Collaboration:
The Dark Side of the Multitude

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Collaboration is one of the guiding terms of an emergent political sensibility in which certain collectivities and mutualities are being redefined as modes of affectual politics. Collaboration, literally, means working together with others, especially in an intellectual endeavour. The term is widely used to describe new forms of labour relations within the realm of immaterial production in various domains. Despite its significant presence, however, there is very little research and theoretical reflection on what it implies. What is at stake is the very notion of establishing a new understanding of the term ètogetherí, within a contemporary dynamic of èworking togetherí.

The problem is that most often collaboration is used as a synonym for cooperation. However, it will make more etymological, historical and political sense to elaborate the actual differences that shift between the various layers of simultaneous meaning.

In contrast to cooperation, collaboration is driven by complex and often diverse realities rather than by romantic notions of a common ground or commonality of interests. It is an ambivalent process, constituted by a set of paradoxical relationships between co-producers who affect each other.

1. An Indecent Proposal

As a pejorative term, collaboration stands for willingly assisting an enemy of oneís country, especially an occupying force or a malevolent power. It means to work together with an agency or instrumentality with which one is not immediately connected ¡ for instance, the French Vichy regime in the 1940s, which collaborated with the German occupiers.

This traditional view of collaboration as a traitorous cooperation with the enemy provides a counter to what management theory since the 1980s has been promoting as ëteamworkí: the act of subordinating oneís autonomy to the specific regimen of a group. This has conceptually replaced the classical role of the ëforemaní as the disciplining force. Efficiency is increased not by repression but by the collective identification of small groups of co-workers.

Meanwhile, various research studies have shown that people working in teams often make wrong decisions, especially when the task involves solving rather complex problems. These findings come as a surprise, since rapid technological development and the global availability of intellectual resources increase the pressure on individuals to exchange knowledge within and between groups.

Teamwork often fails because of the banal fact that the internalised modes of cooperation are characterised by the opposite of the impulse and ability to share knowledge: in order to stay ahead of competitors and produce unique work, one has to hide relevant information from others. On the other hand, it also refers to the fact that joining forces in a group or team increases the likelihood of failure much more than that of success. Awkward group dynamics, harmful externalities and bad management practices are responsible for the rest.

2. In Praise of Mutuality

There is more and more evidence to show that working together may also happen in unexpected ways. Instead of exerting the alleged generosity of a group, where individuals are supposedly committed to the pursuit of solidarity, it may actually be the reverse: a brusque and (in principle) ungenerous mode, where the more individuals follow their own agendas, the more mutually, sometimes inextricably, dependent they become.

Such a paradox of ìfriendship without friendsƒ, as Jacques Derrida pointed out in a different context, characterises contemporary forms of collaboration. Collaborations are black holes within knowledge regimes. In todayís environment, it can be argued that collaboration produces modes of expression that are hollow, ostentatious, offensive. Collaboration is not undertaken for sentimental reasons, charity or efficiency, but is motivated by pure self-interest.

For instance, claiming transparency within what is called the ëinformation societyí reveils as hypocrisy: the emerged and yet-emerging new information and communication technologies replace conventional strategies of walling off knowledge from the public. These technologies rely on intellectual property regimes and digital rights management to grant or refuse access to immaterial resources through operations in real-time. Consequently, the concept of individual rights has vanished, as well as the logics of inclusion and exclusion. Such legislation applies to both virtual and real space, to the domain of knowledge production as well as to national/political borders.

Within the ethos of a postmodern control society, collaborations are all about exchanging knowledge secretly and through the evasion of borders. The escape agent,

human trafficker or ìcoyoteƒ ¡ as such individuals are known along the US-Mexican border ¡ supports undocumented border crossings by those who want to make it from one nation state to the other without the mandatory documents. The coyote as an allegory of collaboration: always on the move, only temporarily employed, nameless and anonymous, constantly changing faces and sides.

The coyoteís motivations either remain unclear, or do not matter at all. This figure is a postmodern service provider par excellence: there is no trust whatsoever, and this does not even create a problem. The conceptual insecurity of those involved overrules the eventual financial aspects of the collaboration, and triggers a redundancy of affects and precepts, feelings and reactions. Those who do not need the coyoteís support are hunting and demonising it; those who depend on the coyoteís secret knowledge and skills are longing desperately for it.

Nevertheless, the collaboration between the coyote and the clandestine immigrant exemplifies the certain amount of illegitimacy intrinsic to any form of collaboration. It stands for the attempt to regain autonomy amidst the coercions of a society of control.

3. Singularities

While cooperation is undertaken between identifiable individuals within and between organisations, collaboration expresses a differential relationship that is composed of heterogeneous parts defined as ësingularitiesí: out of the ordinary, in a way that produces a kind of discontinuity and marks a point of unpredictability, even if deterministic.

