

Book review

European Journal of Cultural Studies

0(0) 1–3

© The Author(s) 2012

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1367549412458736

ecs.sagepub.com



Maurizio Lazzarato, *La fabrique de l'homme endetté: Essai sur la condition néolibérale*. Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2011. 125pp. ISBN 978-2-35480-096-3, €10.50 (pbk)

It is now more than four years since the 2008 credit crunch. It started with the collapse of the US housing market, but its effects quickly spread around the world, leading to the collapse of some of the world's biggest financial institutions. As entire economies ground to a halt we got used to hearing previously esoteric terms such as 'credit-default swaps', 'subprime markets', and 'double-dip recession'. As governments moved in to bail out banks and financial institutions, public debt rose and cuts in public spending became the new motto in the 'Age of Austerity'.

In such a political and economic climate it is no surprise that the issue of debt comes to the foreground. A number of recent publications tackle the issue directly. David Graeber's *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (2011) takes an historical and anthropological perspective to debt, arguing that contrary to popular belief (with the discipline of economics playing an important role in spreading the latter), the credit form is actually much older than the money form. Whereas Graeber writes from a (loosely defined) anarchist perspective, Maurizio Lazzarato in *La fabrique de l'homme endetté* does so from an Italian post-autonomist perspective, and it is the latter book that is reviewed here. Although currently published only in French, the publisher has assured me that an English version is in the works, as well as Italian, German, Spanish, Korean, Turkish and Japanese translations. *The Making of the Indebted Man*, translated by Joshua David Jordan and published by Semiotext(e), is expected to come out in September 2012.

Some intellectual context to situate the book is needed. Lazzarato is part of a group of scholars writing in what could be called a post-operaist tradition, which unites a group of scholars that have come out of the Italian autonomist movement of the 1970s: a movement that focused on labour's autonomy vis-à-vis capital. With Antonio Negri as its intellectual figurehead, post-operaist scholars have proposed an analysis of contemporary capitalism centred around a set of new but interrelated concepts, like the social factory, immaterial labour or biopolitical production: terms that are subject to continued debate and constant revision.

The core argument of the book is quickly summarized but deceptively simple, and guaranteed to cause quite a stir: the contemporary class struggle no longer expresses itself through the exploitation of labour – the conventional Marxist critique of capitalism – but through debt and the creditor–debtor relationship. This leads to three major

differences from more orthodox positions. First, labour and the way that it is exploited in the capitalist production process loses its central place at the core of the analysis of capitalism. Second, because creditor–debtor relationships cut through the whole of society, it is no longer sufficient to focus on the role of workers in the class struggle; instead, a number of previously untheorized social positions acquire new urgency: precarious and wage labourers, pensioners and students, unemployed and the working poor, producers and consumers are all implicated in the debtor–creditor relationship. The reason for debt’s all-pervasive or transversal quality is that even if we hold no individual private debt, we are subjected to it through the state and our collective insurance funds, as the people of Greece are now painfully experiencing. Third, instead of the punctualized, fordist factory, we are confronted with a *debt dispositif* that is simultaneously abstract and governing society in its entirety, as well as a multitude of mini-*dispositifs* distributed across society.

In this new situation we are in dire need of theoretical tools for understanding the current predicament, because relying on our previously established habits of thought simply does not suffice, and we risk ending up fighting the wrong battle. Lazzarato proceeds by taking four thinkers and what they have to say about debt, each of them illuminating a particular aspect of the debt phenomenon – Nietzsche, Marx, Deleuze and Foucault – not a surprising theoretical combination for those familiar with post-autonomist work. Outlining in detail what each of these thinkers contribute to Lazzarato’s argument would be beyond the scope of this review, so instead I want to focus on those aspects which have relevance for scholars writing within media and cultural studies.

What makes debt so crucial, Lazzarato argues, is that it is a power relationship that produces subjectivity. From the moment we take on a debt we become ‘indebted man’, subjected to what are first and foremost moral categories (in some Germanic languages the word for ‘debt’ and ‘guilt’ is the same). That is, taking on a debt produces in the debtor the moral injunction to cancel out the debt. However, the creditor–debtor relationship also contains an element of freedom, in that the only thing that is required from the debtor is to pay back the sum of money. Thus the power of debt cannot be reduced to mere repression or ideology (although both are obviously aspects of it), but has to be described in terms of a delineated freedom: one is free to act, but these actions take place in a framework defined by the contracted debt. ‘Indebted man’ is free as long as he or she adopts the appropriate lifestyle, hence all the moralistic talk about ‘lazy Greeks’, ‘industrious Germans’ or ‘irresponsible welfare mothers’.

The heavily Foucauldian language is no accident here, as the book can be seen as working towards a critique of Foucault’s analysis of neoliberalism. Although largely sympathetic to it, Lazzarato scolds Foucault’s *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008) for remaining too stuck in the logic of the industrial era to see accurately how people are stimulated to become ‘entrepreneurs of the self’. What Foucault did not sufficiently realise is that the 1970s saw a massive financialisation of the economy, with the finance sector taking over the industrial pole. It is precisely the increasing role of finance that has propagated debtor–creditor relationships throughout the social body, and which is the prime motor for the self-work that Foucault sees as the hallmark of the neoliberal era.

I predict that media and cultural studies scholars will pick up Lazzarato’s reworking of Foucault enthusiastically. Although the book only sketches rough outlines of that

enterprise, it is rich in suggestion and analytic promise. It allows us to see how seemingly unrelated contemporary phenomena such as ubiquitous credit cards, reality TV shows on people who are unable to pay back their mortgage (e.g. *Uitstel Van Executie* in the Netherlands) or on people setting up their own business (e.g. *The Restaurant* in the UK), and health care insurance costs calculators are actually separate moments of a more general neoliberal offensive, centred around the creation of the 'indebted man'. The wider field of governmentality studies will be interested in Lazzarato's book, given Lazzarato's insistence that the debt crisis makes visible the way in which neoliberalism has reconfigured the welfare state and the way it has employed sovereign, disciplinary and biopolitical power: three terms that are crucial to authors working within that tradition. Finally, those scholars influenced by the Marxist debates on labour (immaterial or not) will be interested in the challenge that Lazzarato poses when he argues that debt is the terrain of the contemporary class struggle rather than work.

On the very last pages of the book Lazzarato calls on his readers not to allow themselves to be blackmailed, not only in the material sense (by paying back the debt) but also in the moral sense, by refusing our subjectivities to be formatted by debt. Such a call to arms represents the best that academic writing has to offer: analytic yet engaged, timely but with an enduring relevance, focused on the present yet going beyond the merely anecdotal. If at times there is some repetition in the book, as different sections make overlapping arguments, it can be explained by the sense of urgency that permeates its pages. Certainly, this does not diminish its relevance and value to us as both scholars and as the 'indebted man' we all are.

References

- Foucault M (2008) *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Graeber D (2011) *Debt: The First 5000 Years*. New York: Melville House Publishing.

Jan Teurlings
University of Amsterdam