
SYNAPTIC LABOUR

Stefano Harney

In the conclusion to Frantz Fanon's classic work *Les damnés de la terre* something remarkable happens. In the course of the book, Fanon has taken us through his searing analysis of the psychology, culture, class, and nationalism of the colonized and the colonizer. He has examined revolutionary thought and action as never before. And he has vividly portrayed the gravediggers of colonialism. Then, in the conclusion, he focuses sharply and suddenly on the relation of the newly liberated post-colonial peoples to work.

Fanon begins his conclusion by calling for the rejection of what he calls the 'European model' in the coming post-colonial world:

When I search for Man in the technique and the style of Europe, I see only a succession of negations of man, and an avalanche of murders.

But what is this European model, what is at the heart of this model, why the negations, the unending blood-soaked dawnings? Here is Fanon's answer:

But let us be clear: what matters is to stop talking about output, and intensification, and the rhythm of work.

The coming post-colonial nations must break not only with the negations of history, culture, and personality wrought by colonialism but with the 'rhythm of work' imposed by the European model. And he clarifies:

No, there is no question of a return to Nature. It is simply a very concrete question of not dragging men towards mutilation, of not imposing upon the brain rhythms that very quickly obliterate it and wreck it. The pretext of catching up must not be used to push man around, to tear him away from himself or from his privacy, to break and kill him.

Here is that word 'rhythm' again. 'Rhythms imposed on the brain' this time, imposed by a drive to 'catch up.' Catching up was a phrase much circulated in the takeoff theories of capitalist development pushed by the United States in the Cold War. But, Fanon points out, this catching up institutes a rhythm that 'breaks' and 'kills' man. This is a rhythm that 'tears man away from himself,' that 'obliterates' and 'wrecks' his brain. Fanon uses the metaphor of the 'caravan' for a system that tears man away from himself.

No, we do not want to catch up with anyone. What we want to do is to go forward all the time, night and day, in the company of Man, in the company of all men. The caravan should not be stretched out, for in that case each line will hardly see those who precede it; and men who no longer recognize each other meet less and less together, and talk to each other less and less.

The 'caravan,' or what would come to be called globalization, or what might be termed more precisely, logistics. Notice that the caravan, a term of trade, is here transposed to a chain of work, a line, an assembly line with a rhythm that breaks and kills man. This is a pathological caravan that 'tears apart the functions' of man.

It is a question of the Third World starting a new history of Man, a history which will have regard to the sometimes prodigious theses which Europe has put forward, but which will also not forget Europe's crimes, of which the most horrible was committed in the heart of man, and consisted of the pathological tearing apart of his functions and the crumbling away of his unity.

Fanon reminds us here too of the 'prodigious theses,' Marxism, and the history of enlightenment thought. But it has not been enough to prevent 'the most horrible crimes.' This crime is wrapped in racism and colonialism but at its heart, Fanon says, it is this rhythm of work, this pathological global caravan of work. Even if racism and colonialism cannot be reduced to the crime of slave, indentured, and colonial labour, that crime lies at the heart. The European model of domination, Fanon reminds us in his conclusion, was to steal land and people not to support their mode of production as in past empires, but to impose a new rhythm of work on a global scale, a global assembly line tearing apart the functions of man.

Social Factory

Of course, there is an important difference between the rhythm of work Fanon is describing and the historical institution of Fordist and Taylorist rhythms of the assembly line. The Fordist and Taylorist factory had an outside, however unstable and unjust. Control of cooperation at work was given up, but was supposed to return individually, at least for white men and settlers, in politics, in rights, and votes. In the European model imposed on the colonies, there was no return. The rhythm was all in factory, field, and mine, on the ship, the road, and the rail, in the shop and the house. Or at least, this was the system's intent. In this sense the colony was the first social factory. Everywhere you went in the colony it was work, or else it was criminality. And any other connection, any other line, was conspiracy. No citizenship, no consumers, no land, nation, or culture, no outside. That was the regime, the rhythm.

Fanon feared post-colonial nations would keep the regime and merely erect the outside, with flags, anthems, and new ruling classes. Who can say he was wrong? But Fanon's warning was more than a post-colonial critique of the idea of the outside. It was an analysis of the European model and its tendency towards producing this rhythm without an outside. Indeed Fanon saw

the colony as the first social factory, where worker replaces subject in society as a whole. In the colony, in the first social factory any move to subjectivation was, as it is today, criminal, conspiratorial. The only sound in the social factory is the rhythm of work because that is what takes place in a factory.

This may sound surprising to say there are no subjects in the social factory or that indeed the rhythm of work is omnipresent today. We face millions without work or not enough work in Europe and amongst the migrants seeking to reach Europe. We are told that the future of work in Europe is subjective, creative, professional, and most of all managerial, not rhythmic. And at any rate from more reliable sources like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri we understand that we are living in an era when immaterial labour – cognitive and affective labour - dominates and commands other forms of labour, even if factories are still widespread in Bangladesh or China. But this should not make us deaf to the rhythms we hear no matter where we go, the rhythms that break and kill humans.

We have heard a lot from business about how we can become entrepreneurial, or how we can transform ourselves into leaders, of how we can become responsible for our own careers. And again from our comrades we have received a more accurate picture: conceptions of the artist, of the bohemian, of the researcher, and of the performer have been twisted by business to make us work harder, to convince us we can fulfill ourselves through work. Andrew Ross's work is excellent here. Christian Marazzi has written about the way our bodies are today a kind of constant capital, machines for which we are responsible, which we must upkeep because they are the site of production. He is right. Franco Berardi speaks of the way our psyche and our souls descend into work as if engulfing our whole being, and Emma Dowling of the way even our affect is measured and managed, brought into metrics. It is easy to feel that work for those who have it is about the risk of having your subjectivity and your talents swallowed whole, about having your virtuosity consumed as Paolo Virno might put it.

