Organic Composition of Capital – division between constant capital and variable capital.

This is usually discussed in technical terms – e.g. Pasquinelli discusses chapter 25 of Capital Vol. 1, “The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation”. Here, the discussion is very much a technical one, in which it is the drive by capital for greater productivity, which results in a tendency towards a greater concentration of constant capital (i.e. a rise in the organic composition of capital). See, for instance,

the growing extent of the means of production, as compared with the labour-power incorporated into them, is an expression of the growing productivity of labour. The increase of the latter appears, therefore, in the diminution of the mass of labour in proportion to the mass of means of production moved by it, or in the diminution of the subjective factor of the labour process as compared with the objective factor.

(Marx, Capital Vol. 1, p.773)

This is initially at odds with the so-called ‘Copenican turn’ of Tronti and the autonomists – i.e. that labour comes first in the analysis. If we see the productivity of capital as determining the amount of labour needed, then this doesn’t fit well with autonomist perspectives. Autonomists, in contrast, understand capitalism in terms of capital’s attempt to deal with the inherently resisting and ‘obstinate’. In Pasquinelli’s terms,

Technological innovation and the division of labour have always to follow and adjust themselves to the pressure, friction, resistance, and sabotage performed by a rebellious working class.


The question, therefore, is how to square a concept of Marx’s – OCC – with a perspective that understands capital and capitalism as a response to labour’s disruption tendencies? Pasquinelli shows how to deal with this question by discussing an ‘organic antagonism’, rather than ‘organic composition’. That is, the outcome of the balance between the proportion of value that goes to fixed capital and to variable capital is itself the result of an antagonistic relationship between the working class and capital. It is the nature of this struggle that ultimately determines the OCC. Further, the working class is always here considered to be against ‘capital’ – both fixed capital and variable capital – albeit recognising that with (especially) variable capital, labour is directly constitutive of that which it is against. It is, therefore, ‘inside and against’ capital.

This notion of ‘inside and against’ has increasingly been extended by autonomists to broader spheres of social life, as capitalism inevitably extends and expands beyond the factory. So, the working class are increasingly ‘inside and against’ … ‘the party, the factory, the university, the state, and finally the empire. Its postmodern echo can be found in Hardt and Negri’s (2000, 186) claim that capitalism no longer has an outside’ (p. 182).

Operaismo also introduces a new type of composition – political composition – meaning “the totality of autonomous and class conscious ways of behaving and their associated culture of working class insubordination” (p. 182). Based on this interpretation, we see transitions through different subjectivities: skilled artisan workers associated with manufacturing; with Fordism as an attempt to deskill and thereby tame (and avoid a repeat of the Soviets), but in the process creating the ‘mass worker’. At a similar time (c.1961) Alquati wrote of a ‘computer factory’ (which we might interpret as the first manifestation of the idea of immaterial labour and cognitive capitalism) – with a case study of Olivetti as the first discussion (producing typewriters and computers). Under this scheme, information
becomes a mediator between variable and fixed capital – ‘as an extension of the internal bureaucracy of the factory, which monitors the production process by means of control information’. (p.183).

So, we have something that looks like:

Craft workers (whose skills are problematic for capital) → Mass workers (whose ability to mobilise and associate is problematic) → Information workers

These information workers are more socialised, represent an ‘acceleration of the OCC’, and fixed and variable capital become increasingly conflated.

This has overlaps with D&G’s idea of flows being overcoded, etc. Indeed, many of the operaists moved to Paris in late-1970s and engaged with D&G – especially with Guattari. Although a key distinction remains – for D&G it is desire [and difference] that is at the core; whereas for the operaists it’s antagonism.

This moves us to a consideration of Virno, ‘general intellect’, and the so-called ‘fragment on machines’ in the Grundrisse. At this point, the OCC develops to the extent that fixed capital is essentially free (e.g. zero-cost software paid for by the collective worker). This then extends Marx’s idea of formal subsumption → real subsumption → general intellect. These are fundamentally different ways of subordinating the labour process by capital. This latter stage (general intellect) includes immaterial labour (both cognitive labour and informational labour). It also includes a process of ‘becoming-fixed capital’. At this stage, ‘the very physical body of the human becomes fixed capital’ – Boyer calls this the ‘production of man by means of man’ – i.e. biopolitical capitalism (esp. includes the service sector, tertiary sector, healthcare, biotechnology, new media, culture industry, education). The living as fixed capital. This in itself is both something to be highly wary of (as machines are no longer required for subjection), but also highlights the ‘potential autonomy of the multitude’ – it represents a fundamental social instability at the heart of contemporary technical composition. Pasquinelli posits that this fundamental instability can perhaps explain the ‘new and desperate forms of financial speculation (derivatives and algorithmic trading, for instance) and new forms of economic rent (real estate speculation, information technology monopolization, debt governance)’ … ‘in the long term, knowledge society produces a drop in valorization and a push toward desperate practices of financial speculation and “parasitic” rent. In provocation we could state that the knowledge society has generated financial crisis. This is probably the historical point at which Marx’s OCC diminishes its pace, as technical composition is diluted across society, fixed capital loses its magnitude, and surplus value is extracted with difficulty. Though closer to potential autonomy at the end of the 2000s, nevertheless the productive class has found itself under new governance: that is, a world dominated by the new machine of debt, or to quote Lazzarato (2011), within the “factory of indebted man.” (p. 189).

[some of this above paragraph seemed to me to be a bit too speculative – e.g. to what extent is there a crisis of valorisation? How do we establish that this is due to the instability caused by the conflation of fixed and variable capital? How do we establish that this conflation has even occurred? Debt just seems to emerge as capital’s attempt to solve this problem – but (a) how do we connect the two processes (conflation of FC and VC, and indebtedness as means of control)?, and (b) to what extent has it been successful, if at all? – and how do/would we know?]

Some final thoughts:

1. As Pasquinelli shows, Operaismo can perhaps be considered a ‘Marxism of subjectivities’ – in which we uncover the ways in which the new developments of capitalism both emerge out of attempts to deal with the problematic worker-subjects of earlier stages, and in turn produce new forms of [disruptive] subjectivities
2. From this perspective, the goal of Operaismo is to highlight antagonisms, in order to accelerate them.