

“JUST IN TIME”

<http://brianholmes.wordpress.com/2011/08/19/do-containers-dream-of-electric-people>

From: Brian Holmes <bhcontinentaldrift@gmail.com>
Subject: Re: <nettime> The \$100bn Facebook question: Will capitalism survive 'value abundance'?
Date: March 8, 2012 7:08:30 AM PST

On 03/07/2012 12:57 AM, Mark Andrejevic wrote:

If you boil it down, the valuation of Facebook is based on the promise of the power of the social graph and detailed forms of targeting and data-mining to do what? To serve the needs of advertisers. What needs? To move products and sell services. There may be all kinds of fascinating networking going on, but in economic terms, Facebook is about selling cars and iPads, mobile phones, diet supplements, beverages, and so on.

Indeed. And to sell objects is, in our time, to directly command labor: both the labor of production in distant factories (often in Asia) and the closer labor of transportation, warehousing, delivery and sales, which accounts for an ever increasing portion of the hard, super-exploited work being done in and around the city where I live, Chicago. Because all six transcontinental rail lines cross in this city, it's the 3rd biggest container port in the US, an intershipment point for maritime cargo from both coasts. But almost no one knows this. Dazzled by Facebook and the like, people have simply forgotten about the manufacture of goods and the exploitation of largely undocumented labor forces.

Last weeked at an event put on by the Occupy Chicago Education Committee, members of the fledging union OUR Walmart were joined by a guy from Warehouse Workers for Justice. He explained that the essence of Walmart's success lay in the military science of logistics. Through just-in-time distribution they are able to cut inventory costs while constantly maintaining the availability of commodities. "Their ideal would be to deliver the product you want to the back of the store at the very moment you enter the front." What he didn't say was that to do so, they would also have to control what happens in your head and your heart and your sensorium - the famous flow of desire that Mark Stahlman was talking about. Or at least, they would need to be able to predict that flow. Which is where the Facebook data comes in.

I understood what he was talking about for two reasons. One, because I have been out to Joliet, an hour outside the city, where many of the multimodal train-to-truck ports are, and where the vast non-descript warehouses sprawl over the landscape. In fact we're going out there again today, to a public hearing concerning the case of a woman who was raped by her supervisor, then thrown into jail for two weeks when she went to the police. But I also have a few notions of logistics and the emerging

science of global supply chain management: an integrative system that links data about production, transport, sales and consumption into an ideally seamless world model. In a relatively short article, I tried to do a double genealogy of this system.

On the one hand, the article retraces the fifty-year history of container transport and just-in-time production which has allowed the US and other rich countries to effectively displace the majority of their industrial working classes to Asia. And on the other, it describes the complex science of computerized tracking, representation and predictive modeling which serves to control the just-in-time flows, and which, as far as I can tell, was developed out of the theory of systems dynamics pioneered by JW Forrester back in the 50s and 60s. The text is called "Do Containers Dream of Electric People?" Here are some excerpts that point to the role that information garnered from social networking sites could and does play in such a system:

"With the advent of electronic data interchange (EDI), every aspect of production, transport, display and sales could be recorded, communicated, represented and analyzed, so as to continuously map out the position and trajectory of each single object being handled by a world-spanning corporation. The result is an "executive information system" that gives managers centralized access to a continuously evolving set of logistical data, bringing dynamic simulation over the line into real-time representation. This provides the unprecedented ability to rationalize labor at every point along the chain, accelerating the pace and squeezing workers for higher levels of productivity. Still it's not enough for contemporary capitalism. As systems designer Paul Westerman explains, "Aggressive retailers (like Wal-Mart) will not stop there; they will continue until all company data is available for analysis. They will build an enterprise data warehouse. They give all this information to their internal users (buyers) and external users (suppliers) to exploit and demand measurable improvement." Such is the formula of global supply chain management, in an information-age economy where the "push" of Fordist industrial production and state planning has been replaced by the "pull" of giant retail conglomerates.

"With enterprise data warehousing, the just-in-time machine becomes both extensively and intensively pervasive. EDI is correlated with cash-flow, marketing and financing information. Point-of-sale data is associated with individual names on credit cards, then combined with cascades of other data gleaned from the Internet, generating behavior profiles that can be used for the fine-tuning of display and advertising strategies. The models of optimal future performance built on the analysis of past actions are then relayed upstream to govern the behavior of workers, middle managers and suppliers, and downstream to influence consumers, creating what Westerman calls a "unified data system" (UDS) embracing every aspect of corporate planning. The big boxes of Wal-Mart now cast a 70-terabyte information shadow. To be sure, the possibilities of UDS have not yet been fully implemented. EDI is still rare among Chinese suppliers, while surveillance operators like Google and Facebook are only beginning to codify and sell our intimate data-bodies. There is no need to exaggerate the deployment of data integration. But even less can one ignore the tremendous advances in communication between

manufacturers and distributors, the increasing granularity of representation that this communication makes possible, and last but not least, the accelerating absorption of consumer imaginaries into the managed flows of the pull economy.

"What appears on the horizon is a self-shaping or "autopoetic" modeling process that can integrate hundreds of millions of individuals and billions of discrete objects and desires into a single mobility-system, where every movement is coordinated with every other in real time. The integrative capacity of this kind of autopoetic system is what defines the boundary of each corporate entity, struggling against all others to increase the market-share that it controls. Under these conditions we live in an "open" world of universal free trade across national borders, where giant organizations strive to impose closure on mobile populations. Their computerized map becomes our intimate territory.

"Such a dystopian state was once the exclusive province of science fiction: Philip K. Dick novels, where androids dreamed of electric sheep. But the container, having spawned the big box, now seems destined to bring a world-spanning containment strategy into being. The electronic dream is to maintain continuous contact between a global production system and you, the consumer, whose mobility need not signify uncertainty of behavior. According to this dream, no desire should linger free without a sale."

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Mark says that "Anyone who has studied the media knows that commercial imperatives don't just shape advertising, they shape the content to which we are exposed." I totally agree, but I would go further than that, and say that via computer-enabled techniques of data-gathering, representation and prediction, commercial imperatives have reshaped political geography, creating the strange bi-continent of Chimerica, a single ocean-linked economy whose Chinese population struggles to produce what its American population struggles to consume. In my view, a Marxist approach to commercialized social media would situate it as an essential imaginary moment within this dense network of exchange. When one attempts to integrate all the distinct "moments" of the contemporary circuit of capital, what appears is not just a proliferating flow of mediated desire and a disembodied financial blur, but also a vast, heavy, back-breaking flow of goods linking poisonous and hyper-exploitative factories to largely meaningless and deeply alienating forms of consumption. These flows are commanded by the financial "momet" and their content and rhythm is increasingly fine-tuned through data-gathering and pedictive analysis. This is what I call "the social form of just-in-time-production."

No one can simply be free of such a system. But to achieve some degree of autonomy from its pervasive shaping power is, I think, the political and cultural urgency of our time. Paradoxically (as Jon would have it) this autonomy can only be envisaged when one has first made some effort to actually perceive the system, which is spread out in

broad daylight and remains - with its grievously exploited laborers - for the most part invisible.

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