as principles of design. In Amazon's warehouses, precaritised subjectivity thus combines extreme job dissociation with the growing impossibility of any work-experiences that don't shape your abilities, desires, and habits according to capital's basic logics.

As critical theorists, of course, we can observe and analyse these features of labour-processes and their spatial milieus without talking to workers. We could opt instead to examine the institutions that govern these domains and consult empirical data that show how 21st-century warehousing (or microwork platforms) is planned and operated. The subjective, experiential dimensions of this apparatus's deployment are vital to understand, however. Not only do they underscore in especially

vivid ways how essential it is for theoretical critiques of capitalism and anti-capitalist politics to prioritise the problem of real subsumption. In addition, only by engaging with workers' direct experiences can theorists and activists understand what patterns of subjective constitution exist under these conditions and how subjectivation would need to be altered, to enable radical freedom. These subjective matrices are not simply deducible from a general theory of capitalist accumulation and its antinomies, and they have politically significant complexities and specificities.

In California's Inland Empire, a further crucial aspect of workers' subjection to, and subjectivation by, capitalism concerns their subordination through racial power, and the ethnographic approach is uniquely capable of bringing certain dimensions of IE Latinos' capitalist racialisation to light. Government employment data and sociological analyses readily tell us that Latinos (and other people of colour) over-populate the lower-status and least-well-paying jobs in the logistics industry and in Amazon warehouses, especially in the IE but also in the larger spheres of California and the US (Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese, 2021). Such sources cannot disclose, however, how these onerous jobs are lived. Nor can they enrich our theoretical terms for characterising these place-specific yet globally reverberating regimens of capitalist racialisation in the ways that Amazon workers' concrete references to 'zombie' labour and the other elements of extreme job dissociation are able to do.

Likewise, it is clear from the vantage of social-historical analysis that the advancement of capitalist social relations in Southern California through Latinos' racialisation has depended upon a long history of colonial empire: from the period of Spanish settler colonialism, to newly independent Mexico's installation of forced indigenous labour on former mission grounds, to the land-expropriations that followed the American

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taking of the region via the US-Mexican War of the 1840s, to later successive re-makings of the IE's political-economic geography catalysed by railroad, defence manufacturing, and logistics development (Patterson 2015). But what meaning do working-class IE Latinos attach to the land, its ever-expanding seizure by warehouse developers, its pollution and degradation by swarms of trucks, and the experience of being driven out of spaces that they have cooperatively fashioned as their new home-places in the aftermath of migrating there from Mexico? As a scholar, one only finds this out by asking people about these issues and listening to how they respond as well as by observing and participating in their efforts to stop the developers in their tracks and stake claims to their homes and communities. This is what IE Latinos attempted to do in several towns in 2022-23, most sensationally by staging a series of *cabalgatas* (horse parades) in which legions of riders on horseback wearing traditional (or non-traditional) Mexican clothing filled community streets declaring that their cities were 'not for sale.' The warehouse industry's violent reconstitution of IE society reiterates and reinvigorates a protracted history of colonial-imperialist domination which has cast IE governance as a capitalist-racialist regime for centuries. In turn, to gauge the galvanising potential and grasp the most salient terms of anti-racist politics, immanent critique in the mode of a grounded and engaged approach to critical theory is indispensable.

Reflecting again, finally, on Azmanova's antinomies, I would argue that only through a programme of class struggle that includes targeted fights against capitalist racialisation can working people realise the utopian promise of surplus employability, end reliance on the market for access to the means of life, and radically reconstruct a material world moulded in capital's image. I disagree with Azmanova's suggestion that we face an either/or choice regarding whether to contest the systemic domination of everyone or to wage the class struggle. Real subsumption

and acute job dependency exist to create an exploitable class of workers separated from the means of life – and these processes of class domination also shape and structure the world as unfree for everyone, in the sense of precluding all forms of creativity and pleasure that do not cohere with the objective of valorising value. In this context, an ethnographically derived encounter with working people's direct experiences is not just a nice thing to have. It is vital to theorizing the stakes in the struggle and crafting political strategies that connect the dots between working-class and more affluent class-formations, as well as between white people, brown people, and groups racialised in other ways. This implies that my own investigations with IE Latino workers cannot by themselves yield an adequate theory of power in this quarter of the logistical world. In addition, further inquiries of this kind are urgently needed if theory in the shadow of Amazon is to realise the radical potential of immanent critique.

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