The following is an excerpt of a seven-day email dialogue between two speakers on the contemporary political economy. The speakers are referred to here as S1 and S2, and the excerpts follow is the first day of that conversation. The complete text of the seven-day dialogue is to be published in full a later date.

**DAY 1: WHITHER MATERIALISM?**

**S1:** What's the matter—what's the matter with materialism?

**S2:** Your question of course alludes to a conversation we had some months ago in which I cast suspicion on contemporary claims to the materialist position, and suggested that, through too wide and habitual an appeal, the term “materialism” was in some danger of bursting at the semantic seams. Though no doubt rashly dismissive of the claim that “matter” and its cognate terms (materialism, materiality) continue to make on our intellectual attention, the questions I posed to you and the suspicions I expressed were intended, among other things, to point to the increasing importance of the “immaterial” in discussions of the epistemic, ontological, technical, and political-economic disposition of the present.

**S1:** Can you say a little more concerning what you imagine this crisis of materialism—if we can call it that—to imply?

**S2:** An important indication that something might be shifting in our conception of what the materialist position entails is in view of contemporary realizations was Jean François Lyotard’s “Les Inmateriels,” an essay that was first published in 1983 before being published in Art & Text in 1988. Lyotard suggests that, for a major exhibition organized by Lyotard at the Pompidou Centre in this work Lyotard develops certain themes from his earlier discussions of the dominance of technology in contemporary life, and suggests that an attempt to describe it as a postmodern condition. Citing the neo-structuralism in contemporary thought and the postmodern preoccupation with complexity, Lyotard argues that these are symptoms of an ongoing dissolution of the traditional distinction that had organized the Cartesian trajectory in modern thought. According to this account, postmodernity would amount to a Leibnizian counter-movement in which mind and matter are conceived on a continuum, for which the term “Immaterialia” would serve as the name. As Lyotard puts it in a paper he gave at a conference sponsored by the London ICA in that same year:

> What is remarkable (to me, at any rate) in the so-called ‘new technics’ is that the machines involved are not substitutes for mechanical operations, but for certain mental and/or physical actions. For example: calculation; storage and circulation of information; storage and availability of rules; or literary compositions, and so on. These sorts of machines assume a high level of analysis, notably in the case of that but also of that: to say is to merging of hard sciences (or sciences of matter generally) and soft sciences. An effect of that merging is that the principle and matter that mind and matter are two different substances (as conceived in Descartes’ philosophy for instance) is less and less convincing.

> The overlapping of mind and matter in contemporary science is the aspect we were particularly concerned to emphasize in the exhibition Les Inmateriels. We were trying to exhibit, not the unrepresented, and to that extent it is not a sublime exhibition, but the retreat of the traditional division between mind and matter. Now, the human mind is simply the most complex combination of matter in the universe. Maybe our task is that of completing the complexity we are in charge of. Thus this is a materialist point of view, but only if we see matter not as substance, but as a series of invisible elements, as named and named by abstract structures. So we can be materialists today and in a sense maybe we must. But within this horizon, the development of technical science would be a slow but profound transformation of our conception of the relationship between man and nature.

**S1:** The “immaterial” has been understood by any number of thinkers following in Lyotard’s wake as a useful term for describing the new modalities of labour and consumption that follow from the technoscientific revolutions. And the suspicions I expressed were intended, among other things, to point to the increasing importance of the “immaterial” in discussions of the epistemic, ontological, technical, and political-economic disposition of the present. Modern capitalism, central to the valuation of large quantities of immaterial capital, is increasingly going to a way of postmodern capitalism centred on the valorisation of so-called immaterial capital, which is also termed “human capital.” “Knowledge capital” or “immaterial capital” is the new currency. This idea has been accompanied by new transformations of work. The simple abstract labour which has, since Adam Smith, been regarded as the source of value, is giving way to complex labour. Material productive work, measurable in the unit output per unit of time in which it is performed, is giving way to so-called immaterial work, to which the classic standards of measurement are no longer applicable.

Antoni Negri and Michael Hardt have offered similar prognostications on the dématérialisation of the labour process that has occurred with the recent jump from a Fordist economy to one that relies on heavy industry to a post-Fordist “service economy” in which the concept of work is again seen as having a crucial role to play: “When the production of services results in no material and durable good, we define the economy involved as one of the production of an immaterial labour—that is, a labour that produces an immaterial good, such as music, a cultural product, knowledge, edge, communication... Even when direct contact with consumers is involved, the manipulation of symbols and information along the model of computer operation is widespread. In an era in which workers learned to act like machines both inside and outside the factory. We have learned with the help of our Mouche’s photos, for example, to recognize human actors in general as so-called commodity actors. We increasingly think like computers, when we communicate technologies and their minds. The interaction is one where we are more central to labouring activities.”

As Negri observes in his response to Derrida’s Spectres of Marx, these political-economic transformations have formed the foundation both of post-structuralism and of post-Marxist theory and practice. The “post modern” and the “post communist” fairly well describe what Derrida bonds his new non-class conception. And yet, we do not look at our own society as inscribed by any simple equation of value, is giving way to complex labour. Material productive work, measurable in the unit output per unit of time in which it is performed, is giving way to so-called immaterial work, to which the classic standards of measurement are no longer applicable.