But a factory is neither a collection of machines nor a collections of workers however skilled, however virtuoso. A factory is a line.

Operations Management

The area of management studies concerned with the factory is Operations Management. Operations management has always been pretty clear about what a factory is, and however much it has expanded its understanding of the factory, this definition has not wavered. This is business 'knowledge,' with all its ideological limits, but it can be helpful to our own considerations here. For Operations Management, the factory is the scene of a process. This is process in the sense of procession, of movement. Inputs go into the factory to move along a process, a line, and outputs come out of the factory. Most importantly what machines and especially workers do, according to operations management, is work on the process not the product. In contemporary operations management theory this has meant improving that

process. This is often designated by the Japanese term 'kaizen' originally associated with workers and managers devoting themselves to the continuous improvement of the line's efficiency in Toyota factories. Soon kaizen expanded throughout service, extraction, information, and other sectors.

Rather than attention to the product, including the immaterial product, which remains as much as ever the purview of small fraction of the workforce, most workers are subjected to increased attention to the 'assembly' line. For management science, this is what a factory is: a line, a process, a procession, a movement, a rhythm through from inputs to outputs. And this too is what the social factory is. It's name is accurate even if we have sometimes been distracted by everything from the propaganda of creative cities to the critical discourse of the precariat. But that is not all. Kaizen has been accompanied by another development in the line. This is the extension of the management of inputs and outputs, of the extension to supply chains understood as part of the line, not just a raw clusters of labour, natural resources and machines waiting outside the door of the factory. And with logistics and reverse logistics this line is expanding exponentially, or rather, algorithmically. Logistics and supply chain management extend the metrics of line in both directions, toward inputs and outputs which now have their own work rhythms.

Synaptic Labour

This algorithmically expanding line means the outside of the factory is measured like the inside, aligned with the processual inside. And when the factory is virtual, post-fordist, a social factory, the algorithms of the line extend the rhythm of production, of assembly across our lives. The two meanings of assembly, or perhaps two modes of assembly, begin to merge, to assemble is both to come together and to make, anywhere, anytime. But what is made when we assemble and re-assemble is the line itself first and foremost, not a product or a service.

This is our work today. We take inventories of ourselves. We produce lean efforts. We look to overcome constraints. We define values through metrics. These are all terms from operations management. And creativity is nothing but what operations management calls variance in the line, a variance that may lead to what is called a kaizen event, an improvement, and is thus assimilated back into an even more sophisticated line. Today ours is primarily the labour of adapting and translating, being commensurate and flexible, being a conduit and receptacle, a port for information but also a conductor of information, a wire, a travel plug. We channel affect toward new connections. We do not just keep the flow of meaning, information, attention, taste, desire, and fear moving, we improve this flow continuously. We must remain open and attuned to the rhythm of the line, to its merciless variances in rhythm. This is primarily a neurological labour, a synaptic labour of making contact to keep the line flowing, and creating innovations that help it flow in new directions and at new speeds. The worker operates like a synapse, sparking new lines of assembly in life. And she does so anywhere and everywhere because the

rhythm of the line is anywhere and everywhere. The worker extends synaptic rhythms in every direction, every circumstance.

Groundations

The rule of the line persists beyond the factory in time and space, and its rhythm makes the time and space of our lives. There is no outside to the line, or rather we might say the line runs through the outside promised in Fordism and supposed to be so heterogeneous in Post-Fordism. A rhythm that tears us apart, a rhythm that obliterates and wrecks our brain. In some places the line is all that is left of the factory, and logistics in this expanded sense is all that is left production. The science of operations management becomes the science of society, the common sense of our lives.

No wonder Fanon feared this rhythm, and warned against participating in its pathological caravan, its global logistics. But this is why I turn to him now. Because we need more than the European theses to fight the European model in its fully realised form. Anti-colonial critique, and its grounding in the black radical tradition give us something more, launched as they are from a world with no outside but the criminal one, the fugitive one, conspiratorial one, a world where we are nothing but an input but somehow remain responsible for upkeep, improvement, and innovation of the line. The colonial world, the slave world, were just that: populated by those who simultaneously had to care for and improve that world while being nothing in it. But of course nothing was not nothing. The critique included practices of resistance, autonomy, and most of all a tradition of producing other lines, other rhythms.

The banning of the drum could not destroy these rhythms, nor the rejection of hospitality, or of common land, or any number of everyday practices that turn an inside out with another rhythm. There is a rich history for logistical populations to draw upon here and synaptic workers around the globe have finally caught up to it though it has been with us all along, in the undercommons. I will end with Walter Rodney, the great Guyanese historian, himself a part of this tradition, talking about this tradition, of a Rasta community in the poorest part of Kingston, Jamaica:

But with these black brothers you learn humility because they are teaching you...these brothers who up to now are every day performing a miracle. It is a miracle how these fellows live. They live and they are physically fit, they have vitality of mind, they have a tremendous sense of humour, they have depth. How do they do that in the midst of the existing conditions? And they create, they are always saying things.

Rodney advises:

You have to listen to them and you hear them talk about Cosmic Power and it rings a bell. I say, but I have read this somewhere, this is Africa. You have to listen to their drums to get the message of the Cosmic Power.

These Rasta sisters and brothers are studying, making a line they call 'groundations.' This is the line of flight when there is no where to run that Fred Moten calls Black Ops. This is the undercommons. It's beat that will save your life.

END

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