This is revealed in post-Fordist production, ëaffect industriesí as well as networking environments in general. People have to work together in settings where their input, productivity, efficiency, performance and labour power cannot be singled out and measured as discrete variables, but in each case refer to the specific work of somebody else. Oneís own manner and intent in terms of production may be individual, but may be generated, and often also multiplied, in networks that are composed of countless distinct dependencies constituted by the power to affect and to be affected.

With regard to such a mode of excess, one that is essentially beyond measure, collaboration may be compared to the mathematical definition of singularity: the point where a function goes to infinity, or is in certain other ways ill-behaved.[1] The concept of singularity once more distinguishes collaboration from cooperation. Furthermore, it refers to a notion of emergent precariousness that can been seen as the crisis that goes along with this rupture, or seen as the transition from cooperation to collaboration, in terms of modes of working together.

The meshings of voluntary impulse, motivation, enthusiasm and creativity, as well as of immense pressure, ever-increasing self-doubt and desperation, are transient, fluid and appear in multiple forms ¡ but they all are symbolic of the state of profound insecurity and precariousness that becomes the blueprint for widespread forms of occupation and employment within society in general. It reveals the other face of immaterial labour, one that is hidden behind the persuasive rhetoric of cooperation, networking, and clustering.

In contrast to cooperation, which always implicates an organic model and some transcendent function, collaboration is a strictly immanent, wild and illegitimate praxis. Each collaborative activity begins and ends within the framework of the collaboration.

Despite its manifest multiple affiliations, it is self-bounded, self-directed, self-fulfilled; it has no external goal and cannot be decreed; it is pure intransitivity ¡ it happens, so to say, strictly for its own sake.

Cooperation necessarily takes place in a client-server architecture. It follows a classic narrative structure, in which there is a coherent assignment of every part and its relation to another. Collaboration, on the contrary, presumes rhizomatic structures where knowledge grows exuberantly, laterally, transversely, tangentially, and proliferates in an unforeseeable manner.

The relationships between collaborators can be understood through analysing peer-to-peer formation. Peer-to-peer computer systems (P2P networks) appeared on the internet in the 1990s and revolutionised the conventional distribution model. Such networks are designed to enable people, who do not know each other and probably prefer not to know each other, to exchange immaterial resources such as computing time or bandwidth, as well as relevant content. These pragmatic, anonymous relationships between users are based on a powerful irony embedded within this mode of sharing, even in a strict mathematical sense: due to free and exact digital copying, the object of desire is not divided but can be infinitely multiplied.

Finally, it must also be pointed out that collaborations are authentic sites of revolutionary potential. They are driven by the desire to create difference, and to resist the autocratic imperatives of conventional modes of production. They provide a means to overcome scarcity and inequality in the digital domain, and they imply commitment to the struggle for creative freedom everywhere. Above all, collaboration carries immense social potential as an emancipatory mechanism, for the actualisation of the unlimited creative energy in the multiplicity of all productive practices.

NOTES

1. Mathematicians frequently speak of whether a mathematical object ¡ a number, a function, a set, a space of one sort of another ¡ is ìwell-behavedƒ or not. The term has no fixed formal definition, but can have fairly precise meaning within a given context.

    In pure mathematics, well-behaved objects are those that can be proved or analysed by elegant means to have elegant properties. In both pure and applied mathematics, ìwell-behavedƒ also means not violating any assumptions needed to successfully apply whatever analysis is being discussed. Euclidean geometry, for instance, is better behaved than non-Euclidean geometry; spaces with integer dimension are better behaved than spaces with fractal dimension, etc.

    The opposite of ìwell-behavedƒ is usually termed ìpathologicalƒ. A pathological example is one whose properties are (or should be considered) atypically bad. The term ìpathologicalƒ is subjective and context-dependent, and its meaning in any particular case lies in its interpretation by mathematicians, and not within the subject matter itself. In mathematical analysis and set theory, those searching for the

pathological are considered experimentalists and iconoclasts.

Pathological examples often have some undesirable or unusual properties that make them difficult to contain or explain within a theory. Three important historical instances of this are: a) the discovery of irrational numbers by the ancient Greeks; b) the discovery of number fields whose integers do not admit unique factorisation; and c) the discovery of the fractals and other ʻroughʼ geometric objects. At the time of their discovery, each was considered highly pathological. Today, each has been assimilated and explained by an extensive general theory.

Pathological objects are typically perceived to be aberrant; on the other hand, they are properly defined mathematical objects. Therefore, this ʻbad behaviourʼ can simply be seen as a contradiction with our intuitive picture of how a certain object should behave.

See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Well-behaved; www.PlanetMath.org