Antoni Negri and Michael Hardt have offered similar prognostications on the dématérialisation of the labour process that has occurred with the recent jump from a Fordist economy to one that relies on heavy industry to a post-Fordist “service economy” in which the concept of work is again seen as having a crucial role to play: “When the production of services results in no material and durable good, we define the economy involved as one of the production of an immaterial labour—that is, a labour that produces an immaterial good, such as music, a cultural product, knowledge, edge, communication... Even when direct contact with consumers is involved, the manipulation of symbols and information along the model of computer operation is widespread. In an era in which workers learned to act like machines both inside and outside the factory. We have learned with the help of our Mouche’s photos, for example, to recognize human actors in general as so-called commodity actors. We increasingly think like computers, when we communicate technologies and their minds. The interaction is one where we are more central to labouring activities.”

As Negri observes in his response to Derrida’s Spectres of Marx, these political-economic transformations have formed the foundation both of post-structuralism and of post-Marxist theory and practice. The “post modern” and the “post communist” fairly well describe what Derrida bonds his new non-class conception. And yet, we do not look at our own society as inscribed by any simple equation of value, is giving way to complex labour. Material productive work, measurable in the unit output per unit of time in which it is performed, is giving way to so-called immaterial work, to which the classic standards of measurement are no longer applicable.

Antoni Negri and Michael Hardt have offered similar prognostications on the dématérialisation of the labour process that has occurred with the recent jump from a Fordist economy to one that relies on heavy industry to a post-Fordist “service economy” in which the concept of work is again seen as having a crucial role to play: “When the production of services results in no material and durable good, we define the economy involved as one of the production of an immaterial labour—that is, a labour that produces an immaterial good, such as music, a cultural product, knowledge, edge, communication... Even when direct contact with consumers is involved, the manipulation of symbols and information along the model of computer operation is widespread. In an era in which workers learned to act like machines both inside and outside the factory. We have learned with the help of our Mouche’s photos, for example, to recognize human actors in general as so-called commodity actors. We increasingly think like computers, when we communicate technologies and their minds. The interaction is one where we are more central to labouring activities.”

As Negri observes in his response to Derrida’s Spectres of Marx, these political-economic transformations have formed the foundation both of post-structuralism and of post-Marxist theory and practice. The “post modern” and the “post communist” fairly well describe what Derrida bonds his new non-class conception. And yet, we do not look at our own society as inscribed by any simple equation of value, is giving way to complex labour. Material productive work, measurable in the unit output per unit of time in which it is performed, is giving way to so-called immaterial work, to which the classic standards of measurement are no longer applicable.

Antoni Negri and Michael Hardt have offered similar prognostications on the dématérialisation of the labour process that has occurred with the recent jump from a Fordist economy to one that relies on heavy industry to a post-Fordist “service economy” in which the concept of work is again seen as having a crucial role to play: “When the production of services results in no material and durable good, we define the economy involved as one of the production of an immaterial labour—that is, a labour that produces an immaterial good, such as music, a cultural product, knowledge, edge, communication... Even when direct contact with consumers is involved, the manipulation of symbols and information along the model of computer operation is widespread. In an era in which workers learned to act like machines both inside and outside the factory. We have learned with the help of our Mouche’s photos, for example, to recognize human actors in general as so-called commodity actors. We increasingly think like computers, when we communicate technologies and their minds. The interaction is one where we are more central to labouring activities.”

As Negri observes in his response to Derrida’s Spectres of Marx, these political-economic transformations have formed the foundation both of post-structuralism and of post-Marxist theory and practice. The “post modern” and the “post communist” fairly well describe what Derrida bonds his new non-class conception. And yet, we do not look at our own society as inscribed by any simple equation of value, is giving way to complex labour. Material productive work, measurable in the unit output per unit of time in which it is performed, is giving way to so-called immaterial work, to which the classic standards of measurement are no longer applicable.

Antoni Negri and Michael Hardt have offered similar prognostications on the dématérialisation of the labour process that has occurred with the recent jump from a Fordist economy to one that relies on heavy industry to a post-Fordist “service economy” in which the concept of work is again seen as having a crucial role to play: “When the production of services results in no material and durable good, we define the economy involved as one of the production of an immaterial labour—that is, a labour that produces an immaterial good, such as music, a cultural product, knowledge, edge, communication... Even when direct contact with consumers is involved, the manipulation of symbols and information along the model of computer operation is widespread. In an era in which workers learned to act like machines both inside and outside the factory. We have learned with the help of our Mouche’s photos, for example, to recognize human actors in general as so-called commodity actors. We increasingly think like computers, when we communicate technologies and their minds. The interaction is one where we are more central to labouring activities.”

As Negri observes in his response to Derrida’s Spectres of Marx, these political-economic transformations have formed the foundation both of post-structuralism and of post-Marxist theory and practice. The “post modern” and the “post communist” fairly well describe what Derrida bonds his new non-class conception. And yet, we do not look at our own society as inscribed by any simple equation of value, is giving way to complex labour. Material productive work, measurable in the unit output per unit of time in which it is performed, is giving way to so-called immaterial work, to which the classic standards of measurement are no longer applicable.